

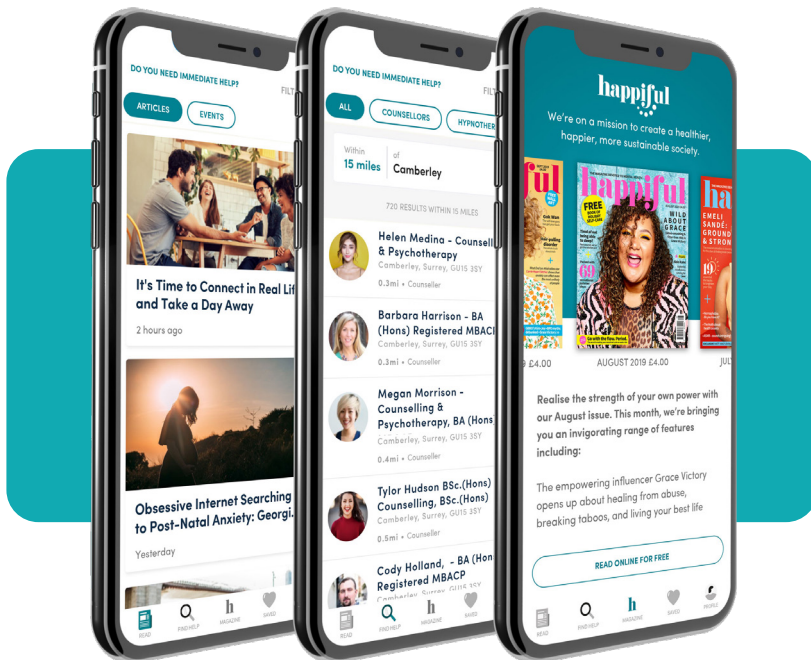


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The heart of health

A regular face on our TV screens, **Dr Rangan Chatterjee** knows better than most what good health looks like. But in a time when the secrets to wellbeing seem more convoluted than ever, Dr Chatterjee is stripping things back. Here, we talk about the key to keeping up New Year's resolutions, the importance of making connections, and his revolutionary new book: *Feel Better in 5*



Writing | Kathryn Wheeler

Hi Rangan! 2020 has just begun – what are your thoughts on New Year's health trends?

Now, here's a thing that I've noticed in my practice: a lot of people are trying to cut back on sugar or alcohol, and for a week or two, they can do it. But then normally, by week two, week three, they're starting to slip back into their existing behaviours.

The reason why this is happening, in a lot of cases, is because that alcohol and sugar was serving a role. It was helping someone soothe the stress in their life. Maybe their work was too stressful, or they were lonely. Whatever the stressor, they were using sugar and/or alcohol to help them. So, they won't reduce sugar or alcohol in the long term, unless

you address the root cause of why they were using it in the first place. Does that make sense?

It does, and that's very much the theme of your new book?

Absolutely. That's why I couldn't write a book just on food. In *Feel Better in 5*, I've made health super simple. Everything in the book takes five minutes, maximum. >>>



If you look at all the behavioural science, you don't create a new behaviour by making it difficult



What do you mean by 'heart'?

When it comes to health, heart is something that doesn't get spoken enough about – it's our connection. Our connection with our self, our connection with our friends or our partners. When you miss one of these areas, it's very hard to make changes stick because they all feed into one another.

You often speak about loneliness and its effect on our physical health. How are they connected?

Research suggests that the feeling of being lonely is as harmful as smoking 15 cigarettes a day... Just think about that for a moment. That is a staggering statistic. So, why could that be?

Well, our stress response evolved a couple of million years ago. Two million years ago, we would have been in tightly knit, hunter-gatherer tribes that were communities, which kept us safe. If you don't have your tribe around you, you might be attacked by a lion, by a predator. So, your very clever body prepares you for that.

It ramps up your stress response. It ramps up your immune system. It makes your body inflamed. Why? Because that means that if you do get attacked, you will have your best chance of survival.

So, if we think about what's going on, if we're feeling lonely, if all

It sounds like a gimmick, but it's really not, because if you look at all the behavioural science, this is the way that you create a new behaviour – you don't create a new behaviour by making it difficult, you create a new behaviour by making it easy.

How does *Feel Better in 5* work?

You have to choose one five-minute intervention from mind, one for body, one for heart – and

do them every day, five days a week. So, literally 15 minutes a day, five days a week, is all you have to do. By doing this, you're covering the three important areas.

You're working on your mental health, which is the mind piece, body is actually a series of five-minute workouts, whether it's strength, HIIT, or yoga – none of it requires any equipment. The third section is heart.

we're having is that electronic communication or interaction with other human beings, we're missing out on that *real* human connection. Our body thinks that we're vulnerable to attack, so it prepares us for our attack; we become inflamed, we become stressed, our immune system goes on high alert. This is what is happening for many of us in 2020.

Another study found 2.5 million men have no close friends, or believe they have none. Is that surprising?

In a way. I'm very lucky that I've got a very tight group of friends. Now, I say I'm lucky, but none of them live near me. I don't have



It takes the pressure off that I know for the rest of the day, I've done something for myself

any good friends who *live* near me. This appears to be a problem that affects men quite a lot. As I've got busier with work, marriage, kids, a mortgage, I don't really find that I have time to make new friends.

But maybe it's not good enough anymore to say you're too busy, you haven't got time. There are things that I could do and I'm

going to work on them. But I'm very lucky that I do have a very tight group of mates from university, who I meet up with two or three times a year for a weekend, and literally it nourishes me on a deep level.

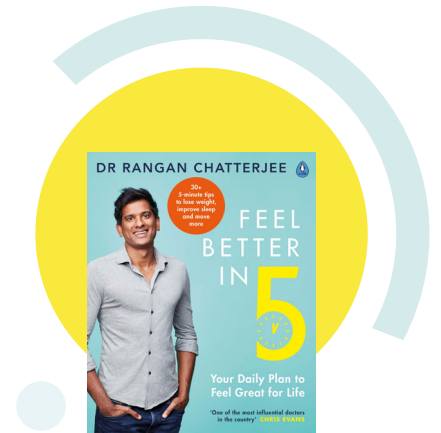
So, for someone who's struggling, I'd say, well, what do you like? Do you like going to the gym? Maybe go to a class. Do you like reading? Maybe there's a local book club. Find something nearby where people share similar interests, and that's how you're going to start creating these new friendships.

From your perspective, how do you see the increase in mental health awareness playing out in your practice?

Things are shifting in a really positive way, but we're currently not where we need to be. We need to do much more because let's not forget that actually, the male suicide rate in the age group of 30 to 45 is really shocking, really worrying, and it seems to be climbing.

The fact that more and more people are talking about this openly on social media, these things are really helping bring these topics into the public domain.

I'm seeing patients coming in now, particularly men, who may not have had the courage to talk about their problems a few years ago, are now openly coming in and saying, "Hey, I heard this podcast," or, "I saw this thing online and I thought that might be affecting me. I just want to talk to you about



'Feel Better in 5: Your Daily Plan to Feel Great for Life' by Dr Rangan Chatterjee (Penguin Life, £16.99) is out now.

it." So, I think things are changing in a very positive way, because the first thing we have to do is be aware of the problem.

What steps do you take to support your own wellbeing?

As soon as I get up, before I do anything else, I'll do five minutes of deep breathing or meditation. Just five minutes. Then, I do five minutes of movement. So, it'll be one of the workouts in the book. Either a strength workout, or a yoga workout, or some stretches. Then, I do five minutes for my heart. I'll write down things that I'm grateful for and the positive things in my life.

It takes the pressure off that I know for the rest of the day, I've done something for myself. I prioritised myself, and I give myself that self-respect every morning, to do something for me. **■**