Her Edit

HER ISSUE | HER VOICE

Issue Thirty-one
Autumn 2020

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Front cover image

Jane Shepherdson
Courtesy of Jane Shepherdson

Welcome to Her Edit

One of my most treasured possessions is a red velvet Vivienne Westwood bustier which has hung in various wardrobes for almost thirty years. I don't have many opportunities to wear it, but it's a wonderful reminder of the young woman who first wore it in 1991.

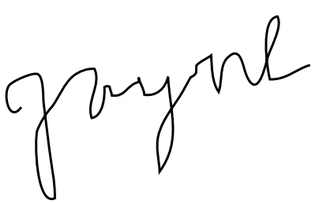
Environmental campaigner and activist Westwood advocates, 'buying well and buying less' and our interview with Jane Shepherdson in this issue highlights why that's so important. Shepherdson is the original game-changer and her clothes rental project signals a positive shift towards a more sustainable fashion industry.

What we wear goes hand-in-hand with how we relate to our body shape. Zoë Stevenson challenges the zeigeist with her rallying cry for us to stop worrying about how we feel about our bodies and find a neutral acceptance.

The incredibly inspiring Suzy Lishman shares her experience of living through lockdown and gives a fascinating insight into the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on her work in the NHS. It's also a salutary reminder that behind the doctors and nurses is an army of people doing incredibly important work.

The last few months have been challenging for everyone and sometimes the best medicine is most certainly laughter. If you're in need of a psychological pick-me-up then I recommend you tune into the hilarious WTB podcast with the talented trio Jen Brister, June Allyson Smith and Maureen Younger. It's the perfect antidote to the Covid blues.

Till next time, keep safe and well.



Her Issue Thirty-one

IMAGES
Left: Jane Shepherdson on her 'gap year' in the United States.
From top to bottom: Maureen Younger, Jen Brister, June Allyson Smith,
Zoë Stevenson and Suzy Lishman.

After over 30 years in the industry, Jane Shepherdson has an inestimable reputation in the fashion world.

She is currently Chair of My Wardrobe HQ, the UK's foremost clothing rental platform, a Director of the London Fashion Fund and a Patron of the charity Smartworks.

She was appointed Commander of the Order of the British Empire (CBE) in the 2015 New Year Honours for services to UK retail.

JANE SHEPHERDSON

The rag trade, riches and rental

'…it's sort of comical how you think that you've made a choice that exempts you from the fashion industry when, in fact, you're wearing the sweater that was selected for you by the people in this room.'

If fictional Runway editor Mirands Priestly's monologue in the 2006 film Devil Wears Prada seems hyperbolic, then reflect back on your wardrobe at the turn of the millennium. Even if you didn't shop at Top Shop, the store's impact on the fashion ecosystem dramatically changed the culture of high street shopping. It not only democratised fashion, putting exciting, on-trend clothes within everyone's budget, but achieved industry credibility through its reputation for design and becoming a desirable fashion label in its own right.

The creative force behind the coolest brand in British fashion, described by The Face magazine as 'a dream factory', was Jane Shepherdson. Variously heralded as 'the most influential person on the British High Street', 'the most powerful woman in British Fashion' and the 'high priestess of fast fashion', under her tenure as Brand Director, the store's profits rose from £9million to £110 million in just six years.

As the single biggest sponsor of upcoming designers and a major player at London Fashion Week, Top Shop shaped British fashion and was loved by fashionistas, models and celebrities alike. And we loved it too. In 2004, Top Shop sold 6,000 pairs of jeans a day.

'Most of our competitors were competing purely on price, but I had a really creative team and we were thinking, 'If I was going into a shop, I would love that'. We showed on catwalks for the first time to prove we weren't copying designers, style advisors could come to your house, men on scooters would deliver to your home the same day. We created this in-store theatre, so it wasn't just racks and racks of trousers, it was exciting and interesting. Everywhere you looked there was a different look or feel.

'You could have a lot of fun and it was successful. People loved it. There's nothing better than doing what you think is right and exciting and it being successful. That's absolutely the way it has to be. You don't think, 'how am I going to make a profit' because it doesn't work. It has to come from the creativity.'

It was her passion for fashion, but thinking she was 'no-way good enough to be a designer', that led Jane to join the Arcadia Group as a business studies graduate, taking the 'most boring, mundane job' to get a foot in the door of the industry. In 2008 she purchased a 20 per

cent share in the dull and rather dated brand Whistles, and as Chief Executive steered its transformation towards a contemporary, pared-down aesthetic that could dress you for the boardroom or a wedding. By 2014, when she took Whistles to New York, there were concessions in Paris, China, Hong Kong and Russia.

After a career spent seducing us to buy, Jane's latest project is the complete anithesis of the concept of fashion itself. The realisation of the ecological impact of the fashion industry - in 2019 the UN Conference on Trade and Development declared fashion to be the second most polluting industry in the world - prompted an epiphany and when you consider the figures, it's easy to see why. In the UK alone we send 235 million items of clothing, 350,000 tonnes, to landfill each year. Each of those pairs of jeans sold at Top Shop took 7,500 litres of water to make, equivalent to the amount an average person would drink over seven years.

During a road trip around the United States with her husband and dog, Jane realised that things - at least for her - could not be the same. Packing up their house for rental while they were away, sounds like a bid for redemption.

'I gave away my entire wardrobe apart from a handful of things; partly because a friend was working for Mary Portas and Save the Children, so I thought I've either got to pay to store this stuff for the next year, or it's going to make some money for a good cause. I'm not terribly sentimental, so I just kept the key things I knew I'd wear again and got rid of the rest. I'm really regretting that now as I look at my huge wardrobe and I've got literally five shirts and five pairs of trousers.'

Jane posed as a buyer to visit a factory in Bangladesh where the appalling working conditions included a ten foot square concrete room which functioned as a creche. A million pairs of shorts destined for the shop floor of H&M were priced at 50p, a clear indication that wages were nowhere near what they should be. Perhaps naively I ask if higher-end brands, with price-tags to match, might be an assurance that they are more ethically produced, but even if that's the case, it doesn't make the production of even the luxury brands, more environmentally friendly.

'I thought I can't go back to what I was doing. Is there any way I can use all this experience to try and, not stop people buying, I'm not that much of a hypocrite, but maybe help people to change their behaviour in some way away from that terrible fast fashion model we've grown into.

'I thought the ethical clothing brands might be a way, but I couldn't find any I liked. I remember going to brands and they'd say, 'how can we make it sustainable' and I wanted to say 'Stop making anything - it's just going to end up in landfill'. Then I came to rental because it's a great way of still enjoying fashion and that whole transformation, but not damaging the planet in the same way.'

Originally thinking she'd start her own site, Jane met Tina Lake and Sasha Newall who together had pooled their experience in fashion retail, the sharing economy and publishing, to create My Wardrobe HQ in 2018 and she recognised they 'were absolutely going to succeed'. Individuals and brands supply the clothes which are available to rent or buy from the online site which manages the photography, cleaning and delivery. If you've ever bought something for a work event or a wedding and it's stayed in your wardrobe unworn ever since, then My Wardrobe HQ offers a perfect solution and Jane is an enthusiastic advocate.

'I've worn an all-embroidered bright pink Gucci suit and it's absolutely gorgeous. I've worn this amazing dress and the skirt is all feathers - things I absolutely love, but I'm not going to wear them time and time again, so wouldn't have

IMAGE
Jane Shepherson at the British Fashion Awards
at the Savoy in London in 2012

bought them. It's also really democratic because a lot of people can rent something for £30 a day, but who can afford to pay £3,000?'

The rental business is already well-established in the United States where young people will rent a whole week's work wardrobe from outlets like Rent the Runway. If the rise of on-line outlets has killed the high street and prompted a step-change in how we shop, then clothing rental presents an even more radical concept. The stock includes designer brands like Chanel and Louis Vuitton alongside more contemporary ones like Rixo available at a lower price point, but it makes the opportunity to wear designer pieces accessible to most.

Of course, luxury is inextricably linked to exclusivity and begs the question whether high-end brands will inevitably want to preserve the sense of aspiration associated with their products. As social media has far more traction than the formerly rarified society pages, brands rely increasingly on celebrities and influencers to promote their clothes.

'We've spent a lot of our time talking to brands, saying, 'This is the future, you've got to come with us.' because then we get the size ranges. It's all very well taking things from people's wardrobes, but if you're a size eight, everything's a size eight. So we need to get brands on board. In January it swung round so much that some of the brands that we really wanted, but hadn't approached were approaching us - partly because we had a space at Liberty so people could see it wasn't smelly, secondhand clothes.

'It is a compromise for brands because for them exclusivity is everything. They don't everyone wearing it, they certainly don't want anyone above a size 10 wearing it, but we have designer pieces on site donated by private individuals and luxury brands are beginning to think they could take advantage of that.

'When a design brand sells something to someone like Selfridges wholesale, they sell it for 30 per cent of the selling price. With us, they can rent the garment out three or four times and make more money. It's a different dynamic. I've spoken to younger designers who've said, 'I'm thinking of doing a range just for rental. I can do the real over-the-top pieces because rental relies on that kind of thing, do something really beautiful and slightly more expensive and for rental that's fine.'

While the fashion rental has a very benign and universal feel to it, inevitably it is a business driven by profit motive. Jane believes it is a viable business model, but is also adamant that it is about changing people's behaviour enough to make a difference and mitigate the environmental damage inflicted by our desire to have something new to wear. There are signs elsewhere that the industry is responding to concerns about sustainability. The London Fashion Fund invests in socially responsible fashion businesses and companies like Clothes Doctor echo the old 'make do and mend' philosophy by offering options to repair, recycle or epicycle treasured items.

However, the fashion industry's moral compass inevitably starts to dial down when it comes to diversity. A 2019 study by Price Waterhouse Coopers (PWC) revealed that only 12.5 per cent of apparel and retail apparel companies are led by women, yet they make up 73 per cent of employees in its stores. Having had a strong role-model in her mother, a biochemist, and crediting attending an all-girls school for establishing her as a confident young woman, meant Jane was shocked at the sexism she encountered when she started work in the sector.

'I thought, bloody hell!' There's a bullying culture in fashion retail because a lot of these businesses are run by alpha male types and I don't think women respond well to that and don't want to join what feel like a boys' club. I'm sure it is changing because so many of the dinosaurs I worked with are either leaving the business or being called out or are dying.'

The epitome of such a culture is Chair of the Arcadia Group, Philip Green, latterly discredited as a bully and sexual predator, and Jane's boss at Top Shop. Employing a strategy of exclusion, Jane would protect her team on the shop floor by ensuring she was alerted if Green was approaching so she could direct him towards her office and avoid him upsetting staff. She speaks warmly though of her female colleagues describing them as mutually supportive.

'Fashion's been labelled as a bitchy industry, but that's not my experience at all. I only have positive things to say about the other women I've encountered. The only people I have a bad word for are generally the men. I have so many instances from having to stick a chair against my door, to being asked by my boss to do some research on whether women would buy this or that, and I'm thinking, 'I'm a woman and there are 50 other women here; we're here, we know this.'

During my conversation with Jane, her warmth and propensity for laughter seem slightly at odds with someone who has been so successful you'd imagine them to be incredibly ambitious and driven, but she disarms this suggestion saying, 'I'm actually really lazy and very good at delegating.' The words she uses most are 'fun' and 'creative' and it's these things which seem to motivate her alongside a genuine belief that fashion rental can change our consumer habits for the better.

'We just have to give them something so easy, so straightforward and so exciting you'd think, 'I'd be a fool not to'.

Visit My Wardrobe HQ.

Jane is a patron of Smart Works, a UK charity that provides high quality interview clothes and interview training to unemployed women in need lacking confidence in their abilities. Each woman is styled into an interview outfit, hers to keep, by trained volunteers and receives one-to-one interview coaching, after which 64% of Smart Works' clients go on to get the job. So inevitably I want to know, what would Jane wear if she was going for an interview.

'I can tell you exactly what I would wear. Black Celine trousers, very slim, bit short; Isabel Marant sandals. I've got a great Prada jacket that always looks fantastic, maybe a t-shirt under it, something quite simple. Or I could just wear something from My Wardrobe HQ.'

IMAGES
From left to right: Maureen Younger, Jen Brister and Allyson June Smith

Jen Brister, Allyson June Smith and Maureen Younger all have well-earned stellar reputations on the British comedy circuit.

Jen is a regular at the Edinburgh Fringe Festival, has appeared on BBC2's Live At the Apollo and Radio 4's The News Quiz.

Allyson has headlined at comedy festivals in her home country of Canada where she has been nominated several times for the Best Female Stand-up award at the Canadian Comedy Awards.

A regular contributor to Her Edit, Maureen is a familiar face as a comic and MC on the comedy circuit at venues such as the Hackney Empire and the Comedy Store. She also runs her own comedy nights in London and Birmingham.

JEN BRISTER, ALLYSON JUNE SMITH, MAUREEN YOUNGER

Women with balls

Despite clear evidence to the contrary, the perception persists that females are the talkers of the species. There is also the received wisdom which says that while men engage in 'banter', women sensitively share on a more emotional level.

Firmly putting a large nail in that particular stereotypical coffin are standup comedians Maureen Younger, Allyson June Smith and Jen Brister with their new podcast, WTB, or to expand the acronym, Women Talking Bollocks.

In the same way that there are 'comics' and then 'female comics', in the world of the informal chat format, men's talk is regarded as generic, but women's gender specific.

JB: There are a lot of male-fronted podcasts which are very loose and irreverent. Men have a platform and licence to speak whereas women have to have a reason or be subject specific. We're doing a podcast and we're not going to apologise for it. Women are going to be talking bollocks.

MY: If three men were doing it, you wouldn't assume it was just for men. It would be assumed it would be universal.

JB: It is three funny women and it will be irreverent, anarchic and a bit chaotic, but it will be very funny. You'll form a relationship with the three of us, both as a group and individually. and we'll be your companions for the 24 episodes that we do. Although things [lockdown restrictions] have eased up, for a lot of people nothing's changed and we wanted to create an antidote to the isolationism of Covid.

AJS: We end up talking about things that anyone would find interesting.

Notching up over six decades of performing between them, the three women became firm friends after meeting at a comedy festival. Maureen gave Allyson her first gig when she moved to the UK from Canada nine years ago. They are drawn together by mutual admiration and friendship although respect for your mate's stand-up routine isn't a prerequisite for amiability.

MY: You can have a friend you don't think is a good comedian. You'd never recommend them for work because that would reflect on you. You always know if someone thinks a friend isn't a good comic, when you ask, 'what's so-and-so like?' and the first thing they say is, 'Ooh they're lovely' or 'a really nice person.' Comedians know it's code for 'they're not funny'.

AJS: I've missed performing so much and it's so nice to be doing stuff with other people. I love Maureen and Jen, this is a fun experience with people I trust. They've both been there for me at times. Comedy can be a lonely industry and these two have been really good friends. I couldn't think of two people I'd rather do it with, so this is a joy. It forces them to spend time with me, so I don't have to worry about gaining their affection.

The show's magazine format includes an eclectic range of sections reflecting each woman's personality and interests. Allyson is resident agony aunt and talks about horror films; Jen has a 'ranting' slot. Maureen talks about culture and features in a special item, 'Be More Maureen', which explores how you can adopt Maureen's unapologetically eccentric approach to life.

AJS: 'Be More Maureen' is about having a different perspective on life, so if someone says, 'I can't believe you just did that,' you can say, 'I'm just being more Maureen.'

The demographic of the target audience includes all ages, gender and sexual orientation and the intention is to tour with live shows when that's possible because, as Jen says, 'That's what we love doing the most.'

While the pandemic has closed down live performance, the broadcast format seems at least an opportunity to reach more people than at the average local comedy club.

M: I run a weekly online chat show, MY Comedy Chats, and there's a woman in Hawaii who watches religiously every week even though it's ten in the morning there. On Instagram we used to have a man in Australia who got up at 5am to

watch us with his daughter. So you do get people in different time zones and potentially reach an international audience.

Clearly the pandemic has impacted on live performance. All three women's lives have changed quite dramatically and the future is inevitably uncertain.

M: Normally we're on the road - always complaining about the travel.

AJS: I remember trying to get home to Manchester from a gig in Leicester on a Sunday and had to get six different trains. I'm nervous of going out into even one different environment now. The thought of being within10 different locations in one day is mind-boggling now, but I'm more on the paranoid side.

J: I haven't missed the travelling, but I've missed performing. I think when we go back, if we go back, it'll be interesting to see how we all adapt. Maybe we'll try to arrange our diaries so we're not away six nights a week or maybe it'll go straight back to how it was.

I don't think it's going to come back until there's a vaccine. I don't think our job is possible. You can't have 300 or 400 people laughing and hope the particles don't pass on.

M: For comedy to work you need people close together -the exact opposite of social distancing. Not only that, but it may not be economically vialbe. If venues have a third of the number of people in, they'll pay less.

AJS: It's recession times.

J: This podcast is an opportunity for us to keep up our profile, let people know we exist and when things head back to something resembling normality, if those venues still exist, we can invite our audience to come and see us. You don't need that many fans to tour - we're not expecting to play stadiums.

M: There is an audience out there, it's just people finding out about us. People have found us by fluke, we're hoping with a podcast you increase your audience.

AJS: We all tried to find a podcast that captured our attention and there are a limited number by women. It's like the 1980s in comedy, very male dominated.

M: We want to tour it and if you perform to your own audience, they know you personally, the in-jokes, so this is a stepping stone so the three of us can tour together later.

As you might expect, Jen, Allyson and Maureen are all very funny and there is a wonderful warm feeling of inclusivity in listening into their hilarious conversation and effectively becoming part of the gang. It's easy to forget that they are professionals and performing is their livelihood. I wonder if any of them had considered an alternative career.

J: I'd like to think I could pick up some writing work.

M: I'd be Jen's cleaner.

AJS: That is the question. There are moments when I delve into that thought in my head, but we still don't know. I've been doing this for 20 years - it's taken me 20 years to get here - so I refuse to believe that comedy will be done. It will evolve, it might change, but it won't disappear.

Subscribe and if you'd like to ask Allyson anything or join the WTB book club, email womentalkingbollocks@gmail.com
Follow WTB on Facebook and Twitter

ZOE STEVENSON

Accentuate the positive

‘Love your body!’ How often do you hear that phrase, and had you ever given any thought to your body in that way before you heard it? It’s the often used rally cry of the body positivity movement, which aims to encourage people to embrace their bodies regardless of how they look.

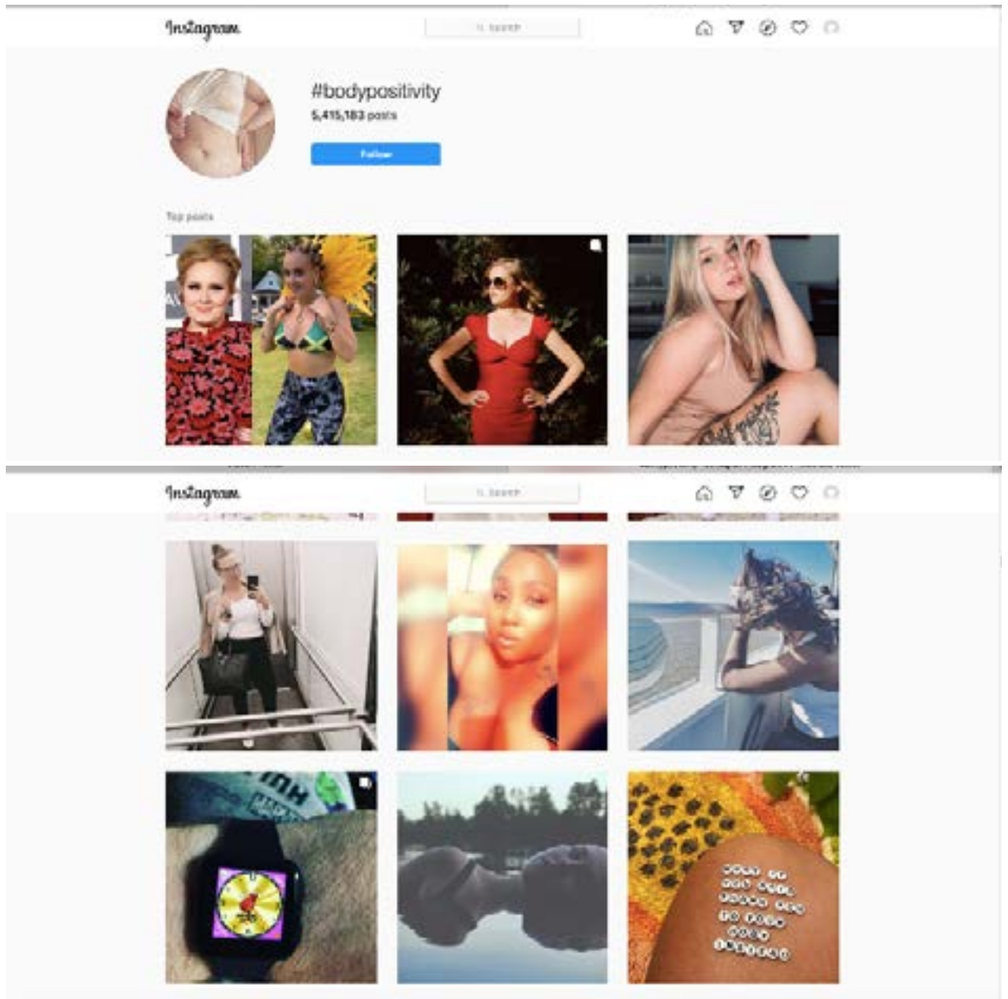
But the body positivity movement didn’t start out as simple as that. It was actually born out of the fat acceptance movement, which started in the United States in the 1960s, essentially a protest against the discrimination that fat people faced in society, be it in their careers, doctor’s office or just in the street. The fat acceptance movement is still going strong today, but its fundamental socio-political agenda, for inclusivity, diversity and equality, has been overshadowed by its younger sibling, the body positivity movement.

The concept of body positivity as we recognise it now didn’t actually come into being until the early 2010’s, when social media enabled the rapid dissemination of new ideas, information and images to people all over the world. The movement’s ambition is to challenge societal standards of beauty, which tend to be dominated by white, western cultural norms and set unrealistic expectations, particularly for women, of how we need to look to be ‘beautiful’.

Ironically, if you do a quick search of the hashtag bodypositivity on Instagram, the majority of images which appear are of women who already conform to those standards. Not exactly the target audience. One could argue that these women do need to learn to love their bodies, as they are subject to the same societal and marketing pressures as those of us who

Orignially from Ireland, Zoë Stevenson is a marine educator currently waiting for the pandemic to be over so she can go back to sea. She enjoys baking, horse riding and smashing the patriarchy, but not necessarily in that order.

Zoë writes about things she thinks are important on her own wordpress site,



IMAGES
Previous page: Zoë Stevenson ©VicHill
Above: a selection of images posted on Instagram with the hashtag bodypositivity

‘Many people find it impossible to love their bodies all of the time. Maybe they are disabled or experience chronic pain.’

might fall short of the ‘ideal’. Making women - and increasingly men - self-critical about their body shape has generated millions of pounds of profits for the diet and fitness industries and even the ‘beautiful’ are not immune from insecurity.

Over two decades, the emaciated zero-sized archetype has given way to the surgically enhanced ‘curvy’ look epitomised by the Kardashian dynasty, further demonstrating how societal expectations of beauty can never truly be achieved. As soon as ‘beauty’ is achieved, the industry changes what is considered to be beautiful.

However, initiatives like the Dove advertising campaigns, greater diversity on the pages of Vogue magazine and the increasing visibility of ‘plus-size’ models like Ashley Graham, older women and a (slightly) more ethnically diverse mix of models, are attempting to drive a narrative of inclusivity and an exhortation to love ourselves as we are.

But if you are a woman who is discriminated against because of your body and looking to a movement for acceptance, would the body positivity movement make you feel better or worse about yourself?

On top of all of that, phrases like ‘body confidence' and ‘self-love' confuse the matter further. All of these words that are designed to give us ownership over our relationship with our bodies, have become jumbled together and confused to the point where no-one seems fully aware of the differences between them all, and navigating them seems like a minefield.

As women, we experience biological changes in our bodies, whether through pregnancy or the menopause for example, which might be challenging, debilitating or just plain unwelcome. Teens in particular struggle with body image almost as soon as puberty begins. If the notion of self-acceptance is one that you struggle with, where do you go?

The good news is that a safe harbour has appeared amongst all of this chaos: body neutrality.

Body neutrality is liberation from the way of thinking that you always have to love your body and if you don’t, you’re failing at something for some reason. Many people find it impossible to love their bodies all of the time. Maybe they are disabled or experience chronic pain.

I have suffered from skin conditions since I was a child and now, I have discovered that my joints are wearing down faster than they should, to the point where I have had two rounds of surgery before my 30th birthday, with more on the horizon. Try telling me to love my body when I’m cutting an apple into tiny chunks because physically I can’t bite down on it.

Body neutrality gives people the space to just not think about their bodies. It doesn’t require you to attribute positive or negative emotions to it, just acceptance. This frees up valuable emotional space and thinking time to focus on other things, like the amount of money in your bank account or how you’re going to smash the patriarchy today, or design your outfit as if you were a Jedi. Whatever you want.

Ever since I heard Jameela Jamil in an interview say, “I believe in just not thinking about your body”, I’ve been enamoured with the whole thing. Her words gave shape to my own feelings so precisely. I’ve watched friends go on diets and struggle with their body image while I couldn’t see anything wrong with them.

Body positivity clearly wasn’t working for them because no-one I knew was accepting themselves, and nothing I said helped, so I just gave up on the conversations. The discovery of body neutrality has allowed me to completely reshape my conversation. It allows for the discovery of a middle ground for those who do struggle with body image and may even lead to genuine self-love further down the road.

For me, body neutrality is the end-game. My body is amazing. It’s taken me all around the world and allows me to participate in sports I love, but due to illness it also sometimes causes me untold pain and stress. Accepting my body as it is, without the pressure to love it in the way the body positivity movement wants me to, prevents me from spending too much energy, either positive or negative, on the whole thing. It’s just my body. It is what it is.

Your body is something you are literally going to spend the rest of your life with. Life’s too short to spend precious time forcing yourself to love it or waste time hating it. Why don’t you try just not thinking about it, and see how that works for you?

Dr Suzy Lishman CBE is a consultant histopathologist at Peterborough City Hospital, immediate past president of the Royal College of Pathologists, Trustee of National Confidential Enquiry into Patient Outcome and Death, the Royal Veterinary College and the Association for Art History, and a non-executive director of the Medical Protection Society. She chairs the Medical Examiner Committee of the Royal College of Pathologists and is Lead Medical Examiner in her hospital. Medical examiners are senior medical doctors trained in the legal and clinical elements of the death certification process.
Here Suzy describes some of the changes she's encountered during the pandemic.

SUZY LISHMAN

Pathology and the pandemic – how life has changed

I feel very fortunate that my working pattern hasn't changed at all during the pandemic. I still drive to the hospital most days and work in the lab with my colleagues. I was already working one day a week from home before lockdown, and have continued to do that. Several colleagues have started to do the same, which I think is a positive step and one that will continue in the long term.

Seeing colleagues, many of whom are also friends, has been a great way of coping with these strange times as there's a positive atmosphere in the hospital and a feeling that we're all in it together. The dedication of many health and care staff has been awe-inspiring – people have really risen to the challenge and worked together to provide the best care for patients.

My day-to-day work as a histopathologist involves examining tissue specimens under the microscope to make diagnoses such as cancer. The number of these samples received fell dramatically during the first weeks of the pandemic, as the focus of healthcare moved to treating patients with Coronavirus. The number of specimens has increased significantly over the last few weeks and the pathology team is very busy catching up with the backlog of cases. I am concerned about the delays in diagnosis for patients with non-Covid illness – although the NHS remained open throughout the pandemic, the restrictions inevitably mean that some people with suspicious symptoms weren't investigated as soon as they might have been. It will take some time to catch up.

One of my roles at work is chairing monthly Schwartz Rounds. These informal meetings are open to all staff and explore the emotional side of our jobs rather than teaching facts or finding solutions to problems. The rounds provide an opportunity for colleagues from diverse backgrounds to come together to share their experiences. Evidence has shown that staff who attend rounds feel less stressed, are happier in their jobs and take less sick leave as they feel valued and supported.

Moving these rounds online has been a big challenge – it's very difficult to recreate a space that feels safe and supportive using videoconferencing platforms. But I've been

impressed by the honesty and openness of recent speakers, who have shared their experience of coping with the pandemic and the impact it has had on them and their families. Everyone has different coping mechanisms, from keeping fit to raising chickens, but the common theme that emerged was that of pulling together as a team and supporting each other.

While I had fewer tissue samples to examine, I set up a death certification service with colleagues to ensure that all deaths in the hospital were certified quickly and accurately. This freed up frontline doctors to care for seriously ill patients and ensured that bereaved families were able to register deaths and make funeral arrangements without delay. The most striking difference was that it took only three days from my offer to set up the service to implementing it – many of the barriers to change disappeared during the pandemic, making it easier to make rapid improvements and adapt to changing circumstances. This is one aspect of the impact of the pandemic that I would like to keep.

The pandemic has also had an impact on health charities, cutting their income from fundraising and donations. This means that they have had to cut back on many of their activities, including funding research, campaigning for improvements in diagnosis and care, and providing support for patients. Charities such as Bowel Cancer UK, whose Scientific Advisory Board I chair, provide a vital service for patients who are currently ill and their families, as well as investing in research to explore how cancer can be diagnosed earlier and prevented. I worry that the recent reduction in charitable donations will have a lasting impact on organisations carrying out this vital work.

I have continued to contribute to several external organisations during lockdown, attending Council and Board meetings, Steering Groups and subcommittees via Zoom or Teams, often several in the same day. Being able to attend these remotely makes it much easier to fit them into the busy working week – I can be in three places on the same day and don't need to allow travelling time between meetings. I've had a few days with over six hours of meetings, which is pretty tiring – but at least I haven't got a three-hour journey to get home. Remote meetings work well for well-established teams but there's nothing quite like face-to-face contact for getting to know new colleagues. I also miss the opportunity to meet up with friends and family in London after a day of meetings there.

As national training lead for medical examiners one of my roles is organising and chairing interactive training days for doctors working in this new specialty. A team of expert facilitators, patients and faith representatives has trained over 550 medical examiners face-to-face over the last year. Hoping that lockdown wouldn't last too long, we cancelled training days in April and June, intending to reschedule them when restrictions were lifted. However, it soon became clear that face-to-face meetings wouldn't be happening in the foreseeable future so I worked with the Royal College of Pathologists' events team to adapt the training. We held our first training day via Zoom in July and it was a huge success, with many of the delegates saying that they hoped we would never go back to in person meetings. I think the key to the success was dividing the delegates into small groups of no more than nine for small breakout sessions so there was still the opportunity for informal conversations and networking, in addition to panel discussions and short presentations in a larger group. A further 250 delegates have signed up for training over the next three months and I'm considering alternating in person and remote teaching indefinitely so people have the option in future.

One of the things I've missed is holding events for the public. I have had to cancel numerous talks and demonstrations, including several Living Autopsies, where I describe what a post-mortem examination involves with the help of a live model and a bag of instruments. Fortunately one of these events was recorded last year so audiences can watch it online. I've got several events booked for later in the year so hope that they'll be able to go ahead. I used to talk about the bubonic plague and speculate about the threat of modern contagious diseases – I think I'll give that topic a miss for a while!

Lockdown has given me the opportunity to do more teaching than usual. I am an Honorary Fellow of Girton College, Cambridge, but can usually only get there once or twice a year to talk to the students. As teaching moved online, I was able to give a weekly talk last term about pathology, followed by a light-hearted pathology-themed quiz. I enjoyed meeting the students and relished the opportunity to contribute to the teaching programme for the first time.

Like most people, my social life has taken a hit this year and the pace of life has slowed considerably. Videocalls have been essential for staying in touch with friends over the last few months. I've had weekly coffee with my closest girlfriends, and regular cocktails with larger groups of friends to keep up with what's going on. We've introduced a weekly family quiz, which means we get together more frequently than we ever did before lockdown, and I'm learning lots of random facts about football and world capitals.

I spent the first few weeks of lockdown baking cakes and eating very well, but soon began to pile on the pounds. So I've cut back and taken the opportunity to get fitter, going out for brisk walks and working out with a personal trainer for the first time in years.

I feel lucky that I have had work to keep me busy over the last few months, and that none of my family, several of whom also work in hospitals, have become ill. I have enjoyed finding solutions to the many new challenges at work and home and don't think life will ever quite go back to the way it was.

Find out more about Suzy and her work
via her fascinating feed on Twitter
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