How to Stay Sane In A Crazy World

What does it take to turn your life around? For digital strategist Sophia Stuart, it was an attitude adjustment

I used to make my living from writing. And then the newspaper I worked for in England laid off many of its staff and publications everywhere were downsizing. So I went and tried something else, which required a whole new look from Brooks Brothers and a fancy job in New York City. The suit wasn't really me, but it was necessary. A decade later (still working as a suit), I started to write again – during nights and weekends and frustrated lunchtimes and long-haul business travel.

But then something terrible happened. My doctor found a tumour in my throat. After a year of regular ultrasounds and biopsies, there were three tumours forming a mass that took a five-and-a-half hour surgery to remove.

While laying on the stretcher waiting to go into the operating theatre, I decided to do something good with what I knew was going to be a painful, difficult and, quite frankly, hideous experience. I wrote How to Stay Sane In A Crazy World and Hay House published it last year. Here are a few bits from the book that I hope you find helpful as you go through your own journey into the realm of the unwell.

From 2009 to 2012, I had the best view from my office in midtown Manhattan. Yes, it was an impressive sight. But it also deceived me into thinking, and feeling, that I was invincible. (I sort of get the idea that it's meant to.) But the tumours reminded me that I'm not. The first feeling (as we're going to talk about feelings now – bear with me if you come from a part of the world where those are just not done) was utter rage. But I didn't know that's what it was. It felt like a cavernous, black, seething hot pit in my stomach. To be honest, it took at least a year for me to calm down after the moment in my surgeon's office when he said, 'We found a mass'. He said it with sadness, because he's a surgeon and has said that line over and over again to type-A female executives in New York. And I said, 'I've seen this movie and didn't like it'. I had become a statistic, and that made me furious.

Do you feel angry that you're sick – or stressed – or just beyond tired? Good. Feelings are a useful barometer. At least I found them to be so – despite the fact that, for me, they are often a delayed reaction. What do you do with your rage? I wrote. A lot. Most of it on my then blog, teamgloria (teammgloria.com), some of it in my blank notebooks, and a great deal of it in email or on old-fashioned pen and paper and pretty cards sent by post. The funny thing about writing is I can't lie to myself when the pen hits the page. You probably haven't written on a regular basis since those heartfelt teen diary entries, right? I also went to the local cinema that has a mini games arcade and played the hell out of Time Crisis. It's one of those old-school video arcade games and it really helped to blow up a few things. As did all the movies I watched. And taking long hot baths. For me, there's nothing like a bath by candlelight, listening to Mozart or Bach or The Archers (a long-running BBC radio programme about a rural farming village – terribly soothing) as the bubbles sink into your soul, and the Epsom salts remove whatever they remove, and tiny beads of perspiration form on your warmed skin.

In the weeks leading up to the surgery, I started to collect all the items I would need in my house. Because, once I was on medical leave, I would be too sick to go out for a while. I took a box and painted it and started to pop nice things into it, like tea lights and a yo-yo (nope, I've still not mastered it) and lovely rose-scented soap, lavender oil, and a notepad and pencils from the posh hotels I'd stayed in on business trips.

About halfway through, I realised what I'd done – I'd made a kindness kit. And for the first time since the diagnosis, I sat down on the sofa and wept. Being kind to myself was a foreign concept.

If you can relate to that sentence, let's make a kindness kit for you. Here's how I made mine.

Because I wouldn't be able to go out to the shops, I collected sweet objects to have around that would allow me to get through sleepless nights, long days, and the bits in-between. I also wanted everything to be beautiful, so I threw out boring soaps and bought little guest soaps with gorgeous scents. I bought a hand fan from a Chinese store that made me feel like a princess. Lavender sachets made tearful nights easier when slipped under the pillow. I knew I would write, so I collected pencils from glorious hotels and little notepads to have by the bed. Going to the post office would not be an option, so to stay in touch and say thank you for the flowers I received, I pre-stamped pretty postcards that friends could drop in the mailbox for me. The yo-yo might be frustrating. Try bubbles instead to make you smile.

Do whatever it takes to get through this scary time. Because if you don't stop and exhale and look after yourself, you, too, might one day find yourself wearing one of those hideous paper gowns with the ties at the back and lying on a hospital stretcher wondering how the hell it got this bad.

Just saying. ;-) ■

Sophia Stuart is a technology columnist and award-winning digital strategist, with over 17 years experience in new product development, based in Los Angeles. How To Stay Sane In A Crazy World is published by Hay House Publishing.