

A woman with curly hair is looking out a window, holding a white mug. The background is bright and slightly blurred, suggesting an indoor setting with natural light. The overall mood is contemplative and hopeful.

ARE YOU SECRETLY...

*stuck!*

When you're feeling like your life's in a rut, it's often hard to see a way out. Our experts give some guidelines and have ideas to help you work out what you want

#### MEET THE EXPERTS

**Dr Nicola Bunting** is a life coach and author of *Who Do You Want To Be?* (Platkus); [starpowerresults.com](http://starpowerresults.com)

**Monica Castenetto** is a life coach and author of *What's Your Excuse For Not Living the Life You Want?* (WYE Publishing); [livealifeyoulove.co.uk](http://livealifeyoulove.co.uk)

**Dr Cecilia D'Felice** is an award-winning clinical psychologist, psychoanalytic psychotherapist, yoga teacher and mindfulness trainer, author and journalist.



**Problem** "I can't help dwelling on what's gone wrong with my life and I don't see how it, or I, can change."

*Replaying past, negative events in your head won't resolve anything. It's actions that create difference.*

### Unstick yourself

✦ **Divert your thinking.** When you can't get rid of negative thoughts, try a gratitude mantra. Say thank you for three to five good things that happened that day. This introduces a different train of thought, making it harder for your brain to automatically revert to the dark side.

✦ **We have no control over reality, but we do have control over ourselves.** Always remind yourself that things can be different, but only if you allow them to. Take small steps. If you're feeling overweight and unattractive, don't think "I need to lose two stone and I'll never do it". Instead, take up a healthy cooking class, or start walking to work. See our body confidence feature on page 134.

✦ **It's liberating to think, "What do I really want?" Don't be afraid to make mistakes getting there.** They mean we have to find a different way and, by doing that, we unstick ourselves.

**Problem** "I've been a wife and mother for so long, I've got no idea who I am any more."

*As a woman, it's easy to feel that we belong to someone else. We'll always play a role in someone's life – mother, wife, carer – but it's possible to express yourself in your own life too.*

### Unstick yourself

✦ **Think about a period in your life when it was exciting to be you.** It could be when you were a student or got married. What was it about that time that made it so exciting? Was it that you were learning something new? Mixing with different people? Try and pick up those elements and put them into your life again.

✦ **Be honest. Are you "stuck" in this role or is it that it plays to your talents?** If nurturing is your thing, don't knock it, just find other ways of doing it that will make you feel

"I feel life is taking over and I'm just hurtling along without thinking what I really want to do"

Most of us operate on autopilot with days whizzing by. The problem with feeling that life's simply happening to us, is that we feel unfulfilled. We need to learn how to live in the present.

### UNSTICK YOURSELF

✦ **Recognise precious moments that are happening now.** It might be as simple as a special smile, or a sunrise. Instead of gulping your coffee down in the morning get up five minutes earlier and savour a more enjoyable start to the day.

- ✦ **Swap passive activities,** like watching TV, for ones where you're engaging with people, like an art class or a walk with friends. That exchange of energy that can lift you up and connect you to the now.
- ✦ **Nurture relationships.** Think about what you'll look back on most fondly in ten years time. Your success at work or the relationships you formed? Whether it's post-work drinks with colleagues or kissing your partner goodbye, these shared experiences help us bond and connect us to the present moment.

more connected to your life, so your skills are valued in a different way.

✦ **Have you thought about fostering or becoming a classroom assistant?** You can use and adapt your nurturing skills.

**Problem** "My youngest has left for university. I'm bereft and don't know what to do next."

*Children flying the nest is one of those inevitable milestones in life that still take us by surprise and leave us feeling upset and lost.*

*Learning a new skill or subject is a particularly good route into a new way of being*

### Unstick yourself

✦ **Think, "I've invested all these years in a marriage/children but now I've got time for me." What do you want that time to look like?**

Learning a new skill or subject is a good route into a new way of being and keeps you interested, engaged and adaptable.

✦ **Tell yourself that you can change and do what you want if you put your mind to it.** Be realistic. You're not going to be CEO of a multinational, but you could get involved with community projects, grow your own vegetables or start your own business.

✦ **Talk to others who've been through the same thing.** Ask them how they got through it and what they did.

**Problem** "I tend to go for the same type of man and the relationship always fails."

*So many of us are drawn to the same type of man, the same toxic friendships or the same jobs. Knowing deep down they won't make us happy, but not being able to break out of it.*

### Unstick yourself

✦ **Don't be critical.** It helps to be able to laugh about it. Instead of saying, "You're so pathetic, you've done it again," say, "Here I am again, caught up in the drama!"

✦ **Don't be afraid to say, "There's a pattern here.** It's not working, so maybe I should do it another way." If you keep going for successful men, who don't have lots of time for you, try someone for whom a career isn't as important. They'll have more time for you.

✦ **Question the ideas you carry about yourself.** If you constantly pick friends who are mean to you, think about why. Was it because you were always put down as a child? You know when you've got good friends because they make you feel good, instead of joining in the office politics, go and find the person keeping you out of it.



# WHO AM I REALLY?

Find out with Dr Cecilia's quiz. Circle one answer to each question

**1** Breakfast is the most important meal of the day. Which of the following phrases fits you best?

- A I barely notice that I'm eating it.
- B Who has time for breakfast?
- C It is such a bore remembering to buy the milk.
- D I wake up early enough to enjoy a relaxing breakfast at home to set me up for the day.

**2** You have three deadlines looming, your mother isn't well and you have to get your children to various afternoon clubs. You deal with this by:

- A Trying to manage everything, depriving yourself of breaks, food and sleep, and somehow getting through it.
- B Getting into a state, catching a virus and having to take time off work sick.
- C Sighing and reminding yourself constantly that life is a drag and it can only get worse.
- D Asking your boss for more time off due to your mother being unwell, while arranging for your partner or friend to help with the children.

**3** You've been looking forward to a weekend away with your new boyfriend. He calls to tell you he's got to cancel as he's to go on a business trip. You:

- A Say, "Oh well, I didn't really want to go anyway," and forget all about it.
- B Feel hurt and convince yourself that you've done something wrong.
- C Tell him that he is the reason why your life is so awful.
- D Tell him how disappointed you are and suggest you rearrange, then arrange to see your friend for dinner that weekend.

**4** You're offered an exciting six-month placement abroad for your work. It means leaving friends and family behind. You:

- A Accept the job without hesitation. They can live without you, can't they?
- B Turn it down, it's too much trouble and your IBS will flare up if you go.
- C Complain to everyone that it's not fair these great opportunities come up and you can never take them because no one ever helps you.
- D Discuss the implications of you going away with your family and elicit their support so you can go with the minimum of disruption to their lives.

## Mostly As

**AVOIDANT AUTOPILOT** You find it hard to accept your feelings, rather pretending you don't have them. The problem is that you lose out on intimacy, shared experiences and challenging yourself. Step out of autopilot and start noticing what's going on around you. Watch your life become richer and your chances of optimising opportunities increase.

## Mostly Bs

**UPSET AND OVERWHELMED** You often feel overwhelmed by life and swallow down your real feelings, but enact them by becoming angry or low. Try asking for help more often. The more help we are prepared to receive, the more we can give in return. It'll enable you to step out of the confines of an overwhelmed life into one where you can achieve more by sharing the load.

## Mostly Cs

**MISS NEGATIVITY** You've learned to swamp your real feelings in a blanket of

negativity to protect you from disappointment. You find it hard to accept that life can't always be good, so to compensate you tell yourself that life is always going to be impossible. Stop focusing on what won't work and say yes to everything for a week. See how differently you can feel about yourself by opening up to what is possible.

## Mostly Ds

**REALISTICALLY FLEXIBLE** You have learned that life is about balance and balance is achieved by facing up to reality. You know how important it is to look after yourself, so you have the resources to take care of all your commitments. The more we accept our limits, the more we can achieve, because by accepting support, advice, nurturance and kindness, our lives can open up and flourish.

# START DOING WHAT YOU WANT

Follow our tips to alter the course of your life in a small, or a major, way...

## STEP ONE

**SET THE STAGE** A common mistake is to rush straight into planning your "dream life" without first clearing a space where you can think. If you're feeling unhappy or uninspired, you're not in the best place, physically or mentally, to set new goals. For clarity and vision, you need to feel positive and energised, which means doing a little housekeeping and overhauling your old life first. In the process, you might just discover that the changes you need are different or not quite as drastic as you first thought.

► **ELIMINATE ENERGY DRAINS** Most of us live with a lot of them. Together, they drag us down, keep us from what we'd rather be doing and distract us from living the life we want.

► **PHYSICAL ENERGY DRAINS** That's clutter! Your wardrobe, kitchen cabinets, office drawers... If it wastes your time, then tackle it! See our clutter feature on page 130.





► **FINANCIAL ENERGY DRAINS** Do you have a financial plan for the year ahead? It might seem odd to begin with, but looking at your bank balance is about eliminating nagging worries and feeling stronger. Do you have six months' worth of savings, or working towards it? Are you getting the best interest rate on your mortgage? Be on top of your money before you start laying plans.

► **HEALTH ENERGY DRAINS** This includes diet, exercise and sleep, but also any routine screenings you've missed and nagging worries you know you should sort out at the GP.

► **RELATIONSHIP ENERGY DRAINS** Sometimes, this yearning for a "new life" can spring from a feeling of being fed up with everyone else – but turning away is never the answer. Only you know if there is a big issue to be addressed – in your marriage, for example. But, in other areas, forgiving people, letting go of grudges or deciding to see more of some people and less of others will free you of mental clutter.

## STEP TWO

**MAXIMISE YOUR FEEL-GOOD ENERGY** Now you're ready for change. We all know there's nothing more important than feeling good yet few of us act on it. Think about the things you most enjoy, the people you love to see, the activities that make you feel good. Now ask how much time in your week is given over to them? If the answer is "not much", make a conscious effort to change this, to build in the things you love. When you consciously focus on what makes you feel good, you've begun to make change happen.

## STEP THREE

**BUILD YOUR VISION** Now you're improving the day to day, you're ready to look further ahead. Imagine your ideal life in three years time. What would you like to be doing? Does it have to be something you earn an income from? Can you use existing skills or acquire new ones? Where would you love to be living? If it's somewhere different, could you test run that idea by renting even for a holiday? What about relationships? Health? Whatever feels pertinent to you.

## STEP FOUR

**CREATE STEPPING STONES** When your vision takes shape, start breaking it down. To live this life, what would have to happen? Create steps that would take you from where you are to where you want to be. Now take the first step and break it down into its tiniest components until the moves aren't giant leaps but little stepping stones. For example, the first step could be as small as researching gym membership or a walking holiday, or as big as investigating renting out your house. Make short-term, manageable goals that steer your life in the right direction. If you get stuck or it seems too daunting, break it down even more or brainstorm with a friend. Then keep moving forward!

# WHAT IF... YOU DON'T KNOW WHAT YOU WANT?

## WORK FROM YOUR DISSATISFACTIONS

They indicate where your life isn't what you want, and can show what's lacking. Make a list of the areas you want to address, then start with the most urgent one. Work on changing this one area until you feel a benefit. **+ Make time** Even a little time is better than none. Make space around your other responsibilities. For some this may mean one hour a week of guaranteed clear space to focus on new goals.

## BE FLEXIBLE

Regularly review where you're at. What has worked, what hasn't? There's no need to be overly goal-oriented – make sure you adjust along the way to ensure you end up with a life you truly want!

## BE HONEST

Do you have the talent, the personality, the values to fit the life you're dreaming about? If you value security and don't like uncertainty, then freelancing or leaving your job may not work for you. Perhaps your life revolves around family while work is something you do for money – in which case, launching a business or "project you" may take you further from the family you love, so perhaps volunteering or making space for a hobby would be a better solution.

*There's no such thing as a perfect life – we all have aspects we're not so keen on. The aim is to have enough of the things we love in it too!*

