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WELCOME

Welcome to *Open Your Mind: Learn to Deal With the Big Stuff In Life*.

This book is here to be your guide in times of need. Keep it on your shelf and go to specific chapters during those moments in life that mess with your head, or leaf through and devour it cover to cover. By opening this book you have become part of #TeamOpen, and part of the movement for open hearts and minds. There is no one that this book isn't for.

During years of presenting, and more recently with *The Surgery* on BBC Radio 1, I've encountered a huge variety of people who are dealing with lots of different things in their own ways. My own life hasn't always been easy, and whilst I've dealt with some of the stuff that comes up in this book, I'm not an expert in everything – all I can do is communicate openly about what I've been through and be a friend. I've consulted lots of people who are experts in the issues covered, though – along with a list of people and organizations to speak to if you need more information on anything.

This book covers some tough stuff, but there's nothing you wouldn't find in the storyline of a popular soap opera, and definitely NOTHING you wouldn't find within a four-second Google search. *Open Your Mind* is about real life and everything that comes with it.

This book isn't all about me, it's also about you and all the other incredibly clever, brutally honest, brave and awesomely inspiring voices woven within its pages. This book is yours and I want you to personalize it in any way you see fit; to embellish it and make your own mark on the pages. There are no rules. Douse it in gorgeous gold pen, doodle across it with a blunt pencil or a defiant marker pen, or cover it in magical stickers – and whatever your approach, feel free to respond to however the words make you feel.

Just  You

DEAR READER

I write this from Ghana, West Africa, where I am recording a documentary about music for BBC Radio 4.

I have been procrastinating woefully about writing this introduction. Putting off things that you are capable of doing is a type of self-harm. The worry keeps you up at night, oozing around your mind like treacle. But now that I'm in the sun where I'm most happy, in new and uplifting surroundings, my bones feel warm and relaxed, my brain feels more fluid and my beating heart less panicked. I can write this. Self-sabotage is something that comes annoyingly easily to me, but it is also something I've learned to swim with in the seas of life. I know my mind – its ups, its downs, its capabilities – and that helps.

We're all capable in our own ways of learning from hard times, from mistakes and feelings that are difficult to describe but can seem overwhelming. Tuning into behaviours that make you feel down, upset or fearful is a truly powerful thing. It's one of the ways we open our minds. Knowing what makes us us as individuals, accepting it, and deciding to do what makes us feel most happy is the spirit of *Open Your Mind*, the third book in the #TeamOpen family. Be absurd, be berserk, be angst ridden sometimes, surf your own waves, be excited, be bewildered, but don't give in to fear.

I once interviewed the legendary singer Grace Jones, a phenomenal force of a woman; she was utterly brilliant. One of the many marvellous things she said when I asked what scared her was, 'The only thing I fear, is fear itself.' It's important to know that our minds are complicated and they need to be exercised just like our limbs.

'The only thing I fear, is fear itself.'

Sometimes I feel like my body is in knots, like a physical manifestation of exhaustion from being the best I can be, or sadness about failed loves or general life worries. We all need to reset mentally and physically sometimes and we all do it in different ways.

I don't meditate, though I probably should because my mind often fizzes with ideas and fears. Instead, I plunge into cold water, quite literally and metaphorically. I jump into an eighty-year-old tidal pool near my house and splash about like a goofy seal. The way the cold makes my skin tingle and the blue of the ocean fills my vision makes me feel serene. I am immersed in nature, detached from a phone or any technology buzzing at me to buy something, or achieve, or get back to someone on email. It's a mighty flipping powerful way of resetting. (Of course, cold water swimming isn't for everyone and you need to do your research first before starting something new. Don't just jump straight in, but do take the sentiment.) My thing is pool plunging; what's yours? What do you have in your life that you love, that helps you press reset if you're feeling blue? If you don't know the answer, I can only hope that this book will help you find it.

receiving the book with open arms

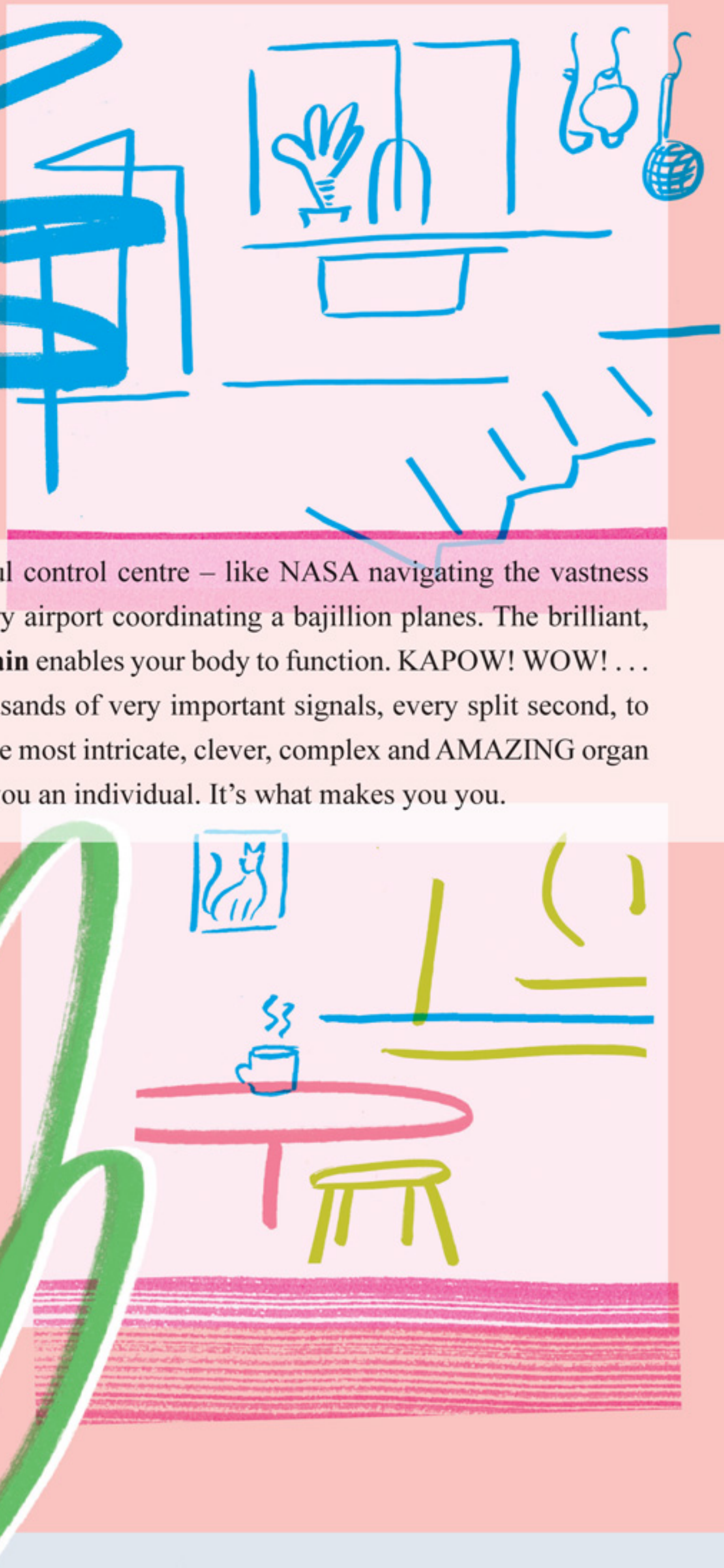
It's fair to say that I felt overwhelmed by how many things I touched on in trying to create #TeamOpen and cans of worms were opened in my own personal life. I slumped a little. It's been a heart-wrenching journey, but one I'm truly grateful for. The response I've had since the original hardback *Open, A Toolkit For How Magic and Messed Up Life Can Be* was published has been incredible. I feel inspired and humbled by how awesome people have been in receiving the book with open arms. Knowing that #TeamOpen is out there and that some part of *Open* has made someone giggle, or helped someone to feel less lonely is a thing I can't put into words except for WOW.

Gemma

YOUR MIND



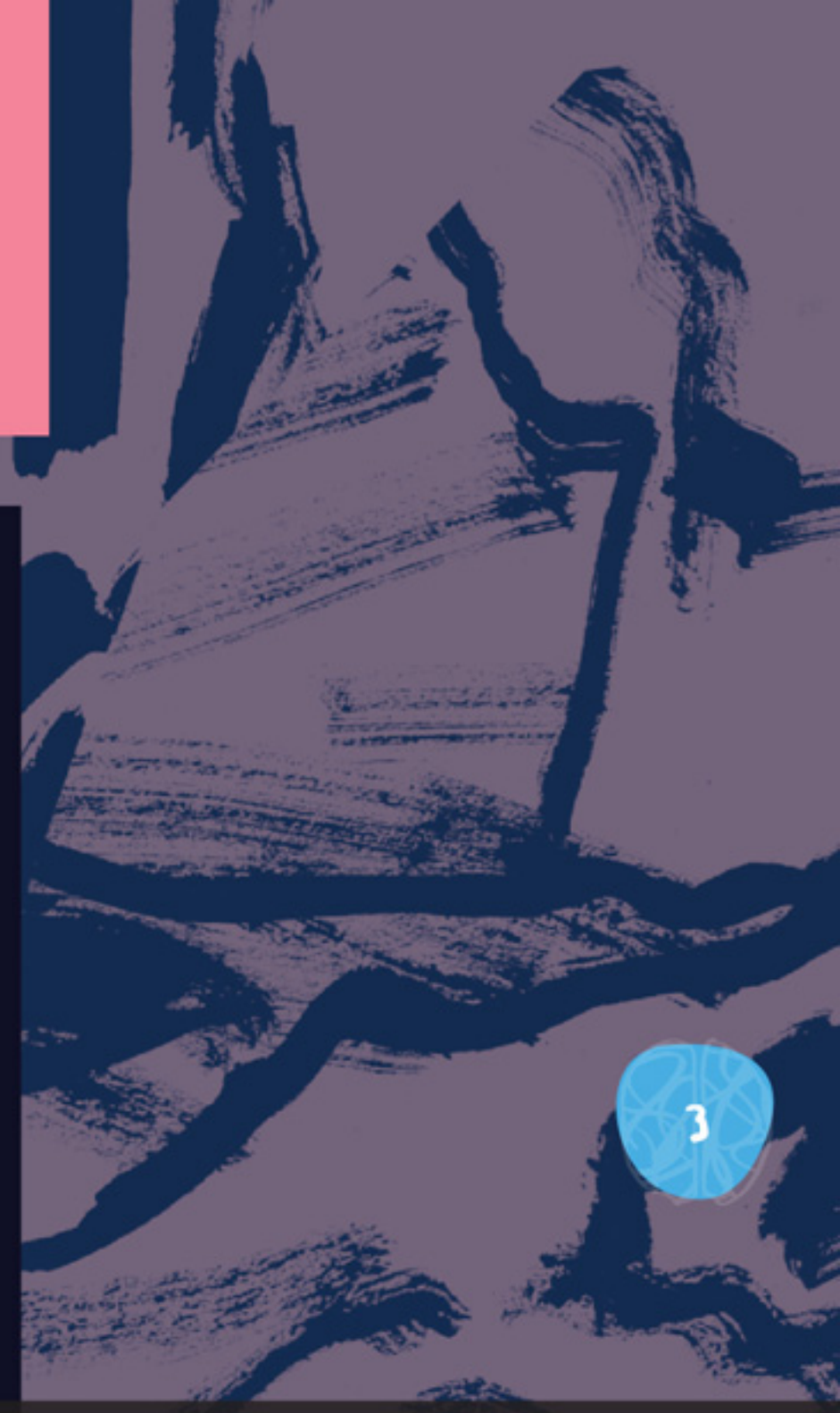
BRAIN



Your mind is your dazzling, powerful control centre – like NASA navigating the vastness of space, or the control tower at every airport coordinating a bajillion planes. The brilliant, boggling headquarters that is your **brain** enables your body to function. KAPOW! WOW! . . . Your brain is immense! It sends thousands of very important signals, every split second, to all parts of your body. Your brain is the most intricate, clever, complex and AMAZING organ you have. Your mind is what makes you an individual. It's what makes you you.

HOUSE





While you're growing – from birth to adult-hood – your brain is developing impressively fast. You learn to crawl, to speak, to read and write, to ride a bike . . . to drive, to cook, to perhaps even speak another language. Your brain is exotic, inquisitive and capable of all sorts. You are endlessly grabbing at the multiple learning opportunities the world around you has to offer with the help of your brain. Stop and give your incredible mind some credit for a second.

You may feel like a loser sometimes – but you were once merely a tiny cell . . . and now look at you! Snap, crackle, POP! – your brain is whirring. If you're lucky, and you protect it, your brain will serve you well. Combined with positive experiences, education, nurturing and the right people around you, your brain will help you make important life decisions, alert you to danger and keep you on the right path.

But sometimes, through no fault of your own, your brain can let you down.

This section of the book will walk you through some important truths about the way our minds work. We'll explore some of the darker corners, and give you the knowledge and the tools to cope when things go wrong. Please read on, especially if you are experiencing issues with your mental health or feeling at a loss in trying to help out a family member or friend.



> If we think about ourselves as brains . . . the brain is a lot about thinking, but the brain is also a lot about feeling. In fact, in Western society we have an obsession sometimes with the brain as a thinking thing, you know, in terms of exams, in terms of being smart, in terms of wordiness and so on — and so on — but actually there's as much of the brain dedicated to feeling as there is to thinking.
>
> **Dan Glaser, neuroscientist**

Understanding your brain and your mind ain't half TOUGH sometimes.

LIFE ISN'T ALWAYS easy

'Well, it's weird, isn't it?' said my friend Laurence recently, whilst sat around a dinner table philosophizing and trying to work out the meaning of life. 'Being heaps of bones encased in flesh and filled with feelings.'

We were pondering political doom and whether we were making the right life choices. Let's face it: being human is weird. It's weird to sometimes panic that life is too short – and then at other times wish time away. It's weird to want everything to be perfect, but not know what perfect is. We are big, walking, talking contradictions really. Let's just accept that and try to find a middle ground, some calm and acceptance . . .

It is NOT good for your mind to . . .

- **bitch about others**
- **obsessively check in with your phone, rather than your real life**
- **worry about something out of your physical control**
- **judge others**
- **do things that you fundamentally don't agree with – just to please others.**

DEMONS



Demons. Those nagging obstacles to your peace of mind. They are snarling, weaselly, toad-like things, and they are annoying to say the least. They wield defiant little pickaxes, and their mission is to get right into your noggin,* making you anxious, stressed and upset.

**Noggin: a word my cherub of a friend Georgia uses to describe our heads. I love it because it makes our heads seem almost funny.*



These demons don't half piss me off, and when I imagine what mine might look like I imagine jumping, blobby, chewed-up bubble-gum balls with poppy-out eyes and big, licking tongues. We each have our own particular demon(s), made up of many things. If we were labelling their ingredients – what they're made up of – they'd contain half a tablespoon of nature (things we are born with – our DNA and genetic make-up), a dash of nurture (how we are brought up, environmental influences), a sprinkling of regret, perhaps the odd trauma and a dollop of fear thrown in for good measure.

Depending on how big and defiant they are, demons are pretty good at getting in the way of life, and they can make us feel out of control. Some people's demons manifest as a sense of isolation; others come as startling anxiety or a panic attack. Some appear as a dark cloud of depression, or as an addiction that grips. Demons are bespoke.

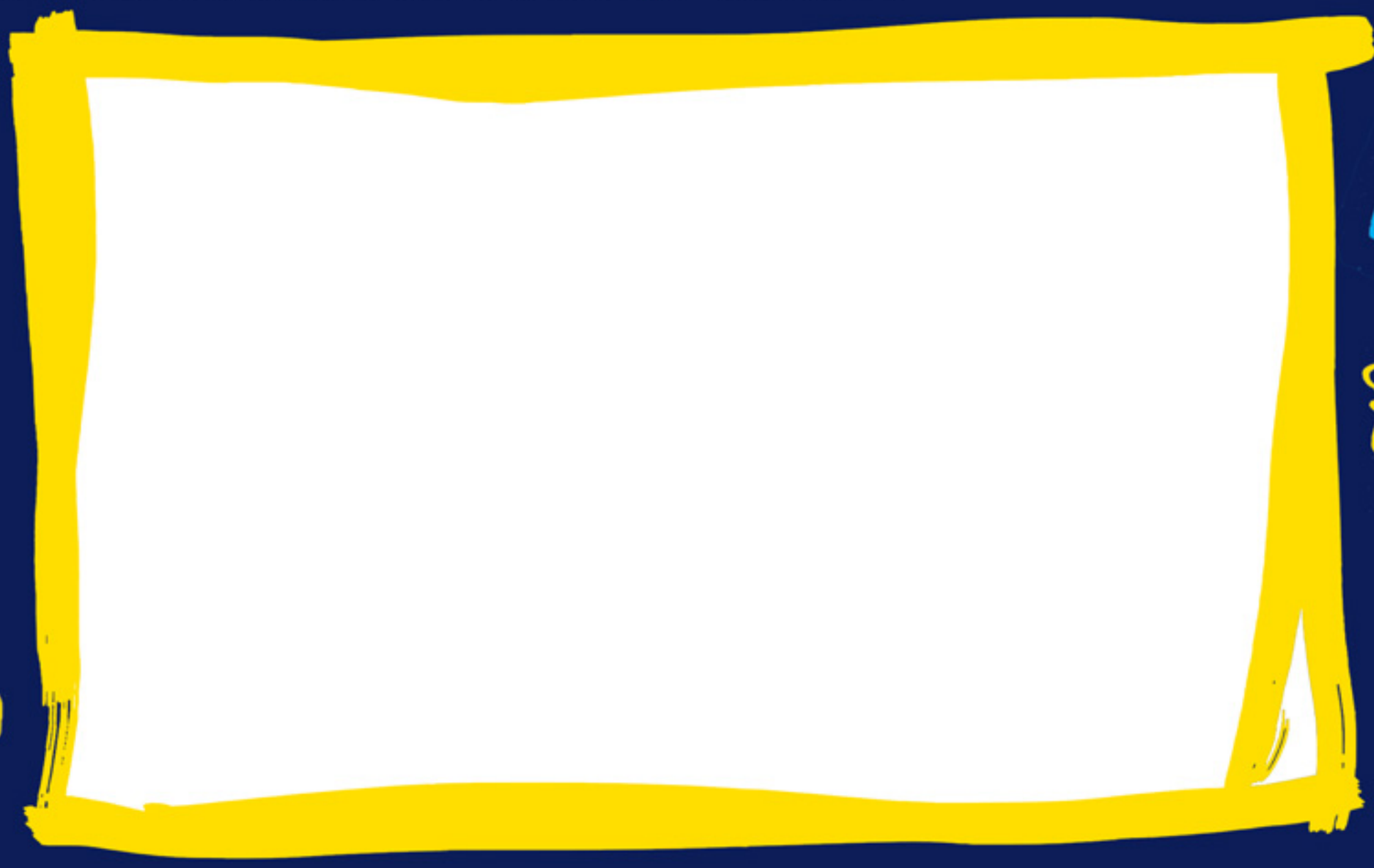


It's good to equip ourselves by KNOWING OUR DEMONS and how they make us feel. Stare them in the face and figure out exactly what we're scared of . . . and – most importantly – WHY we're scared of whatever it might be.

To put it simply: if we can identify the roots of our problems, they aren't as likely to bubble up to boiling point inside us.

Opening up about your demons – big and small – is the first step to getting on better with those pesky toads. There is nothing to be ashamed of: you are a human being, you are dealing with a lot and it's time to offload.

What do your demons look like? Draw them below.





FYI . . .

. . . SINCE CAVE TIMES, we have been tuned in to risk and danger. 'Fight or flight', as the survival response is known, was once upon a time about hunting for food and not getting eaten – these days, our anxiety is about exams, money and terrorism. Some of us soak it up more than others. For some, **fear and anxiety** are all too familiar, and **calmness and happiness** seem harder to find. If this is you – THIS DOESN'T MEAN your life is crap. If this applies to someone you know – and that someone finds reaching a calm mental state a struggle – it doesn't make them less of a person . . . it's just the way their brain is wired.