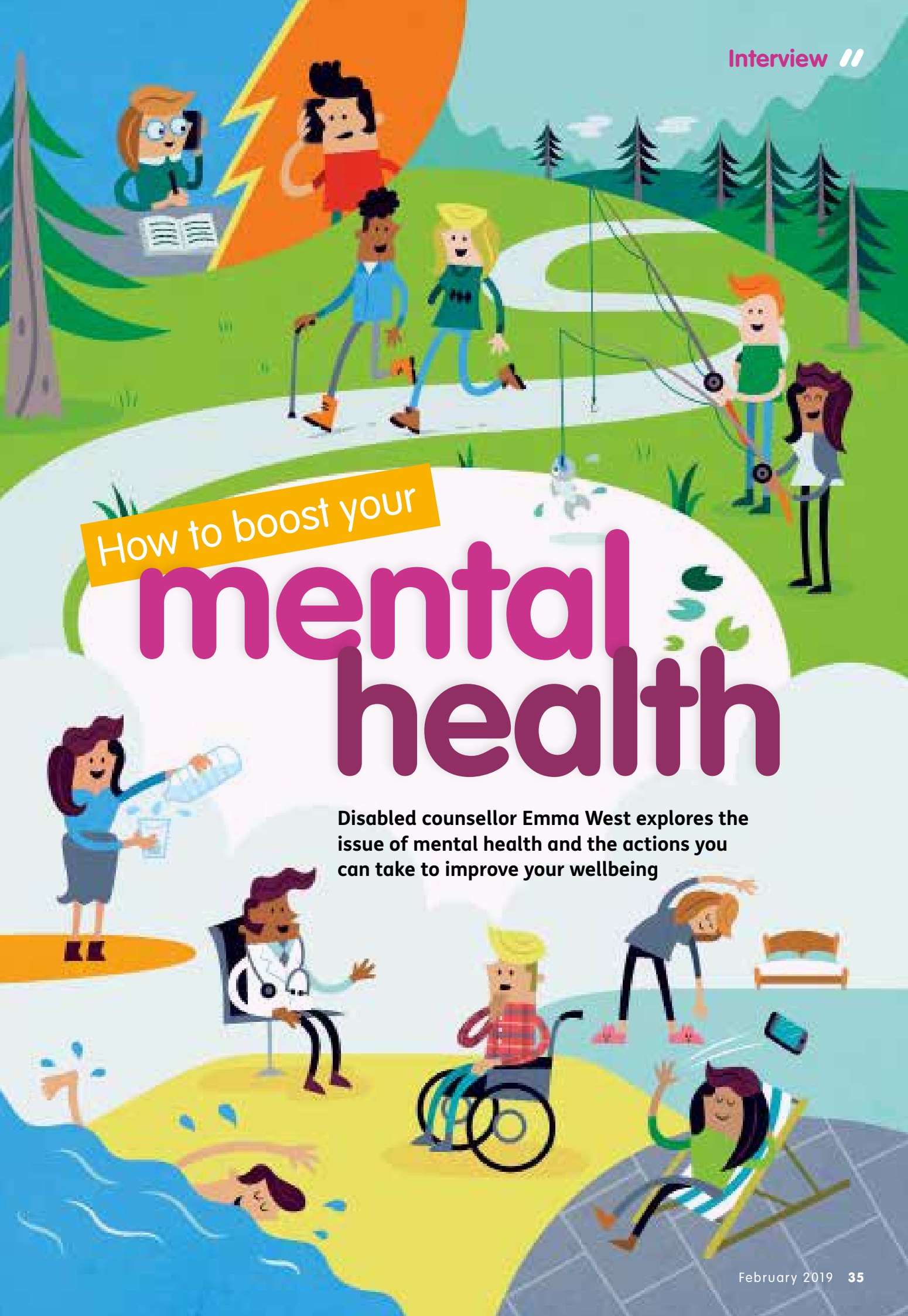


How to boost your

mental health

Disabled counsellor Emma West explores the issue of mental health and the actions you can take to improve your wellbeing



Bereavement, social isolation, relationship or family problems, physical ill health, lack of money, childhood abuse, work issues, traumatic events, unsuitable housing... Life can certainly get tough at times.

As a counsellor I've noticed that many people who come to see me whilst experiencing challenging circumstances come pre-labelled as 'having depression', 'experiencing anxiety' or whatever diagnosis they've been given. But mental distress – feeling depressed, anxious, stressed or panicked, lacking in confidence, having negative thoughts, worrying, and even hearing voices – is actually a very natural response to difficult events like the ones listed above.

THE MENTAL 'ILLNESS' MYTH

There's a common myth that mental 'illness' is caused by a chemical imbalance in the brain, but the evidence for this theory is very weak. It's generally more helpful to see



Breaking the silence

The taboo of speaking out about mental distress is diminishing, and this has been helped by a growing number of people in the public eye talking openly about their experiences. These well-known names include Stephen Fry (bipolar, pictured above), JK Rowling (depression), Ed Sheeran (body image), Adele (anxiety), Lady Gaga (post-traumatic stress), Ellie Goulding (panic attacks), Russell Brand (addiction) and Freddie Flintoff (depression).

mental distress as a normal response to negative circumstances and experiences. This means that rather than being at the mercy of a chemically imbalanced brain, there are active steps you can take to improve your mental wellbeing.

I'm not saying it's necessarily easy to take charge of your unruly thoughts, feelings and behaviours, but it is definitely possible!

HELP YOURSELF

If you want to help yourself, then the Mind and 'getselfhelp' websites are excellent starting points, with clear information about different forms of mental distress, treatment options and practical issues, worksheets and videos. There are loads of great apps out there too, including Calm, CBT-I Coach, Thought Diary, SAMApp and Silvercloud.

Reading has a positive impact on wellbeing and the 'Reading Well Books on Prescription' scheme is supported by many organisations, including NHS England. The recommended books are

chosen by health experts and people living with the conditions covered, and they can be borrowed from your local library.

Other sources of self-help include online communities, which proved life changing for Ami, 23.

"Earlier this year I felt so alone with my disabilities and the deterioration of my health, so one morning I typed 'disability forums' on Google," says Ami. "Scope was the first result that came up, so I checked it out and it has changed my life ever since for so many reasons. You get to meet other people who are suffering the same as you, and you're able to talk with others, just like you would when you go for a coffee with a friend.

"Before becoming a member of the community I would never speak to new people. I took a chance and I'm glad I did because I've got to know some extraordinary people. This has had a massive impact on my mental health – the community has given me

such a confidence boost and let me be myself, and I love them for that."

Mind's Elefriends, with its lovely introductory video, is another great example of peer-to-peer support.

IT'S GOOD TO TALK

With hundreds of therapies out there, you may be wondering how on earth to find the one that will work for you. Certain types of counselling are more effective for specific forms of emotional distress. For example, Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT) is good for anxiety, mindfulness for depression, EMDR (eye movement desensitisation and reprocessing) and somatic therapy for trauma and PTSD (post-traumatic stress disorder).

Helen Rutherford, a counsellor with a disability who specialises in working with people with disabilities, says, "It's important to find a counsellor who you feel really understands you. The 'therapeutic relationship' between the counsellor and client is essential in facilitating positive change."

Approximately one in four adults in the UK will experience mental distress each year

While most counsellors offer face-to-face counselling, there are a growing number who, like Helen, offer online counselling, which for Michael eradicated the stresses of travel and access, so he could get on with the task in hand.

Michael says, "Working with Helen has had a transformational effect on my life. It's given me the opportunity to talk to somebody who really empathises with the situations I bring to discuss, and as a result I've grown as a person and gained increased confidence." →

Your mental health checklist

Support network

Good support is key for positive mental health. Are there people or organisations you could contact to bolster your support levels?



Sleep

Emotional distress frequently impacts on sleep. Avoid caffeine, alcohol and computer screens at least an hour before hitting the sack. Establish a bedtime routine that includes relaxation, such as mindfulness (see page 49 to find out how mindfulness can also help you lose weight).



Alcohol/drugs

If you're using alcohol or drugs (recreational or prescription) to deal with emotional issues, talk to your GP who can refer you for specialist support.



Coping strategies

Strategies such as avoidance and self-harm are ultimately unhelpful. Instead, develop effective ways of coping – practising mindfulness, being self-compassionate and challenging your thoughts through CBT are all proven positive strategies.



Exercise

Dubbed the 'wonder drug', being active is a sure-fire way of improving mental health. Exercise that requires concentration is most effective, and even a little bit is better than none at all.



Diet

What you eat can affect how you feel. Try to eat regularly, with plenty of fruit, vegetables, pulses, oily fish and live yoghurt. Caffeine and energy drinks give a quick hit of energy but they can increase anxiety and depression, so opt for water instead.



Digital technology and social media

Is your online activity or watching the news dragging you down? Try reducing your exposure or take a break from it altogether. Better still, turn your worries into action through voluntary work, blogging or starting a petition.



Having fun!

What do you do for fun? Are there friends you've lost contact with? Look them up! And if there are hobbies you've left by the wayside, see page 46 to discover more about the positive effect of pastimes.





FIND A SUPPORTIVE GP

If you're experiencing mental distress, a good first port of call is your GP. They may discuss the option of medication with you, as this can be effective for some people, particularly in the short term. They can also refer you to an in-house or appropriate local counselling service.

A more innovative GP who is into 'social prescribing' will direct you towards activities. These are generally provided by voluntary and community sector organisations, such as volunteering, arts, gardening and sports, instead of just offering medication.

If you need further encouragement to take action, remember that poor mental health doesn't just make you feel rubbish psychologically, it can also have a direct impact on your physical health. So, if you can improve your mental health you'll inevitably improve your physical health too – that's definitely a win-win situation! ■

Help is out there

If you're in crisis, please contact your GP, the Samaritans (116 123, free) or Childline (0800 1111, free). Other sources of help and information include:

Mind mind.org.uk

GetSelfHelp getselfhelp.co.uk

The Reading Well reading-well.org.uk

Scope Community community.scope.org.uk

Elefriends elefriends.org.uk

Helen Rutherford, Emotional Respite – Disability Counselling Service
emotionalrespite.co.uk

YoungMinds youngminds.org.uk

Mindfulness: franticworld.com

Find a therapist Search for 'find a therapist' at bacp.co.uk and acto-org.uk

Get Yourself Active Search for 'Lifestyle' at motability.co.uk and go to issue 99 (all issues of *Lifestyle* can be found here)

National Survivor User Network nsun.org.uk

Hearing Voices Network hearing-voices.org

Emma West emmawestcounselling.co.uk

