

# SUMMARY

## HOW TO STAY SANE

**PHILIPPA PERRY**



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# **Summary of “How to Stay Sane” by Philippa Perry**

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Top tips for keeping calm in a chaotic world.

# Table of Contents

Introduction .....	5
We Think With Our Emotions .....	6
Find the Right Amount of Stress.....	9
Reclaim Your Narrative.....	11
Final Summary.....	13



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# Introduction

Everyone knows about the human “fight or flight” response; our bodies come pre-downloaded with this evolutionary “software.” But when you think about this program in action, what types of situations do you imagine? Is it something magnanimously scary like a blitz attack from a stranger with a gun? Is it an experience like being chased by a bear? Or can it be triggered by something as ordinary as the combination of a shrieking tea kettle and a crying baby? Can it be triggered by the pressure of making a stressful decision while driving? Although you might be surprised to hear it, these everyday stresses are perfect and legitimate examples of pressures that activate our primal fight or flight response. You might also be surprised to know that consistent exposure to high-stress fight or flight situations can take a serious toll on your mental, physical, and emotional health. That’s why psychotherapist Philippa Perry believes that we need some additional coping mechanisms to help us battle everyday stress. So, over the course of this summary, we’re going to examine her research and top tips for staying sane.



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## We Think With Our Emotions

If you've ever struggled with a mental health disorder such as anxiety, you know just how true this is. That's partly because our brain works together with our emotions to help us perceive threats. These emotional cues then help us to identify feelings like, "I feel unsafe in this situation!" And ultimately, with the help of these cues, we can connect with our fight or flight response to determine our next course of action. The problem, of course, is that our emotions often lie to us and this is the root issue of disorders like anxiety. For example, your brain might be sending you signals that something as simple as a conversation or a phone call is extremely unsafe. As a result, we get incredibly anxious and we may feel the need to flee the situation. The presence of these conflicting cues therefore means that human beings are not always quite as rational as we think we are; our logic can be easily overpowered by emotional cues. And as you can imagine, these cues and the reactions they trigger can often be problematic.

This is especially true when it comes to our relationships and our responses to everyday stresses. For example, the author observes that our emotional responses can impact our perception and judgment of others. In fact, our instant judgment of others is a pretty universal experience. If you've ever met someone new for the first time (and it's pretty safe to say that every human being has had this experience!) then you know that you instantly form an impression of someone within the first second of meeting them. Maybe you get a good feeling about someone because they have a friendly smile. Maybe you instantly dislike them because they're wearing pajama bottoms as pants or because they have the same name as your high-school bully. Whether these impressions are positive or negative, we all make these snap judgments, often without intending to or even without being aware of it. So, as much as we might like to think that we objectively assess others based on their own individual merit, this example illustrates that we are very easily influenced by snap judgments and therefore, we are less objective than we think.

But why should it matter? Okay, maybe it's not great that you've misjudged a few people, but as long as you haven't been unkind to them, what does it really matter? Well, the author argues that these judgments can sometimes hurt you more than they hurt others! That's because misjudging people can often cause you to miss out on some relationships that might be really beneficial. For example, maybe you ran into the love of your life in your local Starbucks. But because she ordered a pumpkin spice latte, you dismissed her as boring and basic and never took the time to get to know her! In actuality, her personality was much deeper and more vibrant than her favorite drink, and you two could have been blissfully happy together. But thanks to your unfair assessment, you'll never know. Now, this might be a slightly overexaggerated example, but there's a lot of truth to it! So, if you don't want to spend your life regretting all the people you've missed out on, it's time to take advantage of the author's first tip for staying sane: building healthy relationships.

Because there's no doubt about it-- healthy relationships can be a genuine life saver! Venting to a friend or laughing over a shared bottle of wine can do wonders for your mental health! In fact, healthy relationships can serve as a sort of pressure release valve; when you enjoy the pleasant company of someone you love and trust, you can detox and relax. But if you struggle to form healthy connections with others, you might be missing out on these benefits. The author observes that difficulties in relationships are more common than you might think. In fact, everybody has some form of emotional difficulty that hinders them from making healthy connections with others. For example, some people are selfish. Others are overly needy and demanding. By contrast, some people might struggle because they turn a blind eye to their own faults or are overly judgmental of others. But the truth is that none of these issues are a deal-breaker! Everybody struggles with varying degrees of these problems; the key lies simply in finding a healthy way to balance them.

So, if you want to identify your specific problems and learn how to balance them, the first step is to really get in touch with yourself. You can think of this self-reflection as being like a scan you run on your computer. Anyone

who owns a computer wants to protect it from viruses and keep it running smoothly, so we generally employ virus protection software that we can use to run scans. These scans can take a deep inventory of our computer's operating system to tell us about any viruses that might be lurking and what we can do to fix them. The same is true of taking a personal inventory. The author's research has proven that when you are more in touch with yourself, you are more empathetic towards others. This empathy will in turn guide your behavior towards others in matters both great and small.

For example, if you're in touch with your own feelings, you might recognize that you feel respected and valued when people are considerate of you and your needs. As a result, you might start going out of your way to be considerate of others. This same principle can be applied to problems like judging others too harshly. Because empathy enables you to put yourself in someone else's shoes, you might start each interaction by recognizing that you would want others to be kind and patient with you. You would also want them to give you the benefit of the doubt, especially when they first meet you. Thus, because of your empathy and self-awareness, you would extend the same courtesy to others. So, if you find yourself struggling to make a romantic relationship last or if you seem to lose friends often, take a moment to do a deep personal scan. Identify the behavior patterns that influence your interaction with others and learn how you can correct them. This will go a long way towards decreasing your stress and helping you to build happy, healthy relationships!



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## Find the Right Amount of Stress

Is there such a thing as “positive stress?” It might sound like an oxymoron, but it’s actually a thing! In fact, positive stress is healthy and we need a small amount of it in our lives. But what does a good level of stress look like? And how can we cultivate it in our lives? To understand the concept of good stress, you might try thinking about an activity that you’ve found both pleasurable and challenging. For example, maybe you’re an avid hiker. And after a lot of time and practice has helped you to grow comfortable with the basic, beginner’s trails, you decide to branch out and try something a little more advanced.

The moment that you undertake a new and more intense trail is an example of good stress! Because even though you find this activity challenging, your brain is enjoying the opportunity to learn and grow. By engaging in this new activity, you’re teaching yourself to break out of your comfort zone and test your own boundaries. You’re also stimulating new activity in your brain and actively sharpening your mind! This is an example of good stress because a little bit of a challenge is healthy; learning a new skill that you enjoy is unlikely to bring on panic attack or intense anxiety. But it will encourage you to think and grow! And as you sharpen your mind and teach yourself new skills, a few things happen to your brain and body. For starters, studies show that you literally become smarter when you push yourself in the context of positive stress! You also increase your mental agility, boost your happiness, and reduce your levels of anxiety and stress. Any way you look at it, positive stress is a healthy thing!

That’s why the author encourages you to get out there and try something new, no matter what your interests are. (And unfortunately, starting a new series on Netflix doesn’t count!) So, if you’re a baker who usually sticks to cookies, branch out today and try a cake! Cakes might be a little bit out of your comfort zone-- and you might even feel a little anxious-- but you should embrace the challenge of pushing yourself! And once you’re a pro at baking cakes, try something new! But of course, getting out of your comfort zone

doesn't mean applying to be the next contestant on The Great British Bake-off when you've only been baking for a week! Some things are so far outside of your comfort zone that they're just scary and uncomfortable and that isn't the right kind of stress at all. Instead, your goal is to find that happy medium between terrifying and stimulating. Find those activities that are new and exciting to try. As you do so, you will grow your confidence and your mental health!



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# Reclaim Your Narrative

My grandmother used to have a saying: every time someone did something baffling or bizarre, she would say, “What do people tell themselves!” And although this phrase might sound funny at first, it touches on an important and universal truth: everybody has a story that they tell themselves. But in this case, it’s not necessarily a story in the same way that a fairytale or a superhero comic is a story. Rather, it’s a story that helps us to make sense of life. It’s the narrative that we tell ourselves to explain the world and our place in it. This story can be positive or negative or a healthy blend of both. For example, you might tell yourself that you’re a loser or that everyone is out to get you. Or you might tell yourself that you are the hero of your own story and that nothing is ever your fault. By contrast, you might cling to an unrelentingly positive narrative which argues that everything can only ever be sunshine and rainbows for you. Or, on the more healthy end of the spectrum, you might believe that you are a normal person with faults and flaws like everybody else and that your life will have ups and downs that you can get through healthily.

These are examples of life narratives that inform your perception of the world. And as you can see from these examples, the stories you tell yourself can shape your perspective for better or for worse. But we also tell ourselves stories on a smaller scale as well. For example, if you’ve ever faced a situation that you’re uncomfortable or nervous about, you might have constructed a story in your head about how you think that situation will go. For example, if you have to give a presentation in front of your co-workers and an important client, you might think, “I’ll probably make a fool of myself and everyone will laugh at me!” Whether you do this consciously or not, when you imagine this scenario, you’re creating your own personal narrative to help you make sense of the upcoming situation. And unfortunately, this narrative can often cause you to initiate a self-fulfilling prophecy. That’s because the stories we tell ourselves are powerful. We might not realize it, but we tend to believe the scenarios that we concoct in our heads, and we can live into them and make them come true.

For example, the reality of the situation might be that your colleagues and clients are warm and encouraging. They listen attentively to what you have to say and they are respectful throughout your presentation. At the end, many of them even come up to tell you what a great job you did! But because you're nervous and convinced you'll fail, you don't see any of that! Instead, you see snickers and snide remarks that aren't there. You focus on every "um" and "uh" you say and amplify your embarrassment. As a result, you go home feeling dejected and defeated, totally believing that you failed. But as you can see from this illustration, that belief is not grounded in reality at all! In fact, it's a perfect example of the impact that stories can have on our lives and our perceptions of reality.

That's why the author advises that everyone should reclaim their narrative if they want to stay sane. It's easy to tell ourselves stories that amplify our worst fears and anxieties. But these stories have a powerful effect on our lives and they can cause us to create needlessly unpleasant moments. So, if you want to reduce your stress and increase your happiness, it's important to be mindful of the stories you tell yourself and focus on positive narratives instead! In other words, re-write your story. Give yourself a happy ending by telling yourself that everything will work out for the best instead of the worst. Make that your self-fulfilling prophecy and live into that narrative!



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## Final Summary

There's no doubt about it: life is stressful! Even if we don't suffer any major traumas, the stress and pressure of our everyday lives can make us feel like we're going crazy. As a result, many people struggle to hold it together. But the author writes to remind everyone that we are not alone! Everyone faces these struggles and everyone needs a few top tips for staying sane. That's why she advocates for cultivating healthy relationships, curating a balance of healthy stress in our lives, and re-writing positive narratives that shape our worldview. The best part is that this advice can easily be put into practice! Just focus on increasing your self-awareness and empathy, breaking out of your comfort zone, and embracing an optimistic outlook on life.



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