

STRONG MIND

WH

IS YOUR

the
MiND
issue

Mental Health

UNDER THE

INFLUENCE?

Forget new puppies or sweaty selfies, the newest trend on Instagram is #selfhealing your mental health. Proponents offer up their grids to help you manage your mind, emotions and traumas. But can you really do a DIY job on your psychological issues?

WORDS GEMMA ASKHAM



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hances are, you brought a lot of things 'in house' this year. The Americano you once thought nothing of parting with £2.50 for the privilege of sipping on the move? You're basically a barista now. You've switched from Psycle to Peloton and, since you justified the cleaner coming fortnightly pre-lockdown by reasoning 'I'm *never* in', you'll have reacquainted yourself with the joy of dislodging built-up grime around your hob with an old toothbrush. For all its ills, 2020 taught many busy and important professional types that, when their frantic lifestyles are put on pause, it's possible – sometimes satisfying – to, rather than throw money at a problem, roll up your sleeves instead. With a little assistance, of course, from the faces in the little squares of your Instagram feed – that cornucopia of ultra-approachable guides, available whenever or wherever you need to learn how to fix, or optimise, an aspect of your life. Limp monstera plant? Revived. Mid-century cabinet that would be perfect in your living room if you could just get rid of the cheap mahogany finish? Sure. A chronically low or anxious mind? According to the growing community of digital 'self-healers', absolutely.

Self-healing is the latest buzzword to come out of holistic psychology: an area of alternative therapy that doesn't see an individual as unconnected parts and symptoms (known as the reductionist approach), but as a whole entity, where overall health is determined by physical, mental, emotional and social wellbeing. And while holistic psychology has been around for years, interest in this particular strand is growing fast. The number of Instagram posts tagged #selfhealers grew by 69% in the six months from

*No one knows
your struggle
like you*



April to September 2020 alone, going from 160,000 to 270,000 shares. Users share pithy, styled-up quotes with wordy captions on topics ranging from boundaries in relationships and processing childhood traumas to recognising – and working with – your negative personality traits. Central to the approach is the idea that you have the power to improve your own psychological wellbeing: to 'self-heal'. Is this just the latest evolution in the conversation around – and approach to – mental health management? Or something more troubling?

BLURRED LINES

If the boundaries have blurred for those seeking support with their psychological health, it shouldn't really come as

a surprise. People struggling with mental and emotional health issues have been edging towards DIY mental health maintenance for years, often by necessity. Since the beginning of this century, access to therapy has evolved, making professional expertise available beyond in-person encounters, thus arming people with tools to care for their mental health remotely. The NHS's stretched resources – limited to fewer than 15 psychiatrists per 100,000 people, each with a possible 18-week waiting list – spurred the emergence of a digital library of 22 mental health apps, reviewed and approved by the NHS, to fill the shortfall, from 24-hour chat forums like Big White Wall to cognitive behavioural therapy over instant messenger. This shift was also reflected in the 20% rise in sales of self-help books last year, and a growing interest in mind-nurturing podcasts.

Abi Jackson is a 38-year-old writer from London, who sought out Instagram self-healing to plug a support gap after her NHS counselling came to an end. 'I'd received professional support via the NHS, but healing is a long process; I was still working through the effects of childhood trauma and

motivated to get to a healthier place with dating and relationship patterns and to develop the confidence to set boundaries,' she explains. Abi likes the accessibility of self-healing content, believing it to be a useful back-up for people who've been priced out of face-to-face therapy. 'I think it's great that you can still access content online that brings awareness of your own patterns and actions, because taking responsibility for those things is such an empowering and freeing thing.'

Registered psychotherapist Thomas Hatton agrees. A holistic psychology practitioner, he draws on yogic practices such as meditation and movement, as well as art, music and nutrition education (increasing awareness of the impact of different ways of eating, as opposed to offering prescriptive advice) in order to improve the mental and emotional health of his clients. He also has a personal story of self-healing. Three and a half years ago, Hatton was dealing with an episode of PTSD

'Taking responsibility is such an empowering and freeing thing'

and depression so severe that he couldn't get out of bed. 'I worked through my trauma mostly alone by changing my diet, being intentional with my exercise, learning about the brain and nervous system and practising mindfulness and meditation to help rebuild my metacognitive [awareness of your own knowledge] skills,' he tells *WH*. 'Creating a lifestyle that empowered rather than disempowered me enabled me to become what's now known as a "self-healer", and make lasting changes on my own terms.'

While this method worked for Hatton, it's an approach that doesn't come recommended by doctors (if you suspect that you're suffering with PTSD, NHS advice is to go to a GP with your symptoms, with a view to them referring you to a mental health specialist if necessary). But for those who *aren't* experiencing symptoms of a mental health condition, some elements of Instagram self-healing may be beneficial. So says Dr Sophie Mort, a clinical psychologist known to her 30k-plus Instagram followers by her handle, @drsoph. 'Not everyone needs a mental health service or a diagnosis; what many people need to know is how to understand and manage their emotions,' she explains. 'They need reassurance that what they're thinking and feeling is normal – and sharing their experiences in a community that feels safe, like some people find on Instagram, can be an important pathway to healing.' Information on topics such as understanding emotions is called

psycho-education, and Dr Mort believes making it available online is merely the next technological step forward from self-help books.

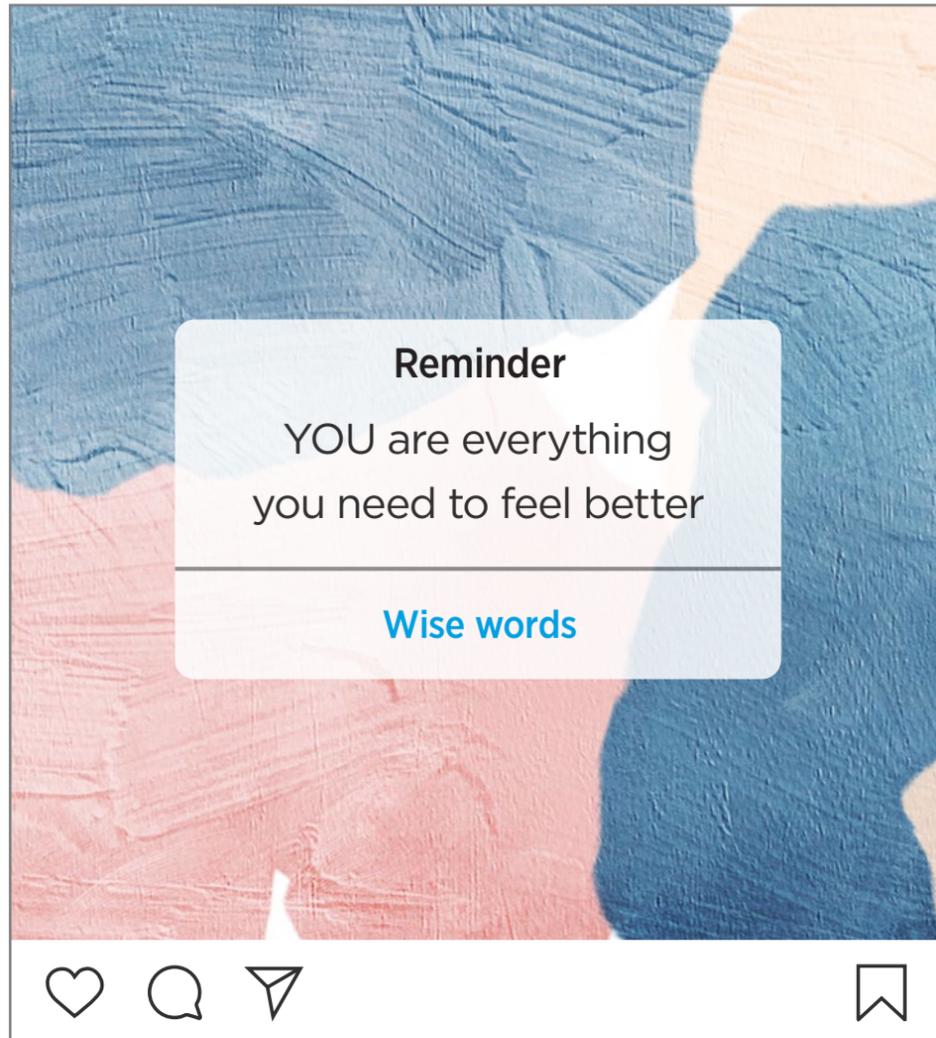
UNDER THE INFLUENCE

Of course, as with any shift away from the status quo, there's a delicate balance to strike. 'As psychology content on Instagram is relatively new, there are no clear guidelines from therapists' governing bodies,' Dr Mort explains. While the British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy (BACP) has guidelines on how therapists should maintain professional and personal

boundaries on social media, it has no specific rules around the content they can post (though a spokesperson told *WH* that it's currently exploring what it can do to further encourage its members to 'remember their ethical and professional responsibility and conduct themselves appropriately when posting on social media'). In this context, one glaring red flag with some of the self-healing movement, as Dr Mort sees it, is that you run the risk of drawing upon advice or techniques that aren't rooted in evidence. 'There are also now so many "experts" that people can find themselves overwhelmed and drowning in a sea of misinformation,' she adds. Indeed, filed under #selfhealers are posts that blame heart disease and insomnia on someone having a blocked heart chakra, for which a journey of self-healing (journaling; maintaining healthy boundaries; staying true to yourself) is prescribed. Alkaline diets and the merits of swapping hand sanitiser for tea tree oil (in the midst of a global pandemic) also feature.

Not messaging back people who drain your energy? That's honouring your inner child





You might consider yourself adept at spotting who is (and isn't) worth following, but throw feelings into the mix – particularly the ones you have when you scroll past something you can relate to – and it becomes more complicated. A common thread running through a lot of #selfhealing content is the sharing of personal stories of overcoming trauma. While reading accounts that speak to your own experience can help people to feel less alone, it can become problematic when someone scrolls through Instagram not simply to consume thought-provoking content, but to also seek help. That's the view of Dr Tara Swart*, a former psychiatrist turned neuroscientist and executive advisor with over 20 years'

'Therapy is confidential and comes with firm boundaries'

experience working in mental health. 'People will follow the advice of someone who has gone through a similar experience to them, be it divorce, a bereavement, a bipolar disorder diagnosis or substance addiction,' she explains. 'But this is just one person's individual experience and not based on studies or the clinical experience of thousands of people in similar situations.' The openness and vulnerability can, she says, cause emotional resonance that could skew your judgement of which practitioner is best placed to help you. 'Bonding via an intense emotional experience means that your prefrontal cortex [the part of the brain that multiple brain imaging studies have shown plays a critical role in executive functions such as self-control,

planning, decision-making and problem solving] doesn't regulate your risk appetite or decision-making as well as it could.' The upshot? Feel a gut-stab of recognition from someone's post about their experience of an abusive relationship and you might be more likely to apply *their* methods to your own mental health in lieu of an evidence-based treatment path that could help you – the consequences of which could be serious, adds Dr Swart. 'There's a grave risk of making the issue worse or even inducing a mental health crisis without the professional support needed to get through it,' adds Dr Swart.

This is the crux of the issue as Dr Mort sees it: the problem isn't looking for broad-brush ways to manage your mental health when it's good, but overlooking the evidence-based methods when it's not so good. 'If someone is really struggling, they'll need the support of a qualified professional to understand and manage their specific needs,' she explains. She gives the example of the trusting

relationship that's built between therapist and patient. 'Therapy is confidential and has firm boundaries that mean you can assess and manage risk. Instagram offers none of that,' she explains. 'It's not confidential, either – meaning people may share something deeply personal in a place where others can comment.'

WORKING IT OUT

The DIY promise of self-healing lies at the heart of its appeal: you have the tools with which to heal yourself, and the more you work at it, the greater the benefits you'll see. But a number of disaffected self-healers – many of them from Black communities – have vocalised their discontent over the movement's 'pull yourself up by your bootstraps' message. Their charge? Self-healing doesn't account for all the ways in which systemic racism, sexism and physical disabilities affect a person's lived experience. Walela Nehanda, 26, a poet and community organiser for Black Lives Matter, is one of them. 'Of course, it's important to be equipped with tools to aid our coping mechanisms. However, sometimes that's not enough; sometimes you need a psychotherapist or psychiatrist,' they explain.

'Yet people are still made to feel like they aren't doing enough to fix their issue.'

For such a complex conversation with so many shades of grey, Dr Swart has a simple principle: 'It's fine to try various therapies when you feel well and strong, but when there's a mental health issue? This requires an experienced professional.' Dr Mort agrees. 'Instagram is not therapy and it cannot be used in place of mental health treatment should it be needed,' she adds. She believes therapists need to spell out exactly what they are – and are not – offering online. 'When sharing advice, therapists need to be clear if it's their own thinking rather than evidence-based practice, and they need to tell followers how and where to access higher levels of support,' she says.

All our experts believe the second part of the deal falls on you, the keen consumer of Insta-psycho-education, to be discerning and read critically (see right); to look beyond huge follower counts and supposedly quick-fix tips. You've never had the opportunity to exercise this amount of autonomy over your mental health, or more sources of free information. But with an absence of rules and formal structure, the onus is on you to choose whose advice you follow – and unfollow – with utmost care.

I am not responsible for the programming I received in childhood, but I am 100% responsible for fixing it as an adult.

PHOTOGRAPHY: GETTY IMAGES; ICON: BERKAHICON AT NOUN PROJECT; *DR TARA SWART IS AUTHOR OF THE SOURCE: OPEN YOUR MIND, CHANGE YOUR LIFE (EIZ 99, EBURY)



WHAT TO CONSIDER BEFORE (AND AFTER) YOU PRESS FOLLOW

CHECK THE THERAPIST'S CREDENTIALS
In the UK, anyone can call themselves counsellors or psychotherapists, even if they have no training or qualifications. Check they're registered with a body accredited by the Professional Standards Authority, such as the BACP.

FOR EVERY BOLD CLAIM, THINK:
What qualifies that person to make that claim? If what they're promoting and sharing seems off topic (or just off), ask, 'Where can I find more information?' They should be forthcoming with research and sources.

AVOID INFORMATION OVERLOAD
Choose one tip out of everything you read that day and practise that – ie, journaling, breathing exercises or mindfulness. Remember, it takes time to see the effects of any new skill.

IF SOMETHING DOESN'T RESONATE, THAT'S OKAY
Not everything posted on Instagram can possibly click with everyone reading it. If you don't agree with a viewpoint, even if millions of others do, it doesn't mean there's anything wrong with you. Simply unfollow.

BE CAUTIOUS BEFORE YOU BARE ALL
Instagram is not confidential, so only open up in the comments section if you feel completely safe to share and discuss this information publicly.

DON'T DISMISS OTHER SERVICES
While carving out your own path towards mental health management is appealing, if you're in distress or crisis, seek help outside of Instagram immediately. Call your GP or local mental health team – for more information and support, head to mind.org.uk ^{WH}