CALM BREATH

Filling our lungs with air and letting it all out again is a reflex action and something we rarely give much thought or time to. So how hard can breathing be? How can you get it wrong? The resounding answers to these questions, when you dig a little deeper, are most definitely 'VERY' and 'In so many ways'! So many of us get into strange habits with how we let that vital air in and out of our bodies, myself included. Think back to the last time you were excited or stressed. It is very likely your breathing was either much quicker than normal or stopped in its tracks.

TYPES OF BREATHING

When I started writing this book, breathing was one of the areas I wanted to focus on. I touched on its importance in *HAPPY*, but after experiencing my panic attacks it was something I wanted to investigate in more depth, as the first thing I noticed during those few scary minutes was the notion of having no control over the short, sharp pants that were sending my whole body into panic. My lungs felt as if they were almost contracting rather than gently and calmly gathering the oxygen they needed. My instinct in these panic-saturated moments was to breathe deeper and more smoothly. I tried so hard to gulp down air into the pit of my stomach and to blow it out evenly but the panic that was controlling the show had other ideas and compressed my lungs further, ensuring only the smallest amount of air was allowed in and back out at any one time.

When I'm nervous I tend to do the exact opposite. If I'm faced with a colossal and nerve-wracking job and I'm delivering lines or about to speak, I tend to hold my breath at the top of my chest. The air sits there waiting for the impending moment of possible disaster and daren't leave my lungs in case that motion causes some problematic domino effect. If I stay as still as I can and hold my lungs and muscles tight then maybe I'll be steeled for what's to come and just maybe everything will go to plan. It's all very subconscious but since I started delving into this subject matter for the book, it's something I do that I'm much more aware of and intrigued by.

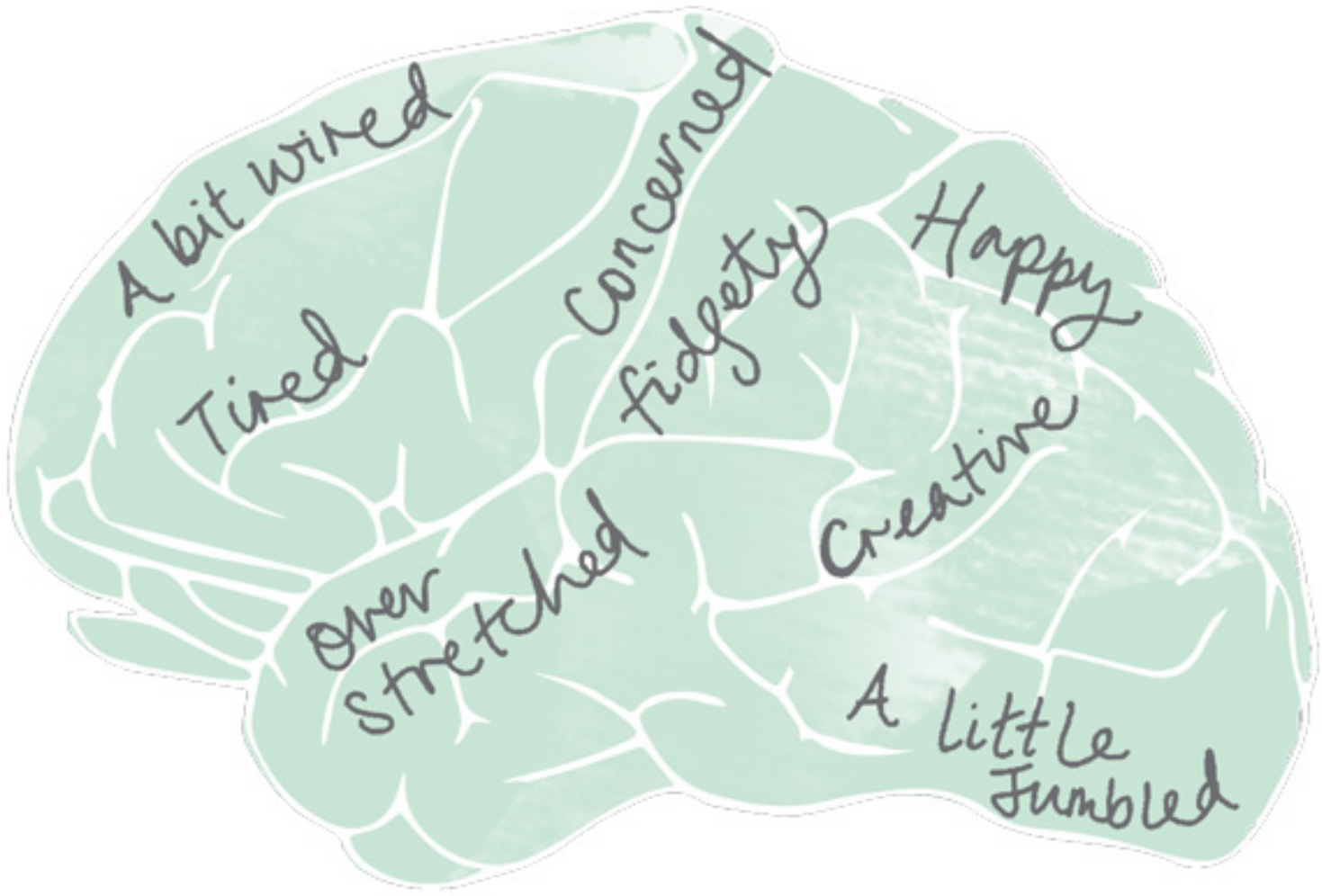
I've mentioned already the birthing technique I used during my second labour (with Honey). My friend Hollie de Cruz, a hypnobirthing expert, told me to imagine a large colourful balloon during my labour with Honey. She taught me that with each contraction I should breathe in and imagine the balloon expanding, and then taught me how to steadily release that breath. I'm not quite sure how the alchemy of this simple technique works but what I do know is that it was a game changer. It allowed me to calm my body and mind so that every inch of me believed everything was okay and that I would get through it. There were no mind tricks, nor was there a magical hippy-type waving a branch of sage over my face; I simply felt in control and calm because of my breathing. Yet even after this moment and learning how impactful conscious breathing could be, I somehow stored away that information in a corner of my mind reserved for 'childbirth', then carried on breathing in a very irregular fashion in my everyday life.

'LEARNING' TO BREATHE

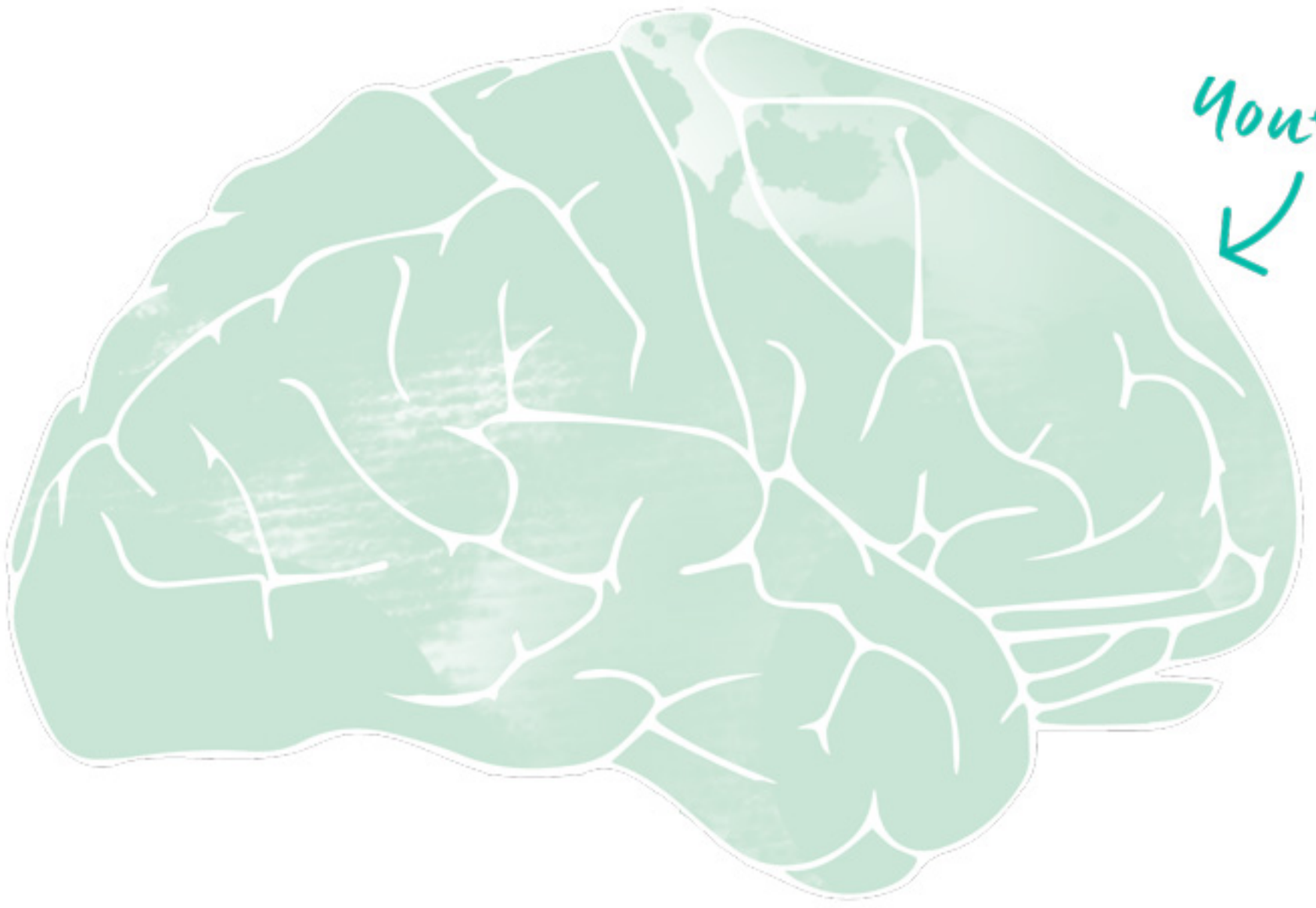
So can someone teach you how to breathe? It turns out they really can! I discovered breathing coach Rebecca Dennis through a friend and intrigued and as research for this book, I went along to see her magic for myself. On page 58 you can find my interview with Rebecca and some of the breathing exercises she took me through, but briefly here, this is what I experienced:

Our minds are bulging with information, ideas, concerns, dreams and everything else in between. Sometimes it feels like a right old jumble sale in that brain. Write in the spaces in the pictures below what is on your mind and how your brain is feeling today.

My brain



Your brain



When I arrived at the yoga studio where Rebecca works, I told the receptionist I had an appointment with her, which was met with a joyful smirk and slow nod. At this point I knew I was in for something special.

Rebecca talked me through her own incredible story and how she discovered the techniques that she now practises with many devotees. I was fascinated but still had not the foggiest as to what I was about to experience. She told me that by partaking in controlled and instructed breathing many inner emotions and past locked grievances, traumas or worries may be freed so that I could move on from them. She also told me to expect nothing and just let go and see what happens without too much thought.

I often wonder if this is our biggest problem in the modern world? We all THINK too much. It's constant: ideas, worries, concerns, comparisons, assumptions. It doesn't stop until we hit the sack, exhausted and all thought-out. Luckily I quite naturally switched off as soon as my session started with Rebecca, as I was so focused on getting the breathing technique right (TEACHER'S PET!) that all other thoughts stayed out on the busy London street where I'd left them. Time seemed meaningless during this whole escapade, so I can't be accurate as to when it all started to kick off, but soon after I got into this mystic cycle of breath everything seemed to open up. My chest lost its usual tightness, my windpipe seemed to expand and have more flow and my stomach softened and stopped trying to look flat and intact after childbirth. As Rebecca moved around my body on the floor, pressing specific pressure points and confirming strong mantras, I felt like a small alien under autopsy. I realised in this moment that I felt far from human in the way I had been carrying on. Pushing myself, never stopping, constantly thinking, invariably slightly stressed and disconnected.

CALM BREATH

Almost alien to the original state of what a human is. We all arrive on planet Earth untouched by experience, regret or trauma and are programmed to see joy, laughter and love, so how come so many of us travel so far from this place? As kids we roam, watch, listen, smell, seek joy always and have a need for fun in the moment. Rebecca was uncovering this and pushing out all of those modern stresses with her words and hands. I could feel it all dispersing and drifting away.

That was when the tears started to roll. Not dramatic, cinematic sobs, more like wild whimpers that ran out of me at great speed. Hot tears flowed as I felt the pain and stress of millions of moments pass through me. Flashes of childbirth, people who have caused me pain, worries that I harbour about people and places due to history, times I've felt crushed. It all came gushing out of these new open spaces.

PILE UP

I had several realisations while the floodgates were open. One was about just how easily small stressful moments pile up, meaning that when something tiny happens – maybe I get a parking ticket or feel a little tired – the stress is maximised and becomes slightly out of control. This is because those small moments sit like tiny canaries on the heads of gargantuan elephants of stress beneath. That mass is made up of many moments and feelings that have built up over time and have sat stagnant, until we realise that we really don't need them hanging around anymore. What an epiphany! I could let go of those small stresses that didn't serve me in any way. Those stresses that live in the past and have no steer or bearing on my life today.



Another realisation was that I don't like to admit to myself that I have been hurt. I feel very lucky that I have a roof over my head and food in my fridge and so far have my physical health, so why would I want to say aloud that I've been hurt? Could it really mean that much and do I really hold on to any of it anyway? I realised during the session that I definitely do and it makes up so much of the stress that I feel about life's banal, smaller problems.

I have been very hurt by certain individuals over the years. Some of these people may even still be in my life now, but this breathing session was making it clear that the pain I felt in certain circumstances was still leaching off my system and making everything else in life slightly greyer and spikier. I'm not looking for sympathy by admitting this to you, or even to myself – we've all been hurt by someone over the years – but what I realised was that it's okay to feel those emotions and say it aloud. The release verified those feelings for me and made me feel okay about acknowledging them.

But what I think I've also learned is that there's an expiry date for these emotions, and if we don't let go and learn to trust again we'll carry this big sack of shit around for far too long, unnecessarily. Recognising this pain and unleashing it from tiny pockets of my body felt liberating to say the least.

Towards the end of the session I felt lighter, more in touch with what was really going on with me and really tingly. I felt I could almost fly out of the room on a magic carpet of newfound space in my life.

The breathing exercises are quite obviously intensely powerful and are something I really want to keep up in my own time, but this session also allowed me to realise

so much of what I was holding on to that was contributing to so much of the stress I was feeling every day. Letting go is the key, and that sometimes feels impossible, but I think awareness and a bit of self-love and patience could be the best starting place. I know there's a lot more I need to let go of and a whole heap of acceptance I need to grasp to truly put all this into action, but it feels exciting rather than daunting. My breathing adventures have only just begun.

This truly extraordinary mental and physical adventure has led me to ponder so many questions. On the next page, Rebecca explains her breathing magic and digs a little deeper on the subject.

