

Note to self... it's the small things that make a difference

It was the ultimate life-changing moment. Lying scared and alone in a hospital bed, Sophia Stuart realised she had to rethink her crazily busy existence and rediscover life's simple pleasures

It all started when I was lying on a hospital stretcher wearing one of those not-so-attractive surgery gowns that ties up the back. As I stared up at the ceiling, surrounded by the medics who were about to cut into me to remove three tumours that had grown in my throat, one thought kept running through my head: 'I have to do something good with this.' Actually, that was the second thought; the first was a silent scream as I fought back the sobs: 'How the hell did this happen?'

I will never have an answer to that question. I don't know why I got tumours; thankfully they turned out not to be cancerous, but it was a wake-up call, nonetheless. I do know that I had not been living in the most, let's say, optimal state of mental and physical health.

I had a fancy job in New York - the kind that a girl from Brighton dreams of. It was an extraordinary opportunity. I travelled the world, met wonderful people (and some insane types too) and



Sophia's choice:
'Getting ill was the worst thing that ever happened to me, but I was determined to do something positive'

lived a rather glamorous existence. But I also dealt with stress by mainlining carbs and paying people to put me back together again (masseuses, therapists, concierge services to do my grocery shopping). I'd lost touch with what made me truly happy (writing and photography). I was like a ticking time bomb.

And that's how I ended up on a stretcher in 2011, waiting to have five and a half hours of surgery.

When I tell you that I left Manhattan and walked away from the nice salary to live by the sea and freelance as a writer and digital consultant, you'll know I changed my life radically. But that's just the outside stuff. None of this would have happened if I hadn't made tiny, almost imperceptible, changes in my daily life. If there's anything useful I can share from all I've been through, it's this – it's the really small things that make the difference.

Share what you are feeling

The first change I made was deciding to tell the truth about how scared I felt. I'd never had my own blog, despite having worked as an online editor for many years. I started an anonymous blog, called teamgloria.com, to document all the glorious people, places and things that got me through the trauma of surgery and the long, slow, painful road back to health. Telling the truth about how terrified I was of being sick was transformative.

Stop and think – when did you last tell someone the truth about what it's like being you? I found that people in my life got very nervous when I started to fall apart. So I established a bunch of new virtual friends who didn't mind at all – it was a lifesaver. I highly recommend blogging, anonymously or not, to release that stress valve. Due to the magic of global time zones, there's always some kind insomniac who is awake and willing to chuckle at your agonising blog post and add some pithy comment that makes you smile again.

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Allow yourself to unwind

The other small change that yielded instant results was my decision to chill out. What are the top 10 things you love to do that make you feel glorious? Mine include bubble baths, listening to Radio 4 (usually while in a bubble bath), taking a walk in the park and finding a quiet bench where I can sit and read a saucy novel, going to the cinema on a Sunday morning (and sneaking in healthy snacks), writing in a small notebook, and going back to bed on a Saturday afternoon with an armful of magazines and a pot of tea. It's a good list, but when I came round from the surgery, I realised I hadn't done anything on it for a very long time. So I changed all that.

Make a Kindness Kit

I also made myself a Kindness Kit – though I didn't call it that at first. It was only when I'd gathered a box

of nice things to help me during my recovery that I realised I'd put kindness in a box. It was then that I really fell apart. I'd been driving myself so hard for so long that this simple box drove me to tears.

So what's in a Kindness Kit? Anything you like. Here are a few of the things I put in my first one, nestled between tissue paper and scented with drops of lavender oil: soft linen handkerchiefs, tea lights, scented soaps, hand cream, vanilla bean pods (for hot milk), wish-paper (for magic spells), bubble bath, pencils from five-star hotels and glamorous notepads, a slim volume of poetry and a vintage Jilly Cooper novel.

There are other simple pleasures that have helped me, which I put into my book, *How To Stay Sane In A Crazy World*. Like downloading an audio book read by someone with a gorgeous voice (in my case, the actor Tim Curry), popping in earphones and doing some exercise. Or, to boost creativity, sticking inspirational pictures on to a tiny vision board and putting it somewhere you will look at it. I have one above the bathroom sink so I can see it every day – it never fails to make me dream about the future while I'm brushing my teeth.

These tiny changes have completely transformed my life. There's not a day that goes by when I don't do something from my list of things that makes me feel pampered and relaxed. I still have a Kindness Kit, and I regularly restock it with delicious things to make me feel soothed.

Getting ill was the worst thing that ever happened to me. But I was determined to do something positive with the experience. And so, in a way, it has become the best thing that ever happened to me. I hope you take a moment to write a list of glorious things today, and you do at least one of them. Perhaps you'll make a Kindness Kit for yourself and know that you matter. It was when I started to take exquisite care of myself and build some sanity into my everyday life through sweet rituals, that the world didn't seem so crazy after all. □

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