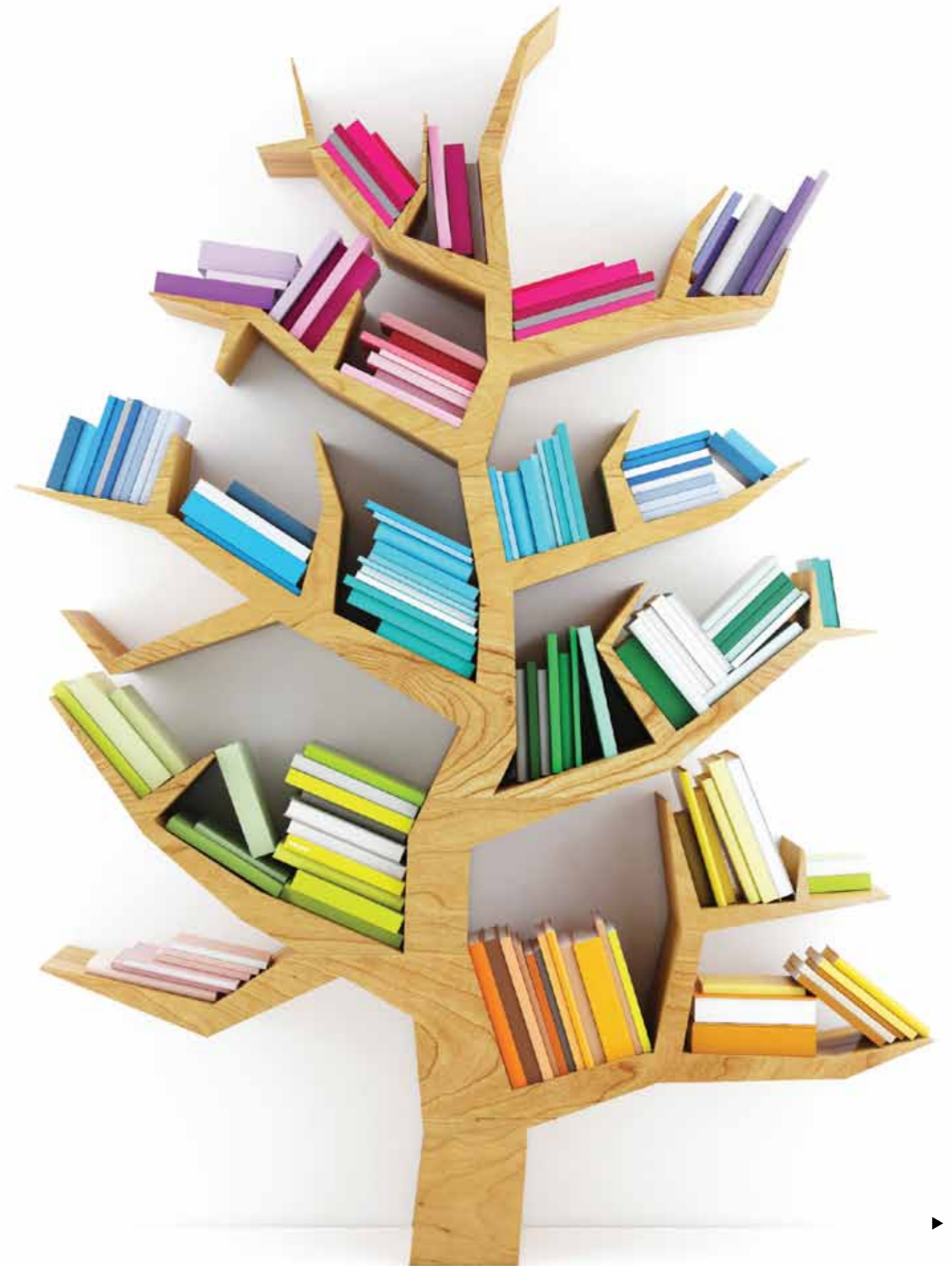


Tree of life

Sally Brown reveals the self-help books that will truly transform your thinking

YOU ONLY HAVE TO BROWSE AN AIRPORT BOOKSHOP to see that self-help is big business. But don't judge the whole sector by the latest bestseller claiming you can unleash "unlimited power" by repeating a mantra in the mirror every morning. It's true that many self-help books are simply cleverly packaged "woo-woo", exploiting our insecurities and desire for a quick fix to challenges and setbacks. But there are also many that are truly helpful, offering intelligent insight into the way the mind works and what stands between you and a happier life. Many respected academics now write for the self-help market. The right book can create a shift in your thinking, much like a course of therapy, but at a fraction of the cost. Here's our pick of the best.





Mindset: Changing the Way You Think to Fulfil Your Potential
by Carol S Dweck
(Little, Brown Book Group, £10)

Stanford psychologist Dweck argues that it's our mindset that determines how successful we will be. Originally published in 2012 and now a worldwide bestseller, Dweck identifies two main mindsets – “fixed” versus “growth”. Her theory is this: when we operate with a fixed mindset, we believe skills are innate characteristics, and success depends on convincing everyone else we're smart. With a fixed mindset, you subconsciously close off from anything you don't fully understand, or feel you're not good at. People with a growth mindset, on the other hand, take the approach of “there is always more to learn”, and soak up knowledge from everyone they come into contact with.

READ IT IF... Your career has plateaued, you struggle with failure, or you'd like to impart some energy in your lacklustre team.

BONUS BENEFITS You will learn how to apply the principle to relationships and family life.

TYPICAL INSIGHT “People in a growth mindset don't just seek challenge, they thrive on it.”



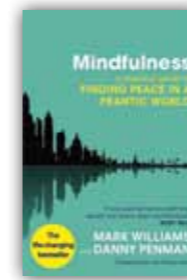
What's Stopping You? Why Smart People Don't Always Reach Their Potential and How You Can
by Robert Kelsey (Capstone, £11)

Kelsey shares personal insights from his past professions – financial journalist, banker and entrepreneur – along with current thinking in psychology on what really works when low self-esteem is sabotaging your career and relationships. It helps that he is a great writer, and open about his own debilitating fear of failure, which grew from poor confidence. The book is about recognising when insecurity is sabotaging you, and coming to accept that side of you, which is the first step to change. The second half is a practical guide to taking control of your life by discovering your own values, and writing a personal constitution.

READ IT IF... You suffer from Imposter Syndrome.

BONUS BENEFITS It may give you the insight you need to manage that disruptive colleague who is making life difficult.

TYPICAL INSIGHT “Those suffering from fear of failure are often able to take extreme risks in situations where failure is almost certain. Meanwhile, they find themselves paralysed by everyday situations that involve only moderate but very public risks.”



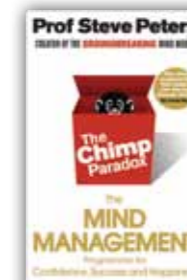
Mindfulness: A Practical Guide to Finding Peace in a Frantic World
by Mark Williams and Danny Penman (Piatkus, £15)

A big myth about mindfulness is that it means turning your mind into a blank screen and relaxing. Stress reduction is a welcome benefit, but the primary aim is to become more aware, so you're tuned in to the world around you. Williams argues that we use up energy by resisting our experiences. This is arguably one of the best mindfulness books out there – it's a summary of the science behind using it to regain a sense of purpose, and a practical guide on how to do it. Daily practice is the key, and the free CD of guided meditations is a great way to start.

READ IT IF... You're stuck in a busy trap, would like to find a sense of purpose, or are prone to recurrent depression.

BONUS BENEFITS Mindfulness, at its heart, is about improving relationships.

TYPICAL INSIGHT “What we really need is a parachute to use when life starts to become difficult. Mindfulness has been compared to weaving such a parachute. We have to weave [it] every day, so that it's always there to hold us in an emergency.”



The Chimp Paradox: The Mind Management Programme to Help You Achieve Success, Confidence and Happiness
by Steve Peters (Vermillion, £13)

This readable introduction to neuroscience is written by a psychiatrist who has worked with Olympians Chris Hoy and Victoria Pendleton. He explains how the most primitive part of our brain, the limbic system – or our “Inner Chimp” – spots danger and keeps us alive, often by generating feelings of anger or paranoia. If you lurch from disaster to chaos, chances are your Inner Chimp has taken control. You can, however, train your mind to operate from the pre-frontal cortex – the “Inner Human” – which provides rationality, reasoning and decision-making.

READ IT IF... You feel stuck in old behaviour patterns, you frequently apologise for impulsive actions, or procrastinate.

BONUS BENEFITS Reducing stress by learning how to put your Chimp back in its box, and trying to see if you have overreacted.

TYPICAL INSIGHT “The Chimp operates with a Jungle Centre that is based on instincts and drives. Major problems arise when the Chimp applies its jungle drives in a human society.”



Mindsight: Transform Your Brain with the New Science of Kindness
by Daniel Siegel (Oneworld, £13)

Siegel, a clinical professor of psychiatry at UCLA, packs a vast amount of information into 300 pages but manages to draw it all together into a palatable blend of neuroscience, philosophy and psychotherapy, all underpinned with case histories from his clinical work. Acting like a personal training programme for the brain, the theory is that by strengthening the neural connections in the pre-frontal cortex and achieving “bilateral integration” – collaboration between the emotional right hemisphere of the brain with the analytical left side – we can take control of our minds.

READ IT IF... You're thinking about going into therapy to understand why you're feeling a certain way.

BONUS BENEFITS You learn how your life narrative (the stories you tell yourself) shapes your experience of the world, and how to change it.

TYPICAL INSIGHT “One of the key practical lessons of modern neuroscience is that the power to direct our attention has within it the power to shape our brain's firing patterns, as well as the power to shape the architecture of the brain itself.”



The Reality Slap by Russ Harris
(Robinson, £10)

If you're facing divorce, redundancy, illness, bereavement or bankruptcy, this book is like a wise friend. GP-turned-therapist Russ Harris addresses that gap between what we hope

for, and what we get. He outlines a four-step technique to help you close the gap, and to regain your equilibrium. His approach is based on the so-called “Third Wave” of therapy, acceptance and commitment therapy (known as ACT), a technique aimed to change your relationship with negative emotions. He argues that it's not the negative thoughts themselves that disrupt our lives, but the way we tend to deal with them. But by learning to “sit with” difficult feelings, while detaching from them emotionally, we limit the power they have to disrupt our lives.

READ IT IF... You're aware of the gap between the reality you want and the reality you have, and need to take the sting out of it.

BONUS BENEFITS You clarify your personal values – a powerful antidote against envy – and your next career move.

TYPICAL INSIGHT “When we pay attention to the threatening, unpleasant or painful stuff inside us... then we are likely to discover something useful.” ■

