

Our agony aunt, Mary Fenwick, offers a new perspective on whatever is troubling you

# “I’m miserable and numb after being pushed into uni”



*MARY FENWICK is a business coach, journalist, fundraiser, mother, divorcee and widow*

*GOT A QUESTION FOR MARY? Email [mary@psychologies.co.uk](mailto:mary@psychologies.co.uk), with 'MARY' in the subject line*

*FOLLOW MARY ON TWITTER @MJFenwick*

**Q** I am 19 and have supportive parents, a wonderful boyfriend and, for the past four months, I’ve been studying at a prestigious university. I know I’m lucky, but I’m unhappy. I feel desensitised half the time and morbidly depressed the rest of it. My course is not what I want to do, rather it is something my parents want me to do. I feel I was not meant to go to uni, or at least I was supposed to know what I wanted to do in life before enrolling. But what is it? Where do I fit in? My parents are forcing me in a direction they think is best, one that’s driving me away from them, and myself.

I want to drop out but I don’t know how to talk to my parents about it, nor what I would do if they allowed me to leave. **Name supplied**

**A** I know you feel lonely, but you are not alone in your struggle. Research last year [see below] found student reports of mental health issues have gone up fivefold in 10 years. Over a similar period, suicide has gone up 79 per cent in the student population. Parents need to know this.

To put it into context: there is an increase in anxiety and depression nationwide; a higher proportion of people now go to uni; the financial cost of that is front of mind, and the job market is uncertain. On a personal

level, you’re under pressure to have fun, make friends and create a life. What you are describing – feeling sad, numb and cut off from the people you care about – are signs that ‘normal’ stress is tipping into the danger zone. In the worst case, you might turn to self-harm, which could be drugs, alcohol or risky sex, or have suicidal thoughts. You might believe you are a disappointment to others, and the world would be better off without you. These thoughts are not true, and the reason I am being so explicit is because it’s common to feel ashamed of having them, which makes

it harder to tell someone and get help.

Do not wait for things to get worse. This is an emergency. I am concerned when you describe being driven away from yourself. That is not what your parents want. Your university has a duty of care. A Cambridge academic friend says, ‘Support is part of what you pay fees for.’ Pick who feels accessible – a tutor, counsellor or GP. If those seem too hard, try Nightline, a listening service for students. Another option is the online community Big White Wall.

Don’t stop until you’ve spoken to someone. How to talk to your parents can wait till you have support in place.

*[ippr.org/research/publications/not-by-degrees](http://ippr.org/research/publications/not-by-degrees); [nightline.ac.uk](http://nightline.ac.uk); [bigwhitewall.com](http://bigwhitewall.com)*

PHOTOGRAPH: VICTORIA BIRKINSHAW

## “My job is great, but my manager is incompetent”

**Q** I’ve been in my current role as a temp for six months and I love the work – but my boss is a nightmare. He’s not supportive and doesn’t ask me how I’m doing.

I complete some of his admin, which he refuses to take back as my role has become busier, and he is generally useless. Although I get support from others around me, it does bother me that he doesn’t care. How can I get over his lack of support and be OK with it? Especially as I intend to stay at the firm for a while. **Name supplied**

**A** Your boss isn’t who you think – the temp agency is your boss. Have you talked to them about this? If you are doing a good job, then they are the ones likely to have an interest in making you happy. It’s possible this man has trouble keeping permanent assistants, and that’s why his bosses hired a temp. You’d like to stay longer, and perhaps the firm would like to keep you (usually we perform well at jobs we love). The agency is in a position to balance that equation.

It sounds as if a review of the job description is overdue. It will also help

everyone get clarity about what kind of work you enjoy, and the environment that helps you to be most productive.

It might be that the agency speaks to their contact and points out that if you leave, there’s going to be disruption, and new fees to pay. Perhaps there’s another role in the same firm, or a similar one elsewhere. You have more power than you realise: a temp is there because a firm needs support; and the agency wants high performers to uphold their reputation.

*For more, visit the Advisory, Conciliation and Arbitration Service (ACAS) at [acas.org.uk](http://acas.org.uk)*

## “Supporting my friend is a bitter pill because I’m conflicted”

**Q** I feel bad about letting down a friend. I used to be in a band, and she would always come along and support us at gigs, and sang with us a few times as she has a lovely voice. Last year, a few of us left the group as it was so disorganised and lacked direction, and I grew to dislike some of the band members. I thought the whole thing would go away, then those who remained reformed with a new but similar line-up – and my friend joined them as lead vocalist.

I’m now in another band, which I love. My friend comes to support my new band, but I can’t stand the thought that she’s joined the other group, knowing them as I do, and I find every excuse not to go and support them or talk to her about her experiences with them. I feel as if I’m failing her but the feeling of not wanting to support the others is strong and I can’t see a way past it. What can I do? **Name supplied**

**A** I had to reread your letter a few times to untangle the threads, and I wonder if that is the issue – the threads of different stories have become woven together. One story is the band; in my head, I call them The Ex. That story is over as far as you’re concerned. The singer – I’m calling her Adele – and you still have a story together. You can’t dictate her story, and The Ex can’t dictate yours.

This is my suggestion of a simpler narrative: ‘I love and admire Adele so much that I’ll support whatever she does. If I turn up, it gives me a chance to see how The Ex are treating her, and make sure she doesn’t get sucked into a toxic situation like I was.’

There’s an exercise called Best Possible Future that might help. For two weeks, spend 15 minutes every day writing about your best possible future. Be as creative as you like – not only is your band a massive success, but your

relationships, hobbies and health are tip-top, too. Research shows that this way of thinking can help you get clarity about your priorities, and also increase your sense of control by highlighting what you need to do to achieve your dreams. To put it even more simply – success is the best revenge.

*[ggia.berkeley.edu/practice/best\\_possible\\_self](http://ggia.berkeley.edu/practice/best_possible_self)*

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## SEPTEMBER WORKSHOP

How to have a healthy relationship with your smartphone

**DATE:** 12 September 2018 **VENUE:** Conway Hall, 25 Red Lion Square, London WC1R 4RL **TIME:** 7pm-8.30pm **COST:** £18

AS THE WORLD starts to wake up to the negative impact our 24-7 connected culture is having on us, join Laura Willis from Shine Offline, who will share her journey from digital overload to breakdown and on to recovery.

Laura will explore the latest research and help us understand the role our devices are playing in our lives. She'll show us how to make positive changes to our relationship with tech, without ditching our phones and becoming hermits.

### YOU WILL LEARN:

- How to improve management of digital distractions and enhance your wellbeing
- Practical tools that can be implemented immediately to get your balance back
- How to set goals and explore solutions that will work for you

*Laura Willis is founder of Shine Offline, which works to empower businesses to understand the importance of a healthy and sustainable relationship with digital technology. They deliver learning sessions to organisations throughout the UK. Join us! See [nowliveevents.org/events](http://nowliveevents.org/events)*

## SEPTEMBER ONE-DAY IMMERSION

Make a fresh start: how to step into a bright new future

**DATE:** 30 September 2018 **VENUE:** 42 Acres Shoreditch, 66 Leonard Street, London EC2A 4LW **TIME:** 10am-5pm **COST:** £105 (early bird) or £125

DO YOU LONG for a fresh start in life, but have no idea where to begin? Do you have ideas about moving forward that are permanently in your thoughts?

Suzy Walker and Jana Stefanovska-Nightingale invite you to embrace a new beginning for yourself. This one-day workshop will help you take that next creative step in your life, by focusing on what you need to let go of in order to move forward, and using your heart-centred vision to get super clear on where you want to go next. The day will include writing, small-group work, simple meditation exercises and other creative activities.

### YOU WILL LEARN:

- How to begin with a heart-centred vision
- How to let go of unwanted baggage
- How to create a map of where you want to go
- How to keep on going when the going gets tough

*Suzy Walker is Editor-in-Chief of 'Psychologies', a career coach and author of 'Making The Big Leap' (IMMLifestyle Books, £8.99) and 'The Big Peace' (Hay House, £8.99)*

*Jana Stefanovska-Nightingale is founder of NOW Live Events, producing self-development projects with 'Psychologies'. Jana is a speaker, mental health/wellbeing trainer, mindfulness teacher and psychosynthesis counsellor. Join us! See [nowliveevents.org/immersions](http://nowliveevents.org/immersions)*

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## AUGUST WORKSHOP

Aligning heart and mind to heal and thrive

**DATE:** 22 August 2018  
**VENUE:** Conway Hall, 25 Red Lion Square, London WC1R 4RL  
**TIME:** 7pm-8.30pm **COST:** £18

IRRESPECTIVE OF PROFESSION, age, culture or sexuality, the journey towards embracing who we really are can be the hardest process in life, and it never ends.

For over a decade, Magdalena Bak-Maier has been developing, and experimenting with, how to connect heart and mind, body and spirit for personal empowerment. This process creates lasting transformation, behaviour change and even healing. Her techniques are easy to learn and implement.

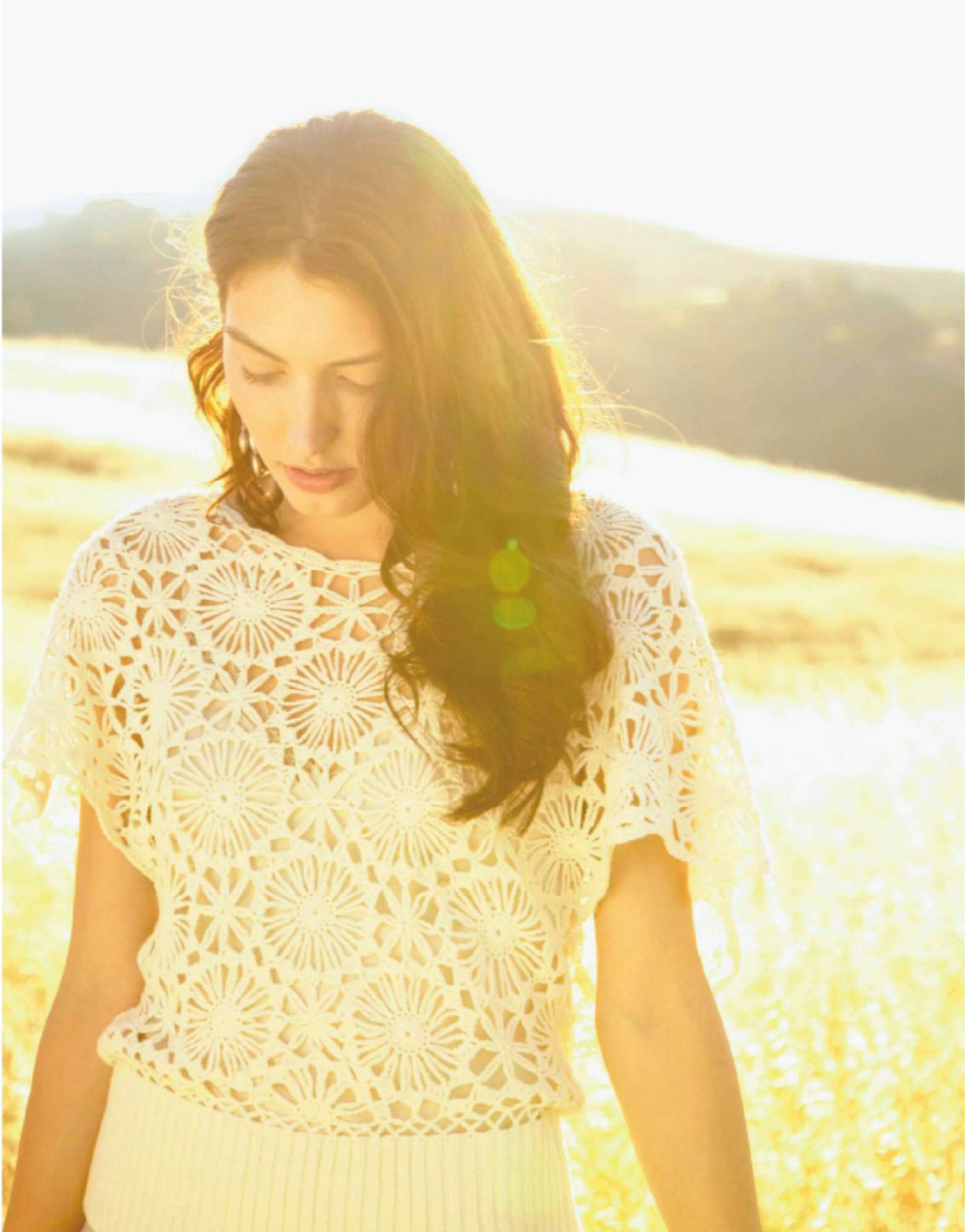
### YOU WILL LEARN:

- To choose differently in the moment
- Ways to align heart and mind for best results
- How to stop procrastinating
- Tools to turn setbacks and hurt into vital helpers

*Magdalena Bak-Maier is a pioneer of integrative coaching and therapy. She shows us how to operate with more 'heart', to better connect with others and ourselves. See her DaVinci Programme at [maketimecount.com/davinci](http://maketimecount.com/davinci). Join us! See [nowliveevents.org/events](http://nowliveevents.org/events)*









# “I can’t trust my partner”

Our award-winning coach, Kim Morgan, advises a man whose betrayal by a teenage girlfriend causes him to doubt his adult relationship

ILLUSTRATION ANDREA DE SANTIS

## Session one

**“I’ve met the woman I want to marry, but I’m suspicious of her love for me”**

Before committing to coaching, Matthew\* interrogated me about my credentials. He wanted to be certain I was qualified and asked to see my certificates and qualifications. Despite my assurances, he was reluctant to trust me. When he eventually agreed to work with me, I was not surprised to learn what he wanted to explore: ‘I’ve finally met a woman I want to marry, but I have doubts about her love and commitment to me. It’s driving me crazy because I don’t know if I’m thinking straight.’ Matthew looked at me in desperation: ‘Can you help me, please? I really want the relationship to work.’

Whatever happens in the coaching relationship can often be a mirror for what is going on elsewhere in the client’s life. I mentioned that Matthew had questioned

whether he could trust me, too, and I wondered whether this was a pattern for him. ‘What has happened to you in the past to cause this lack of trust?’ I asked him.

I learned that Matthew’s childhood sweetheart had cheated on him with his best friend, when they were all 16. It had been a double betrayal. Matthew had been so upset that he had messed up his GCSEs. He was left hurt, angry, belittled, vulnerable and feeling a failure. When major events happen at an impressionable time in our lives, we can form powerful beliefs that influence our thoughts and behaviour from that point onwards.

For homework, I asked Matthew to write down the beliefs he holds about himself, other people or the world in general, which developed because of that incident.

\*NAME HAS BEEN CHANGED

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### Session two

## “You have to give trust to get it”

Matthew produced a spreadsheet of his beliefs: ‘People aren’t always what they seem to be; people cannot be trusted; it’s best to suspect the worst to protect yourself.’ I asked him what behaviour arose from these beliefs and he winced. He admitted he checks his girlfriend’s phone and that he’s encouraged her to stop seeing friends he thinks are ‘a bad influence’ on her. He admitted he was suspicious and jealous, ‘particularly when she talks about the men she works with’. ‘I’m always testing her and trying to catch her out,’ he said. He wants to know ‘everything she is doing’ and, if he doesn’t know where she is, he cannot relax.

‘How is that working out for you?’ I asked, knowing the answer. He flung his arms up in the air in despair. He could see his behaviour was pushing her away – his worst fear – and admitted that when she withdraws, he becomes insecure and needy, but he did not know how to stop the vicious cycle.

I said: ‘You have to give trust to get trust. There are no guarantees in relationships, but what you are currently doing is the closest thing to a guarantee that the relationship won’t last. Mistrust can bring the end of even the healthiest relationships.’

## “Mistrust can bring the end of even the healthiest relationships”

### Further sessions

## Leaving the past in the past

Matthew continued his coaching sessions for several months. He spent time acknowledging his hurt and accepting that his current partner was not the one who’d cheated on him. He also identified triggers, or ‘signals’, from his partner that caused him to be mistrustful of her. He learned to have more open, honest conversations with her, and he changed his language so that he used more questions and fewer accusations. Matthew also realised that, over time, he had stopped pursuing his own interests and had put all his eggs in one ‘relationship basket’. He started playing five-a-side football each week and picked up his guitar again, and his self-esteem improved as a result. He had other things to think about besides his relationship.

There was no quick fix for this. It took courage and commitment from Matthew to take the risk of trusting his girlfriend but, as he said at his last coaching session: ‘I get it now – there is no guarantee that anyone will stay with me forever, but I am giving myself a better chance of it working by trusting myself *and* her. I like myself better now, too!’

## Coaching exercises

### OVERCOMING TRUST ISSUES

Here are six steps to help you change your relationship with trust in your romantic partnership:

- **Understand your history of mistrust and your repeated patterns.** Your partner is probably not the person who hurt you, so stop punishing them for something they did not do. Ideally, work with a coach or a therapist on this – it is difficult work to do alone.
- **Stop monitoring your partner straight away** – it is not achieving anything positive for either of you.
- **Spend more time with friends** and, if you dare, share your anxieties with them and ask for their input.
- **Communicate your fears** to your partner honestly.
- **Ask yourself:** ‘Where is my current behaviour leading me?’ (Probably to what you fear the most.)
- **Build your self-esteem.** Make a list of your strengths and achievements. Do new things that require you to trust others, like abseiling, horse riding or team sports.

### ACCOUNTABLE TO LOVE

Open a ‘relationship bank account’ with your partner. With an actual bank account, you are keeping something valuable safe. You keep the account in balance; sometimes you make deposits and sometimes you make withdrawals. You try not to go overdrawn, although you have a small overdraft limit. A relationship bank account works the same way. Decide what deposits you each need to make to keep your ‘investment’ safe.

#### Deposits might be things like:

- Acts of kindness
- Showing trust
- Demonstrating loyalty to one another
- Being forgiving, and apologising if you make a mistake
- Noticing your partner (and letting them know you have)
- Being honest
- Listening without distraction or interruption

You may each need different things to help you feel safe, so ask each other: ‘What do you need from me to feel loved and valued?’ Make sure you give them what they need, not what you want to give. Check your balance from time to time and see if you need to make a deposit.

### COACHING QUESTION

‘How different would my life be if I could trust myself and those around me? What things would I be doing that I am not doing now if I trusted more?’

*For more from Kim, see [barefootcoaching.co.uk](http://barefootcoaching.co.uk); @BarefootCoaches*

relationships





# Dearly not departed

Why do we find it so hard to tell our friends and family how wonderful we think they are, until it's too late? Lizzie Enfield set out to change that >>>





>>> **O**nce, I invited my friends to a birthday lunch with the message: 'No presents please,' and added, 'but you can all say one nice thing about me!'

Needy, I know! But, there is a tendency for people to feel they must do something on a birthday, and I didn't want them to feel obliged to buy a gift. I thought the compliment idea was a great alternative – but, towards the end of the meal, no one had volunteered anything. I nudged them and, in return, received awkward and anxious looks. A few friends stared hard at their plates. A couple volunteered a few 'warm, witty and wises'... I turned to one of my oldest friends. She would not fail me. She would have something nice to say, surely?

'But I brought a present,' she said.

It might sound arrogant, but I do actually think that one or two of my friends think well of me privately. So, why did asking them to articulate it prove too much? Is it just that we find it uncomfortable? Are we so repressed?

## Coma revelations

The sad truth is that we often reserve our most heartfelt thoughts and feelings for when our loved ones are no longer with us. A few years ago, someone I know had a stroke and went into a coma. While he was unconscious, his partner received numerous letters – eulogies really – from friends and family, saying what a wonderful man he was. Three months later, he was out of the coma, chuckling as he read his 'obituaries', touched by the nice things that people had said about him while thinking he was going to die – things they would probably not have said had they known otherwise.

Why don't we say the things we feel; things that might make a big difference to the way people feel about themselves? Why is it only lovers in the early stages of new relationships who dare to articulate their innermost thoughts and feelings about another person? I am as guilty as anyone. Before my aunt died, I visited

“Expressing that we appreciate someone takes courage and vulnerability. One can't predict their response”

her in a hospice during her final hours. It was my chance to tell her what she meant to me – but I never found the right words, saving them instead for a newspaper article I wrote about her later, one she would never see. Thinking about this, I decide to redress the balance – to let the people still with me know why I appreciate them; to make my reticent loved ones realise how much I value them.

I start, tentatively, with my mother. She's in her late 80s but still spry, albeit rather deaf. We're not the kind of family who shout their feelings at each other but, over lunch at her house, I take her practically ordering me to have the last slice of apple pie as my cue: 'You're selfless Mum,' I say, as she loads my plate. 'I don't just mean the pie; you've always put us and your grandchildren before yourself.'

'What?' Mum retorts, but flushing in a way that makes me think she *has* heard me. Then she deflects my comment with a brusquely barked: 'Do you want custard?'

Her reaction is typical, says Christopher Littlefield, founder of American company Acknowledgement Works. In a study, he found that, while people generally feel valued if they are formally recognised in some way, they also feel embarrassment and discomfort. To counter that, we tend to divert acknowledgements and compliments by downplaying them, or through humour or passing the credit onto another person. 'Acknowledgement is intimate, and we're uncomfortable with intimacy,' says Littlefield. 'What people don't realise is that recognition is more about the giver than the receiver. It's the



giver sharing the difference someone has made to their lives. Expressing that we appreciate someone takes courage and vulnerability. One can't predict their response, and we're concerned about putting awkwardness into the relationship for which are expressing appreciation.'

## Groundwork for praise

Littlefield suggests making the reason for suddenly telling someone you value them clear, announcing why you are gushing so they do not become suspicious about your motives. It seems sound advice and I try it with two of my friends on a walk through our local woods. 'I wrote to the daughter of a friend who died recently,' I say, 'telling her what her mother had meant to me. She wrote back saying how much her mum would have liked to have known.'

There's an awkward pause but I carry on... 'The wonderful thing about having you as friends,' I say, 'is that you both have an innate ability to find the joy in life, no matter how difficult it is, and you make my life more joyful because of it.' One nods



## Tips for sharing loving feelings

*Easy steps to make a living tribute to someone special*

- **Think about what you want to say** and explain why you have decided to say it. Unfortunately, people are often suspicious of others' motives.
- **Explain the impact that one of their qualities** has had on you and your life. Let them see that something about them has a positive effect on others' lives.
- **Try to say something in person**, or in a handwritten message, which is more likely to be kept.
- **Make it clear** that it's not necessary for them to respond or reciprocate.

“People are privileged to have insights into how others think of them; to hear sentiments that might have been reserved for their funeral”

but says nothing. I've clearly embarrassed her. The other is surprised but gracious. 'Oh,' she says, 'that's nice to know!'

The exchange makes me wonder if there is a better way. I trawl the internet and discover a company called Vitae Magnum, which makes filmed biographies of living people. These are ordinary people and films are commissioned by friends or family, who are interviewed, along with colleagues, resulting in what is, in effect, a living eulogy. 'People feel privileged to have insights into how others think of them; to hear words and

sentiments that might have been reserved for their funeral,' says Huw Williams, one of the firm's founders. 'Family, friends and colleagues welcome the chance to say things, through interviewers, without the embarrassment of talking directly to the person concerned.'

### Say it with meaning

I wonder if I should commission one for my parents – with subtitles so they can read it! I think about this while watching psychologist Martin Seligman's TED Talk, *The New Era Of Positive Psychology*, in which he discusses the positive impact of 'gratitude visits' – where people are encouraged to think of someone who did something that changed their lives in a good way, and to thank them for it.

'What happens it that, when we test people later, they're both happier and less depressed,' says Seligman.

That's a positive impact on everyone. I'll try it! I think of my former boss, a news editor, whose policy of positive daily feedback played a big part in making me

feel more confident as a young reporter. Even if I'd had a dreadful day at work, he always found something encouraging to say. He's a big fish in a major organisation now, probably too busy to reply to the email I send, telling him that his early support was pivotal in my career.

'That means a lot,' came his almost instant reply. 'I went into journalism wanting to make a real difference and have never really felt as if I have, but if I had an impact on you, then I'm happy!'

It's a start. I'm obviously not going to change the world with my new policy of telling people what they mean to me but, if it affects them in a good way, that's the point, really. Knowing that those around us appreciate us makes a difference, while efforts unnoticed can turn into resentments. It's about paying close attention and passing it on. It's all very well not speaking ill of the dead, but better still to speak well of the living.

*'Ivy And Abe' by Elizabeth Enfield (Penguin, £12.99) is out now; [acknowledgmentworks.com](http://acknowledgmentworks.com); [vitaemagnum.com](http://vitaemagnum.com); [ted.com/talks/martin\\_seligman\\_on\\_the\\_state\\_of\\_psychology](http://ted.com/talks/martin_seligman_on_the_state_of_psychology)*