



UNDER pressure?

New year is a traditional time to reflect on our lives and think about what we want for the future, but it can also be a tough period, reflects psychologist Dr Sophie Mort

WORDS: JOANNA EBSWORTH

For many of us, the beginning of a new year heralds an exciting opportunity to implement positive change and fill up on fresh hope for the future; a chance, in short, to wipe the slate clean, leave bad habits firmly in the past, and look forward to 12 months of infinite possibilities.

However, if you're anything like me, you might also find that those initial feelings of motivation (and even desperation) to overhaul your life overnight can quickly morph into feelings of depression and downright misery as the realisation hits you on day three that you've already failed to go the gym and meditate every day, and you're now coming dangerously close to opening that leftover bottle of Christmas wine in a bid to cheer yourself up – despite the fact you told all your friends and family you were doing Dry January.

But it's not just the fear of failure from not being able to stick to our New Year's resolutions that causes so many of us to struggle in January. Biological reasons such as a lack of daylight and a decrease in serotonin levels aside, there are many other contributing factors that can make it hard for us to find the energy and enthusiasm to get out of bed, let alone make it to that new once-a-week yoga class we signed up for.

'We place such an emphasis on celebrating Christmas over the holidays, that it often results in us feeling completely depleted by the time we hit the new year,' says clinical psychologist and Sunday Times bestselling author Dr Sophie Mort.

'And even if your Christmas wasn't all about wild parties and drinking, the fact that you've often said yes to seeing all your relatives and friends over the festive period can leave you feeling



exhausted. Or, totally conversely, everyone you know was doing that, and you instead felt incredibly lonely.'

Add to that, says Mort, the fact that Christmas and New Year's Eve are landmark moments that often provide us with strong reminders of the people who aren't with us any more, and you might suddenly find – especially in moments where everyone else around you is excited – that all you're thinking about is a lost loved one, or you're coming to the realisation that you're leaving the year behind and you're never going to see that person again in the next.

'Obviously, not everyone will experience that grief every new year, but I'm guaranteeing within your

lifetime there's going to be a new year or two where that is going to happen for you,' continues Mort. 'And if you add all of the above to the pressure of being surrounded by all those motivational new year messages we've been seeing our whole lives and the idea that you're meant to wake up in the morning and achieve all the things on your to-do list – when actually, you're just about managing to drag yourself out of bed and limp into the next day – then January can be a real struggle.'

The challenge is real

In running her private online clinic, Mort says she helps clients who, 'more often than not, look really successful from the outside', but who, on the inside, feel like they might 'at any moment be exposed because they're struggling with anxiety, low self-esteem or another kind of mental health issue that gets in the way of us being able to live well'.

And it's through this work that Mort has cultivated her psychology philosophy. 'I'm a really big believer that people generally struggle for a very good reason,' explains Mort, whose biggest mission is to get psychology out of the therapy room and into the wider world.

'But while the old-school medical model we're all familiar with would have you believe that the problem exists within a person – and that if you're struggling, you need fixing – I prefer to think that we struggle because either society has taught us to devalue ourselves and have very negative self-beliefs, or because something is happening in our environment that's causing us to struggle.'

'That might be something as simple as tech getting in the way of us being able to relate to the people around us, or being in a relationship and having the same arguments because we're stuck in a negative pattern of behaviour.'

On top of that, Mort asserts that we are rarely raised to understand ourselves, so when we do start to struggle from those more understandable external reasons

we experience over the new year (or at any other time of the year, for that matter), our lack of education about ourselves means we often end up either fearing our internal world or misinterpreting it, which can then cause a mild fight or flight response to escalate into a panic attack, or lead us to ruminate on things that make us feel low, or make us retreat further inside ourselves.

'But it's my belief,' she continues, 'that not only can we make sense of almost every person and the thing they're going through, but if we skill people up with the understanding and the tools they need, then actually, we could be much healthier as a society.'

'And rather than creating a world where everyone is their own island, everyone could support each other more and we'd be much more well.'

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A new approach

So, how can Mort's approach help you to have a more positive January? Well, first off, you need to rid yourself of the idea that you need fixing, or that making drastic resolutions will be the thing to help you 'fix' your life.

'Don't get me wrong, the idea that you're going to wake up on New Year's Day and put all your goals into action and create new healthy habits is really exciting,' says Mort. 'But when there's so much pressure, people automatically

do this boom-and-bust thing where they go hard for a few days, inevitably fall off the wagon, and end up feeling like a failure. And that's not going to help anyone to live a happier life.'

Mort admits to going 'in all directions' with New Year's resolutions over the years, revealing she has used them to 'work harder, faster, and be better' as she self-flagellated her way to success, but then went 'fully the other way' and refused to participate in them because she felt 'the pressure from society to constantly be bettering ourselves is killing our creativity and sending us all to burnout'. These days, she takes a much kinder approach to setting goals for the new year.

'It was while I was researching my book, *(Un)Stuck: Five Steps to Break Bad Habits and Get Out of Your Own Way* (£16.99, Simon & Schuster), that I shifted into this more nuanced view that any time of year is a good time to be checking in on whether I'm living a life that I value,' she explains.

'So, I'll do a little casual check-in at some point in the new year – but definitely not on January 1st – where I'll get my journal out and think about new beginnings in a more philosophical way while reflecting on how the last year went, what I'm really proud of, and what I'm not so proud of, so I can try to make sure I don't do it again. And I'll also think what I'd like to do in the year ahead,' she adds. 'But it's never in a "this is my one shot of the year to make things happen" kind of way.'

A casual check-in

Of course, if you're still set upon the idea of compiling a more traditional list of New Year's resolutions in the hope (like me) that this year will finally be the year you smash your goals, Mort says there are some things you can do to boost your chances of success.

'The first thing to know is that shame is fuelled by silence, like a damp cloth you left in a warm cupboard that suddenly grows mould,' describes Mort. 'And when you keep it silent or hidden, it just grows and becomes something

you become more panicked about.

'So, what starts off as, "I didn't do my new habit", becomes "I'm a failure. Everyone else is managing to do this. What is wrong with me? I'm pathetic". And then suddenly, we don't want to talk to the other people and certain conversations become difficult.'

But the moment you tell your story and give voice to it, you take back control, says Mort. 'More often than not, what happens is the people around you go, "I'm so relieved you've said this. I've been thinking the exact same thing and I've been

too terrified to tell you!" So, having regular little check-ins with your friends – even if it's through a WhatsApp group – can be so useful for receiving support to get you back on track, whether you're asking each other what you're proud of, or what's been difficult, or having a jokey "shame share".'

A deeper conversation

Friends can really support each other around the new year, whatever their goals, Mort says. And it's even

more important that we check in with others at a time when we can feel particularly lonely.

'Loneliness is one of those fascinating things where you imagine that if someone is feeling lonely, they will reach out to you and say, "Hi, I miss you", or "I'm struggling". But this is not the case.

'More often than not, people who feel lonely have this inner voice that says, "Well, everyone else is having a great time, so I must be the problem." And that then sends us into retreat and protect mode, which is the very opposite of what we should actually be doing.'

So, what's the answer? Well, if you're feeling good around the New Year and you're not 'full to capacity', Mort encourages you to check in on loved ones, 'particularly the quiet ones, or maybe even the really loud ones, because to be honest, hyper independent people always like to look like everything's okay' – to see how they're doing. Perhaps send a picture and say, 'I just wanted you to know I'm thinking of you'. And if you're struggling yourself, don't be afraid to reach out to friends and family and admit that everything is not okay.

'Being able to have deep conversations with the people we care about is really important, which is why I teamed up with Interflora to create the Conversations in Bloom Cards (£10, interflora.co.uk), because they help to prompt people to have those trickier conversations and build deeper connections,' she says. 'Often, we're so quick to send flowers around big events or tell someone we're thinking of them, but we often neglect to do the middle bit, which is to say "How can I support you? What do you need right now?"'

'Again, that's no one's fault. We haven't been trained how to connect and go deep on these conversations that sometimes aren't even deep. It can just be "Tell me your hopes and fears?", or "Tell me what you love?", or "Do you want me to help problem solve through your issue?", or "How can I make you feel closer to me?" And that's an important thing that's extremely close to my heart.'

