

## LIFE &amp; STYLE

## Starting a self-help book club saved me

## GROUP THERAPY

'Work hard, play hard' was Toni Jones's mantra for 15 years – until an unlikely guru came into her life

If you'd told me six years ago, when I was 35 and working as a newspaper editor, that I'd find true happiness by turning my back on my dream career, ditching the parties, halving my salary and surrendering to the world of self-help, I'd have thought you were as nuts as the gurus I scoffed at.

I was a tough cookie and proud of it; surviving 15 years as a journalist on some of the world's most notorious news titles and living a high-pressure life filled with constant deadlines and stress and jet lag and hangovers.

Despite being estranged from my alcoholic father, and growing up in a pretty hectic "blended" family, I'd created a great life for myself (thank you very much). Among friends and colleagues I had established myself as the listener and the organiser and – most importantly – the one always busy and always having lots of FUN. Feelings were for sissies. Or at least other people.

But nobody can always be having fun. And behind the scenes things were starting to unravel.

Because despite appearances, and my best efforts at ignoring those pesky feelings and the voice in my head that was getting louder and louder, inside I was shattered and lonely, and sometimes really sad.

Looking back I can see that I had designed a life which made it easy to bury or numb anything I might have – and should have – felt, had I given myself a bit of space. Because being too busy to think can seem like an excellent strategy when, left to your own devices, what you actually think is that you are not important or interesting or ever quite "enough".

The crash finally came after I left my last full-time job with nowhere to go but a certainty that I needed to get off the toxic work-hard-play-harder treadmill I had created for myself before I did irrevocable damage to my health and my marriage. Turning my



I knew I had to change my life before I did irrevocable damage to my health and marriage

**SHELF LIFE**  
Toni Jones found greater understanding of her life through these authors, and wants to share the experience

is to connect people with books, ideas and experts that will help them to look at themselves in different, more positive ways. And then to connect those people with each other.

Our digital family has members from Moldova, Miami and Milton Keynes and next month, thanks to our growing army of brilliant local hosts, we will have 10 meet-ups in the UK, two in Canada, three in Australia and one in LA.

Shelf Help is being recommended by doctors and therapists as part of mental health tool kits, and we've become an established community for like-minded souls from all walks of life, from mothers to accountants to bloggers and musicians, to connect, exchange ideas and support each other through the themes of each month's book, whether that's online through our Instagram page or private Facebook group, or in real life at our book club meetups, events and retreats.

And it's changing people's lives. I receive daily messages from members telling me that Shelf Help has inspired them to quit their job, start journaling, stop drinking, leave that bully. Or even just get up earlier to make space to daydream.

The biggest surprise is how much I have changed, grown to know myself, and actually like myself, through this process.

I meditate now. I tell my friends when I feel bad. I say "no" to things I don't want to do. I drink once a month (maybe) and I get up at 6am because I'm trying to nail a daily spiritual practice. I've learned that I'm not such a tough cookie after all. And that's OK.

Some parts of my life may not have been rosy, but I believe that everything that has happened, good and bad, has led me to here. Or in self-help speak, has happened *for*, not *to* me. And every day I'm grateful to be part of building this kind and curious community and to work on something that is making a difference.

Over the past six years I have gone from never wanting to think about why I hated myself so much to loving my life, and myself. And I hope I'm leading by example when I say that boosting our self-esteem is the most important bit of self-help any of us can ever do. Because that shift changes everything.

shelfhelp.club

back on my career was the easy part. Now working for myself, I struggled intensely with the thoughts and feelings I invited to fill all the "space" I suddenly had. I was more lost than ever.

And then along came Paul McKenna. An unlikely guru? Possibly. But when the pupil is ready the teacher appears and I was ready for something (anything!) when his 2004 book *Change Your Life in Seven Days* jumped out at me in the local Oxfam.

It took me more than a year to read that book about changing your life in seven days, because the concepts in it – that we are not our thoughts, that we are ALL worthy, that we learned and so can unlearn limiting beliefs, that how we talk to ourselves matters – were so new to me. (I'm still working on a couple of them several years later.)

That first self-analysis was uncomfortable, fascinating, painful and enlightening all at the same time. But when I finished that book the self-help seed had been well and truly planted, and self-help books and experts became a lifeline for me.

From the soothing affirmations of Louise Hay, Wayne Dyer and Gabrielle Bernstein to the more shouty, motivating messages of Tony Robbins or the soulful stories of Oprah, Michael Singer and Michael Bernard Beckwith, and even the mind-blowing quantum theories of Dr Joe Dispenza, these books and experts, with the private and group therapy I sought for a couple of months after reading them, gave me the tools to explore my life, and also brought with them a kind of peace that I think we are all seeking and all deserve.

So transformative was self-help for me, in fact, that I wanted to start sharing the life-changing messages in it

with the people I cared about (and anyone else who might listen). I was inspired to start a self-help book club to spread the word. The Shelf Help Club began life in a little wine bar in Chiswick, west London, in October 2017. I wanted it to be a place to encourage people to read more, learn more and hopefully talk more about the things that matter.

Of the 10 friends, and friends of friends, who met that first night to discuss *Freedom Seeker* by Beth Kempton, only three of us had actually finished the book, but everyone had some experience of the themes in it. Over the evening we covered everything from dealing with the pressures of modern life and parenting to the desire to find our purpose and the feeling of "is this it?" that we all seemed to share.

And as the night went on my nerves over forcing my friends together to

talk about their actual feelings turned to butterflies of excitement as I felt the power of connection and belonging that had been created by this little group.

My original plan was to try to meet with the same group once every month or two – like a normal book club – but after that first meeting I had a feeling that we had created something much bigger than that, that this was something people needed, and that I could provide. And I started to daydream about how I could make a bigger impact.

Eighteen months on I am happy to say I was right about Shelf Help being much more than a local book club. A combination of hard work, serendipity and social media has created a thriving community made up of thousands of people from all over the world.

My mission – I have a mission now! –



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## WEEKEND STYLE

Alternative ways to dress for life in the country, with *Virginia Chadwyck-Healey*

Going to the pub. The quintessential English outing. Well I mean, after Buckingham Palace and Madame Tussauds. But then the conundrum of what to wear. Barbour, shorts, T-shirts, wet dogs, cowboy boots, wellingtons ... anything goes.

Then you throw into the mix ... the pub quiz. Now I love a pub quiz, but it's very much my husband's territory – I tend to stay in and rewatch *Line of Duty* to ascertain what on earth is going on. My husband frequents The Royal Oak in Yattendon. It is very competitive. He and his friends are top of the league. It genuinely hurts when they lose. I'll be asleep, listening to Radio 4 ("feeding my brain" for when I eventually get the call-up), and my husband will return, and wake me to tell me the result. (A bit like when a child wakes you up to tell you they need the bathroom... unnecessary information. Just go!)

Imagine my delight when last week I was invited to join the team. (And, may I add, we won). Then imagine the wardrobe conundrum. You can't look like you've tried. You will no doubt be huddled around a table all evening. No one will see you from the waist down. You require forgiving trousers that allow space for a sticky toffee pudding. But you want to embrace the idea of "going out" and you want to make an effort.



**GINNIE WEARS** Yellow 'Erica' cardigan, £51, Boden ([boden.co.uk](http://boden.co.uk)); mid-rise, straight-fit jeans, Massimo Dutti, £59 ([massimodutti.com](http://massimodutti.com)); trainers, Gucci, Ginnie's own

I stumbled upon this yolk yellow cardigan by Boden, and then seized upon a pair of grey jeans, in a straight-leg cut, by Massimo Dutti. Just enough "Hello, world. I'm going out on a TUESDAY night, yes a TUESDAY!", but sufficiently comfortable – and casual, too. A lick of mascara, and a perfect-sized pouch by British independent Apatchy ([apatchy.co.uk](http://apatchy.co.uk)) and off I went.

There are a lot of bold cardigans out there that are very easy to fall in love with. But pick your colour wisely. For instance, this yellow works well with a summer tan, over a pale blue shirt dress – but should sit just as well with blue jeans and a grey roll neck to warm up a cold winter's day. Essential Antwerp has a rainbow of neon options, while Marks & Spencer has a fail-safe palette in a range of styles and lengths.

You see, a cardigan is a great way to do both smart and casual. By day, a cardigan with a tea dress works as a good security blanket in our changeable spring weather. By night, wear with smart trousers, add a silk slip underneath (or indeed nothing, if you can forego a layer) and don a good necklace. And hopefully with the right amount of care (and hand washing... I know, I hate it, too) a good cardigan will keep its shape.

It seems Mr Boden and his team have the answer – and in doing so they win a bonus point.

## GINNIE'S PICKS FOR THIS WEEKEND



**Knitted cardigan**  
£210 (essentiel-antwerp.com)



**Spearmint espadrilles**  
£130 (didaritchie.com)



**Large pouch in midnight navy velvet**  
From £29 (apatchy.co.uk)



**Geranium bath oil** £36 for 200ml (ortigiassicilia.com)