



AUTOPILOT BRITAIN

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Spend it Well

About this Whitepaper

M&S wants to empower people to make small, everyday considered choices that make a difference in a world where, all too often, we live our lives on autopilot, distracted from the things which truly make us happy.

So we engaged the nation in a conversation about autopilot and how it gets in the way of what matters to us.

Methodology

We conducted an online survey with over 3,000 consumers to understand whether we are in control of our lives and the decisions we are making. And ultimately whether or not this is allowing us to lead happy, balanced lives and spend our time well. We also conducted in-depth interviews with two cultural experts on choice-making and happiness.

Study Contributors



Dr Mark Williamson
Director, Action for Happiness

Dr Mark Williamson is Director of Action for Happiness (www.actionforhappiness.org), a movement of people taking action to promote mental wellbeing and create a happier society. Mark has a diverse range of experience across private and non-profit sectors, from start-ups through to large multi-national companies. He was previously Director of the Innovation unit at the Carbon Trust. He was also a non-executive director of Solar Press and founder of online initiative What You Can Do. Before that, Mark spent nine years as a management consultant with Accenture, leading a wide range of projects relating to strategy, technology and change management. He has also worked for Hewlett Packard Labs and Orange. He holds an MBA from IMD business school in Switzerland, and a PhD in Electronics and Communications from the University of Bristol. He is a Sainsbury Management Fellow, a Chartered Engineer and a member of the Institute of Directors.



Professor Renata Salecl
Birkbeck College, University of London
and author 'Tyranny of Choice'

Renata Salecl is philosopher and sociologist. She is Professor of Psychology and Psychoanalysis of Law at the School of Law, Birkbeck College, University of London and Senior Researcher at the Institute of Criminology at the faculty of Law in Ljubljana, Slovenia. She is also Recurring Visiting Professor at Cardozo School of Law in New York. Her last book Tyranny of Choice (Profile Books 2010) has been translated into 15 languages and was featured at TED Global. Her previous books include: The Spoils of Freedom (Routledge 1994), (Per)versions of Love and Hate (Verso, 1998), and On Anxiety (Routledge 2004).

Autopilot is a growing problem. It is becoming our default mode of operating, whereby we are sleep-walking into our choices.

Making unconscious, automatic decisions to help with certain routine tasks is an evolutionary mechanism that has developed to stop our brains from overloading. Yet today, making choices on autopilot has seeped into more areas of our lives and relationships, causing us to feel out of control.

With help from our experts, we examined the modern conditions that make autopilot more dangerous to our lives today, to understand why it has become such a problem. Our understanding of what has gone wrong has helped us to identify solutions. It is within our grasp to liberate ourselves from life on autopilot if we make more effort to notice what is going on and purposefully create more positive habits. Our experts identified the strategies that put us in touch with what really matters to us, which we overlook while operating on autopilot.

“ People recognise that the choices they are making don’t add up to the life they want to live. We can all do better at living more purposefully. The opposite of autopilot is purposeful living. ”

DR MARK WILLIAMSON



81%

DESPITE THE SCALE OF THE PROBLEM THE SOLUTIONS CAN BE SIMPLE. THE MAJORITY OF BRITS SAY IT'S THE SMALL THINGS OR GESTURES THAT BRIGHTEN UP THEIR DAY

CONTENTS

1 What is autopilot and why is it a problem?

2 What are the cultural conditions which drive autopilot today?

3 Awareness of our own personal autopilot: which archetype are you?

4 From autopilot to conscious decision-making





1

WHAT IS AUTOPILOT AND WHY IS IT A PROBLEM?

The average adult makes around 35,000 decisions each day¹; many need to be second nature as we cannot carefully consider everything that we do. Humans have developed an unconscious decision-making system – the cognitive unconscious² – to keep our brains from overloading and automatically manage routine tasks.

But modern life has hijacked this system: it has gone from protecting us to creeping into more areas of life without us even realising. Living life on autopilot has become an epidemic.



The decisions people say they are most likely to make on autopilot include:

- What to do at the weekend**
- What to watch on TV**
- What to wear**
- Which route to take to work**
- Answering emails**
- What to have for lunch / dinner**

Worryingly, our autopilot decision-making is creeping into more parts of everyday life. A large number of these decisions take place when people are at home. In fact, that is where Brits say they are most likely to be on autopilot, with...



This is precisely the time when we should be consciously engaged with the people and things that matter to us the most.

“ We’re forgetting that when we are at home the important things are to interact with family and friends, without being constantly distracted. ”

PROFESSOR RENATA SALECL

The trouble today is that our hijacked autopilot is triggering negative habits. Autopilot distraction means we are forgetting to do important daily tasks, as our survey revealed.



¹ <http://go.roberts.edu/leadingedge/the-great-choices-of-strategic-leaders>

² https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Unconscious_cognition

Other things Brits have forgotten whilst on autopilot are:

- To say 'thank you'
- To smile at people
- To say 'I love you'
- To drink the tea/coffee you made
- Call someone when you say you will
- Packing something vital for a holiday or trip

Another negative reflex is slipping into a habit of acquiescence.



47%

BRITS SAY YES FOUR TIMES A DAY WHEN THEY WOULD RATHER SAY 'NO' AND ALMOST HALF OF THESE ADMIT THIS IS BECAUSE THEY DON'T WANT TO LET PEOPLE DOWN



25%

A QUARTER HAVE SAID YES TO A SOCIAL EVENT THEY KNOW THEY WON'T ATTEND

Other situations where people say yes when they would rather say no include:

- Agreeing to work late / extra hours
- Visiting people we don't get on with
- Agreeing to host an event
- Offering to take care of someone else's kids
- Going for after work drinks when you'd rather go home

What is the impact of living life on autopilot? By sleepwalking into the choices we make, we are prevented from engaging with what matters in life. The autopilot reflex can stop us from really connecting with the people around us.



20%

A FIFTH OF BRITS DON'T PROPERLY LISTEN TO OTHERS WHEN THEY ARE ON AUTOPILOT

It also inhibits us making active and considered choices that help us lead the lives we want to live.

“ When running on autopilot, we often make unhelpful choices, so we feel trapped and like we're living someone else's life. ”

DR MARK WILLIAMSON



38%

FEEL THEY ARE LIVING LIFE TO THE FULL TODAY



76%

ADMIT THERE HAVE BEEN TIMES WHEN THEY FEEL THEY ARE NOT SPENDING THEIR TIME WELL



2 WHAT ARE THE CULTURAL CONDITIONS THAT DRIVE AUTOPILOT TODAY?

It is easy to think that it is risk aversion and the path of least resistance that pushes us onto autopilot. However our experts have helped us identify specific underlying cultural conditions which make autopilot more prevalent today.



61%

OF BRITS SAY THEY STICK WITH SAFE/KNOWN PATTERNS AND DECISIONS

Modern life puts people under three key pressures:

- 1. A DISTRACTED NATION: WE ARE TOO BUSY TO NOTICE WHAT DECISIONS WE MAKE
- 2. AN AUTOPLAY CULTURE: TECH MAKES US SLEEPWALK INTO OUR CHOICES
- 3. TYRANNY OF PERFECT: WE SPEND TOO MUCH TIME COMPARING OURSELVES TO IDEALS WE CAN'T LIVE UP TO



22%

MORE THAN A FIFTH OF PEOPLE WHO MAKE DECISIONS ON AUTOPILOT FEEL THEY MISS DOING THINGS THOROUGHLY/WITH CONSIDERATION



21%

WHILE A FURTHER FIFTH OF PEOPLE SAY THEY MISS OUT ON FOCUSING FULLY ON THINGS

1. A DISTRACTED NATION: WE ARE TOO BUSY TO NOTICE WHAT DECISIONS WE MAKE

There is a crisis of productivity because we are too distracted trying to appear busy instead of achieving anything concrete. We endlessly toggle between tasks. People switch activities on average every three minutes and five seconds and it takes an average of 23 minutes and 15 seconds to get back to the task.³

A study by Daniel Gilbert, author of 'Stumbling on Happiness', and Matthew Killingsworth found that just under half the time (47%), people are doing what is called 'mind wandering'. They are not focused on the outside world or the task at hand because they are looking into their own thoughts.⁴

The more distracted we are, the more difficult it is to make good decisions. David Rock, author of Your Brain at Work, says: "Every time you focus your attention you use a measurable amount of glucose and other metabolic resources. Studies show that each task you do tends to make you less effective at the next task, and this is especially true for high-energy tasks like self control or decision making."⁵

³ <https://www.fastcompany.com/944128/worker-interrupted-cost-task-switching>

⁴ [http://www.danielgilbert.com/KILLINGSWORTH%20&%20GILBERT%20\(2010\).pdf](http://www.danielgilbert.com/KILLINGSWORTH%20&%20GILBERT%20(2010).pdf)

⁵ <https://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/your-brain-work/200910/easily-distracted-why-its-hard-focus-and-what-do-about-it>

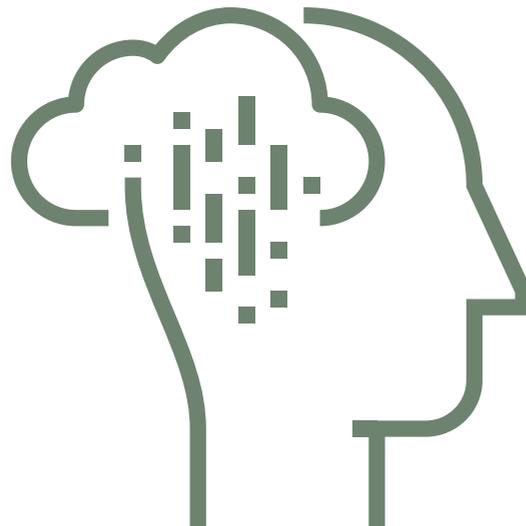
2. AN AUTOPLAY CULTURE: TECH MAKES US SLEEPWALK INTO OUR CHOICES

Many of the technology platforms and products that surround us are increasingly designed to lock us into spending more time on them, employing ways to hold our attention by making it easy for us to keep on watching and scrolling. Think of the way that the next episode of your favourite series automatically plays once you finish the one you were watching, so you end up going to bed an hour later. Or how your social media feed refreshes just as you thought you had finished reading so you keep on scrolling.

Tristan Harris, an ex-employee at Google and the man behind Time Well Spent,⁶ an organisation whose mission is to help people break their unconscious habits and take control of their relationship with technology, claims that digital technology is making it harder for people to make free choices. “We’ve unleashed this black box which is always developing new ways to persuade us to do things, by moving us from one trance to the next,” he says.⁷

“ We’ve unleashed this black box which is always developing new ways to persuade us to do things, by moving us from one trance to the next.”⁷ ”

TRISTAN HARRIS



3. TYRANNY OF PERFECT: WE SPEND TOO MUCH TIME COMPARING OURSELVES TO IDEALS WE CAN'T LIVE UP TO

Renata Salecl told us that the drive to live optimised lives and be the best we can is a recent phenomenon. She says: “The idea that everyone can make out of him or herself what they want, that is a fairly new idea.” And it brings its share of stress. “Constant striving to hit ideals creates anxiety, for example the pressure to be happy, for how you have to look, what kind of parent you need to be and what kind of work you need to be doing.” Social media has bred a comparison culture.

“ Nobody’s perfect. But so often we compare a negative view of ourselves with an unrealistic view of other people.”⁸ ”

DR MARK WILLIAMSON

Paradoxically, if we make happiness our aim, we are less likely to be happy. A series of studies carried out by psychologists at the University of California, Berkeley, showed that the more intensely people value and pursue happiness as a distinct goal, the more likely they are to display symptoms of unhappiness, anxiety, loneliness and even depression.⁹

⁶ <http://www.timewellspent.io/>

⁷ <https://www.1843magazine.com/features/the-scientists-who-make-apps-addictive>

⁸ <https://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2014/nov/03/ten-easy-steps-that-will-make-you-a-happier-person>

⁹ <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC3160511/>



3 AWARENESS OF OUR OWN PERSONAL AUTOPILOT: WHICH ARCHETYPE ARE YOU?

Whilst living life on autopilot has become a big problem, the good news is that we can make a difference with small and achievable actions. The first step, as Dr Mark Williamson explains, is to help people become more aware of the impact autopilot has on their own lives - which will be different for everyone. Once we do that, we are in a position to make changes.

“ The simple step of encouraging people to notice their autopilot behaviours is crucial – because then you’ve begun the journey towards changing your habits and making more conscious choices. ”

DR MARK WILLIAMSON

Acting on autopilot doesn’t affect us all in the same way, so we need to be aware of our own personal autopilots and how they impact on our daily life. Our experts helped us to identify a set of useful archetypes in order to recognise our own versions of autopilot. The action points for each archetype were inspired by thinking from Action For Happiness.

AUTOPILOT TYPES:

Recognise your own version of autopilot:



The Pleasers

Problem: Pleasers find it so hard to say anything other than yes that obligations pile up and the internal voice pleading them to say “no” gets drowned out. By trying to please everyone they end up resentful of their to-do list and not focussing on what matters.



The Pacers

Problem: On a mission to always find “what’s next” the Pacers are so caught up in the pace of modern life that they pack as much as possible into their days - relentlessly busy “doing” rather than “being”.



The Passengers

Problem: The Passengers are overwhelmed with choice and information, like a rabbit caught in the headlights they sometimes struggle through life allowing the world around them to dictate their choices and following the crowd too often.

The Pleasers

There is a pleaser inside most of us. We all find it difficult to let people down and say no to things we would rather not do. And modern life serves up more and more obligations. Whether it is the school bake-off, the after-works drinks, the university reunion, Pleasers have to be resolute and determined to protect their time for the things and people that really matter. Their autopilot is defaulting to Yes without listening to their internal voice. These people need the conviction to say 'no'. Otherwise they will end up burnt-out and resentful of their relentless to-do lists, which seem to benefit everyone else but themselves.

“ **We have a natural human tendency to want to please others and be productive. Advances in technology mean that we can do everything quicker and fit more in, more efficiently. But sadly this hasn't led to more leisure time and improved quality of life. Instead we end up saying yes to more and we overfill our lives.** ”

DR MARK WILLIAMSON



37%

BRITS SAY YES WHEN THEY MEAN NO BECAUSE IT'S JUST EASIER. THEY DON'T FEEL COMFORTABLE SAYING NO (26%) OR TO KEEP UP APPEARANCES (13%)

Action points for Pleasers:

Ideally we need to learn to say no (but kindly)

Rather than taking on more than you can manage - or worrying that you're letting people down - have the courage to say no to people's requests, but in a way that still shows them that you care. Once you have formulated the right 'saying no' phrase for you, write it down on a post-it note and put it somewhere you'll see it every day.

Cancel unnecessary engagements

If we have unwillingly said yes, all is not lost.



23%

OF BRITS CITE VISITING PEOPLE WE DON'T GET ON WITH AS ONE OF THE SITUATIONS THEY SAY 'YES' TO WHEN THEY WOULD PREFER TO SAY 'NO'.

To avoid the pressure of social obligation, look through your calendar every Sunday evening and identify and cancel any engagements which are unnecessary for the week ahead.



The Pacers

The pace of modern life is frenetic. We try to fit as much as possible into our days. For them, technology helps by cramming downtime with productivity, making lists whenever we have a moment to breathe. The Pacers are constantly on the move, eking the most out of every minute, on a mission to better themselves and their families. The only problem is they are so busy looking at what comes next, they forget to look at what is happening right now. Their autopilot is the relentless progress and rush of modern life. For them, what is lacking is appreciating the moment, taking the time to chat with a stranger in the queue for a coffee.

“ **We are always on. If you pause, you risk letting yourself or others down. When you stand still, it’s perceived that you’re going backwards. On autopilot, we end up rushing around like headless chickens and not stopping to ask what we’re rushing towards. It’s like charging up a ladder without looking what the ladder is leaning against. As we look around us, it seems like other people are living successful, perfect lives. We feel that we must keep doing and striving and pushing - and so our homes and lives become more busy, distracted and anxious. ”**

DR MARK WILLIAMSON

Action points for Pacers:

Start with the important stuff

Rather than starting the day by reacting to other people’s agendas (e.g. by checking emails or responding to requests), ask yourself what’s the single most important thing you can do today - and then do that first.

Bedtime alarm

Rather than just setting an alarm to wake you up in the morning, try setting an alarm to remind you to go to bed on time and make sure you have a chance to recharge properly. You could also set weekly reminders on your phone which nudge you to call someone close to you.



The Passengers

An average day can feel like an onslaught of information.

Every 24 hours people are bombarded with the equivalent amount of 34 GB (gigabytes) of information – that amount would overload a laptop within a week.¹⁰ There are so much competing opinions about the best way to live our lives that we can feel like a rabbit in the headlights, overwhelmed with choices and information. Their autopilot is to allow the world around them to dictate their decisions making them passengers in their own lives. They need to stop procrastinating, rise above the cacophony and make those considered choices, even if they are difficult ones.



46%

OF PEOPLE OFTEN WORRY THEY WILL MAKE THE WRONG DECISION



61%

PLAY IT SAFE BY STICKING WITH KNOWN PATTERNS AND DECISIONS

“ **If there is too much anxiety, people become paralysed – to the point of being on an autopilot. A lot of people [become] frozen in front of all these choices, paralysed under pressure to make the right choices, so instead of choosing, they do nothing.** ”

PROFESSOR RENATA SALECL

¹⁰ <http://www.tech21century.com/the-human-brain-is-loaded-daily-with-34-gb-of-information/>

¹¹ <http://uk.businessinsider.com/novelty-makes-people-happier-2017-4>

Action points for Passengers:

Passengers need to consciously break out of their autopilot and stop getting carried along with the tide

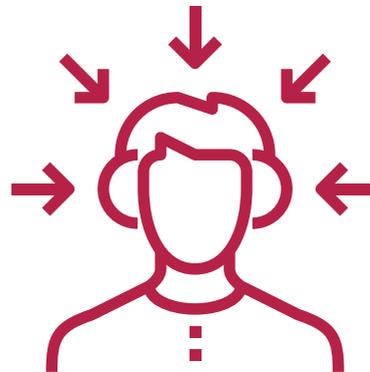
Trying new things can re-vitalise us and spark new passions. Rather than sticking to your normal habits and hobbies, commit to doing one thing differently each week. Sample sushi, read a different newspaper or visit a local place of interest. It could even be using a new word each week.

“ **Often we’re happier, we feel more energetic, more productive, more creative when we try something new, when we challenge ourselves a little bit, when we kind of go out of that comfort zone. That atmosphere of growth can really boost our happiness.** ”¹¹

GRETCHEN RUBIN, AUTHOR OF ‘BETTER THAN BEFORE’
A GUIDE ON CREATING BETTER HABITS

Prioritise your to-do list

Long meandering to-do lists are fuel to the Passengers’ natural tendency to procrastinate. Instead, make a longlist, and then take a separate piece of paper and write down the three most important things on it. These three are your goals for the day.





4 FROM AUTOPILOT TO CONSCIOUS DECISION-MAKING

Once we've become aware of our own individual autopilot behaviours, we can start to change them. We can turn our passive and unconscious habits into active and positive ones. This will allow us to reconnect with what really matters and, as Mark Williamson suggests, live life more purposefully, which to him is the opposite of autopilot culture.

We can identify general principles for living a more considered and purposeful life:

Firstly, avoid comparisons with perfection. Surround yourself with culture, people and activities that make you feel good about yourself, rather than lapsing into a constant comparison which says 'you're not good enough'.

“ **Part of what's going on here is that we look around and compare ourselves unfavourably with others. This is particularly exacerbated by social media images of other people leading successful, perfect lives. We need to stop comparing our insides to other people's outsides.** ”

DR MARK WILLIAMSON

Secondly, life is short, and the special things in life shouldn't just be reserved for special occasions. This may be about little everyday treats, saying 'no' more often, or it may be about reserving pockets of time for hobbies, clubs or even just regular catch-ups with friends.

Thirdly, be more intentional. Make time for more conscious thinking, list the things that matter to you, question your routines and habits to understand whether they truly bring reward and happiness.

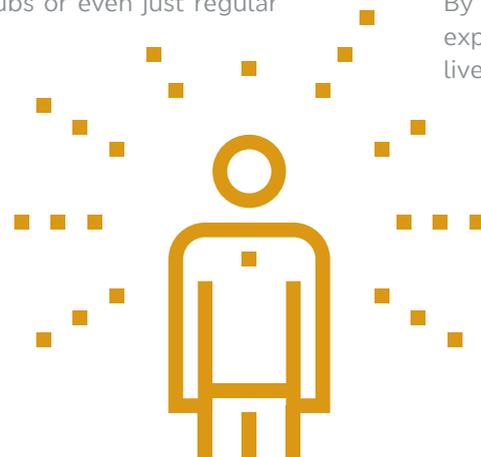
“ **We need to ask ourselves: 'Is this thing I'm doing or prioritising actually making me or people I care about happier, and if not, why am I doing it?'** ”

DR MARK WILLIAMSON

Beyond these general principles, we can effect change across our lives by asking ourselves the following questions:

- i) **How am I leading the life that I want to live?**
- ii) **How am I deepening my connections and relationships?**
- iii) **How am I becoming part of my wider community?**

By offering tips and solutions that address these questions, our experts shed light on how to live more considered and purposeful lives.



i) Leading the life I want to live

Our survey suggested that one of the biggest problems with autopilot is that we lose agency over our own individual lives as we get caught up with obligations and routines.



When asked what would significantly improve your life, people identified the following:



Our experts suggest we need to focus on actively breaking out of our default behaviours, rather than just re-focusing on what we want.

Choose a meaningful and realistic goal to look forward to

Think of a goal, do one thing to get started on the road to accomplishing it and tell three people about it to make it more of a commitment. This will give you more control over your life's direction and satisfaction when you achieve it.

Re-set your mood

Being active makes us happier. Get off the bus one stop early. Walk up the stairs instead of taking the escalator – anything that gets you moving.

Don't live someone else's life, live your own

Share the real you. Rather than sharing a "perfect" image or a status update on social media, share something silly, imperfect or honest to show what's really going on in your life.

ii) Deepening connections and relationships

People are unlikely to feel on autopilot when spending time with other people (either partner, children or socialising).



“ When you look at the research about what makes for a good life, human relationships and our connections with each other are vitally important. But these are often at risk when we are living on autopilot. ”

DR MARK WILLIAMSON

Gretchen Rubin offers a simple but effective bit of advice here: say “hello” more. “It’s to really recognise that someone is coming or going. It’s really to look the person in the eye; say hello; have a little exchange; and to acknowledge the fact that they are coming or going. I am amazed at how much it creates a sense of connection and recognition.”¹²

Small gestures can make a really big difference. Our survey revealed that for most Brits, (81%) it is the small things or gestures (like a hello or a smile) that brighten up their day.

Dr Mark Williamson advises us to say thank you more. “Rather than taking people for granted (especially loved ones), make time to recognise something they do that you really appreciate and tell them how grateful you are and why.”

Another area to be mindful of is our behaviour inside the home and how we can avoid zoning out and improve the quality of our downtime with our loved ones. 39% of Brits said that relaxing at home was when they are most likely to be on autopilot.

Dr Mark Williamson advises:

Give your full attention

Rather than allowing electronic devices to interrupt your face-to-face conversations, make a rule that you will have no phones/ devices at mealtimes or during conversations. Keep a shoe-box in the kitchen and ensure all devices go in at the beginning of the meal.

Renata Salecl agrees: “We can remove our own devices, not only tell children to close their computers, but do it first ourselves. I try myself to have my mobile phone somewhere not visible too much to me.”

Screen-free bedroom

Rather than leaving yourself stressed or mentally stimulated late at night, make a rule not to allow any screens (e.g. TV, tablet, phone) in your bedroom. Create a screen-free bedroom by making a charging station downstairs or away from the bedroom. All devices should be charged here. Buy yourself an alarm clock for the bedroom if you miss seeing the time on your phone.

¹² <http://uk.businessinsider.com/habit-to-improve-relationships-2017-4>

iii) Becoming part of my wider community

Autopilot often puts us on a solo treadmill; we get caught up in ourselves and our routines. One route to living a more purposeful life is by feeling more involved in your wider community and part of something bigger. If we can pause and notice what is on our doorstep, things that we often overlook, we can find ways to play a more enriching role in our neighbourhood.

Join a club

“ We’ve let go of a lot of chances to get together with people that live near you, to meet and share ideas. But there are options open to us: there is a thriving network of local clubs and organisations that bring people together, from rotary to book clubs to mums networks. ”

DR MARK WILLIAMSON

Make three extra connections today

Stop to chat in the shop, wave at a neighbour, learn the name of someone new.

Be more charitable

Volunteering, giving blood or helping someone who needs support in the neighbourhood is another way of helping us feel part of something bigger.

Make more time

Making more time to be just be outside and appreciating nature and our surroundings more is another valuable piece of advice. Instead of arranging to meet friends at cafes, arrange a walk and bring coffees and snacks with you.

“ We should try to find times to go for walks with friends, that’s a small thing I’m doing at the moment, with my group of friends, every second week we go somewhere in nature, and walk and talk and eat a long meal at the end of the day. ”

PROFESSOR RENATA SALECL

