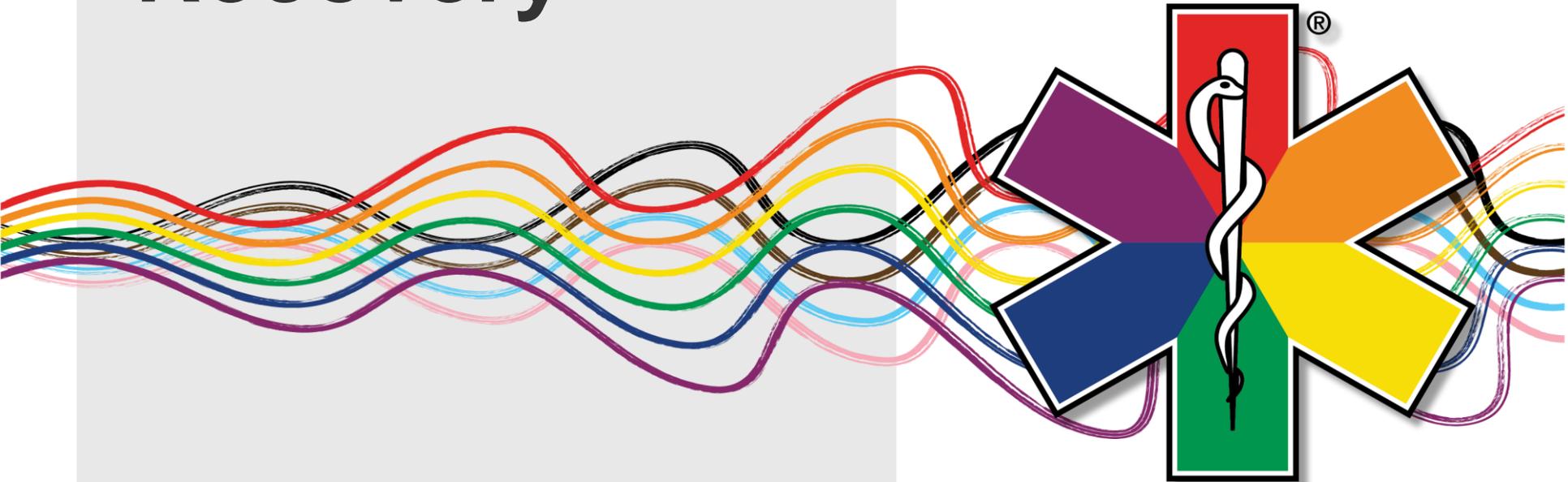


# The Road to Recovery

National Ambulance  
LGBT+ Network



Alistair Gunn

15 September 2022



Celebrating the sexual orientations  
and gender identities of all our  
patients, staff and communities

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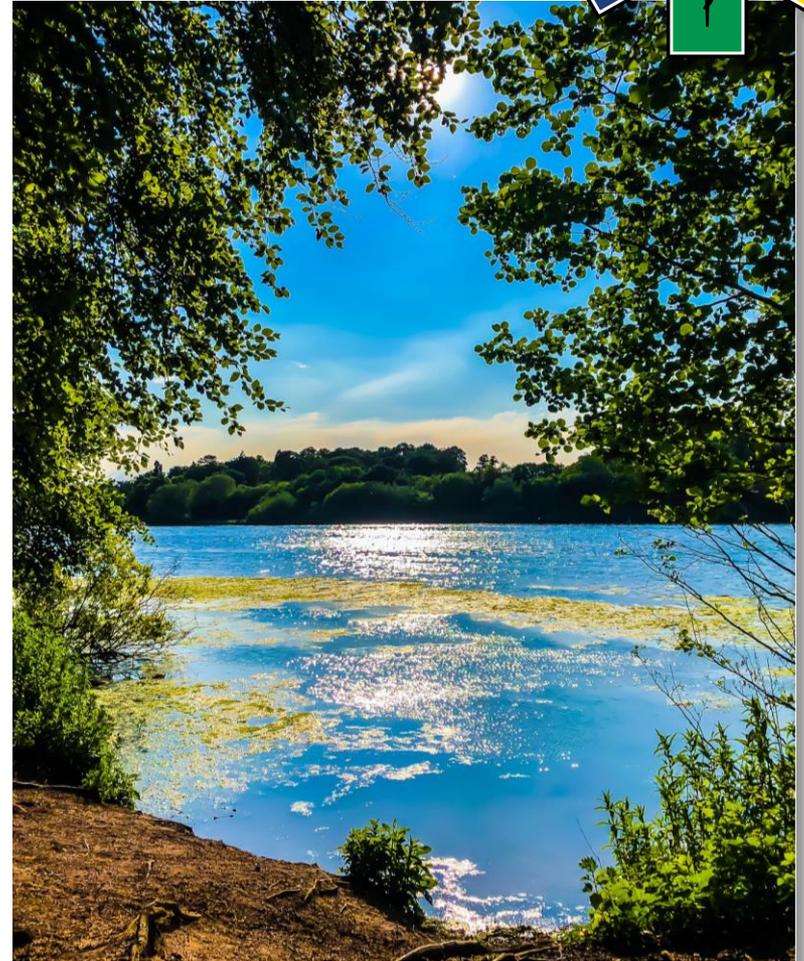
# The Road to Recovery [1]



I don't mind admitting that my mental health took a bit of battering during the pandemic. The first year of it I was surprisingly okay – it was new and we were getting used to it – but as it drifted into the second year things went downhill. I look back on this and can see now this was a mixture of work and personal factors. I can see I was actually a prime candidate for that to happen.

That aside, the process of putting myself back together was a long one and is probably still going on today. I choose my words carefully, because it did feel like trying to complete a difficult jigsaw. After you've had a mental health crash putting the pieces back in the right place was more challenging than I'd imagined.

There are a number of things that definitely did help. And whilst I would never declare myself an expert on such things, I'd rather like to share some of the moments and things that have changed my outlook. For inspiration I am going to draw on two



# The Road to Recovery [2]



things, that are very much part of the story. So, indulge me. Some of this may resonate or even give you some inspiration of where to look for support.

During the autumn of 2021 my sister and I did a weekly walk at Clumber Park in Nottinghamshire. It's a National Trust site just 20 minutes from where we live and it's lovely. There's a lake, woodland and something the National Trust do very well; put facilities in exactly the right places. My sister has coined this 'tea and a wee', for as you reach the further distance from the car you turn a corner and there is the refreshment van and loos. They know what they're doing!

On one trip I found a little book in the gift shop called *A Breath of Fresh Air*. After a couple of minutes browsing through it, I was beckoned by my sister to look at something else and completely forgot to go back and finish looking at the book. On that trip it was my turn to drive and as I

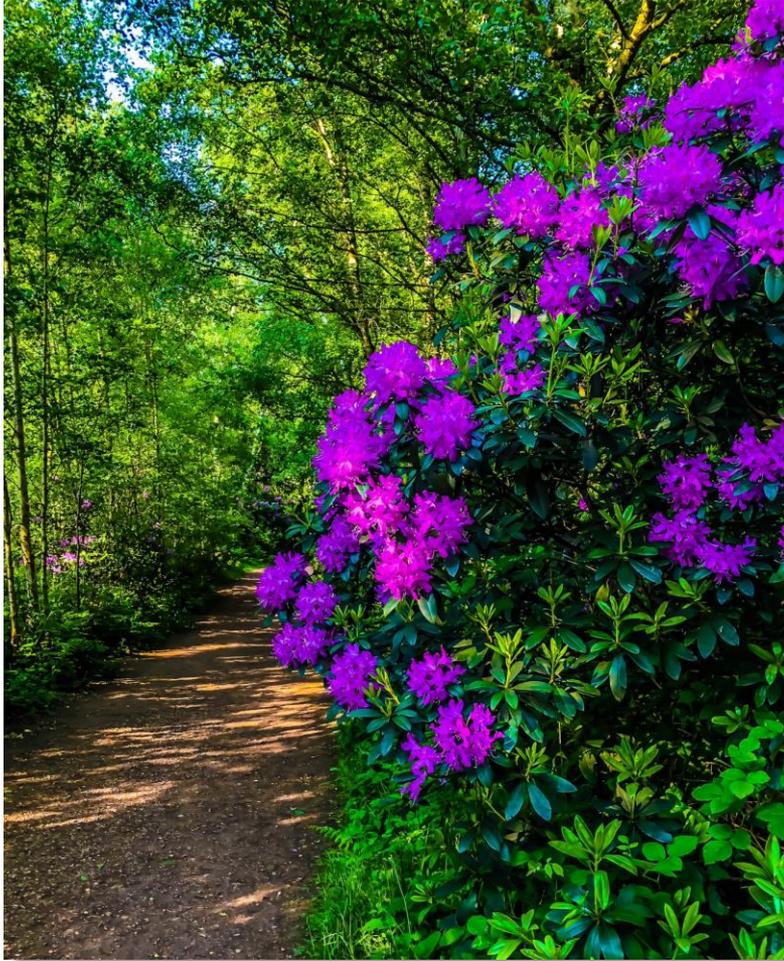
dropped my sister off at home she handed me a paper bag and said; 'Maybe you should finish reading it'. If you're thinking what a lovely thing to do, a thought worth reflecting on is the fact that some people know you better than you know yourself.

For this article I am shamelessly going to rob the headings from the introduction of that very book. They are so practical and sensible.

The second thing began a long time ago and last year came to the fore during a holiday to Northumberland, when I found myself asking permission from a couple to say hello to their handsome chunky Labrador. Without turning round to see who I was, the lady said; 'Go ahead, he's a big ginger tart'. She did turn round sharpish when I replied; 'I know the feeling'! The lovely conversation that followed was picked up by my best friend who later lamented how he was surprised I didn't have a dog.



# The Road to Recovery [3]



It's something I have thought about for a long time, and if I was going to have one a 'big [colour not important] tart' would certainly fit the bill. I'd always listened to those people who didn't think it was such a good idea. My parents, for example, who usually want to cast an opinion on the world whether wanted or not, were very much of the opinion I couldn't have one as I work such long hours. The reality was though, I had spent the last two years working and living alone and I think I really did need the companionship.

My sister found out about a litter that was ready for homing on the other side of town, and I twice refused to go and see them. After a third advert was put out, appealing for homes, I relented and went to meet the three black Labradors also looking for their new companion. One of them came over, took a good look at me before flopping on my lap as if to say 'you'll do'. I can spare you a lot of detail and tell you, six months



# The Road to Recovery [4]



later, that Patrick still does that same routine most evenings.

I need to be really clear here and say that the last thing I am saying you should do is run out and get yourself a dog. What this really is about is listening to your inner hopes and aspirations. Sometimes we hide them quite deep because we perceive them to get in the way. For many of us, the reason why we do this is potentially the problem, not the actual thing we want to do.

Although things have improved massively in recent years, I reflect on many conversations with LGBT+ people who are not living the life they want to, or are not being their true self. This applies as much to our working lives as much as it does to our personal lives. One thing the pandemic has shown us is that life is short and unpredictable. At the start of 2020 none of us had any idea that tough restrictions on our liberty would last two years and have a dramatic effect on our lives. Maybe this is a

good time to push the metaphorical *stop and restart* button and take stock.

Understanding our hopes and aspirations can take a bit of doing, and that's where wellbeing really comes in. Taking time out to relax and reflect is where we are most likely to understand ourselves. I have to say, it is really important that we do this.

Getting involved in staff networks is a great way to meet like-minded people which is important for sharing experiences and understanding. After we relaunch the National Ambulance LGBT+ Network in August I will be encouraging local networks to hold more events that allow people to get together and provide support in an informal way. If you haven't already, maybe getting involved in your staff network could be a positive step.

You may be wondering if having a dog is as good as I hoped it would be. I'd have to say a



# The Road to Recovery [5]



resounding yes, and probably better than I had anticipated. Of course, there are challenges but overall the impact on me has been really positive. In fact, I would go as far as saying I don't know why I didn't do it sooner, although actually I do!

Seeing life from a new perspective is also very refreshing. Just last week I took Patrick to see the sea for the first time. It was quite wonderful to see his initial nervousness disappear as he had a frolic in the waves. Taking him for a walk everyday is great headspace and he's usually laid alongside me whilst I am working from home. Perhaps the best thing I have observed in Patrick is that he starts each day as excited as the last and the next. It seems a great philosophy and one I'm trying to adopt myself.

I hope you enjoy the rest of this 15 Minute Read and the sections that follow provide some support. We need to remember to look after ourselves, and each other, at this moment more than ever. ■



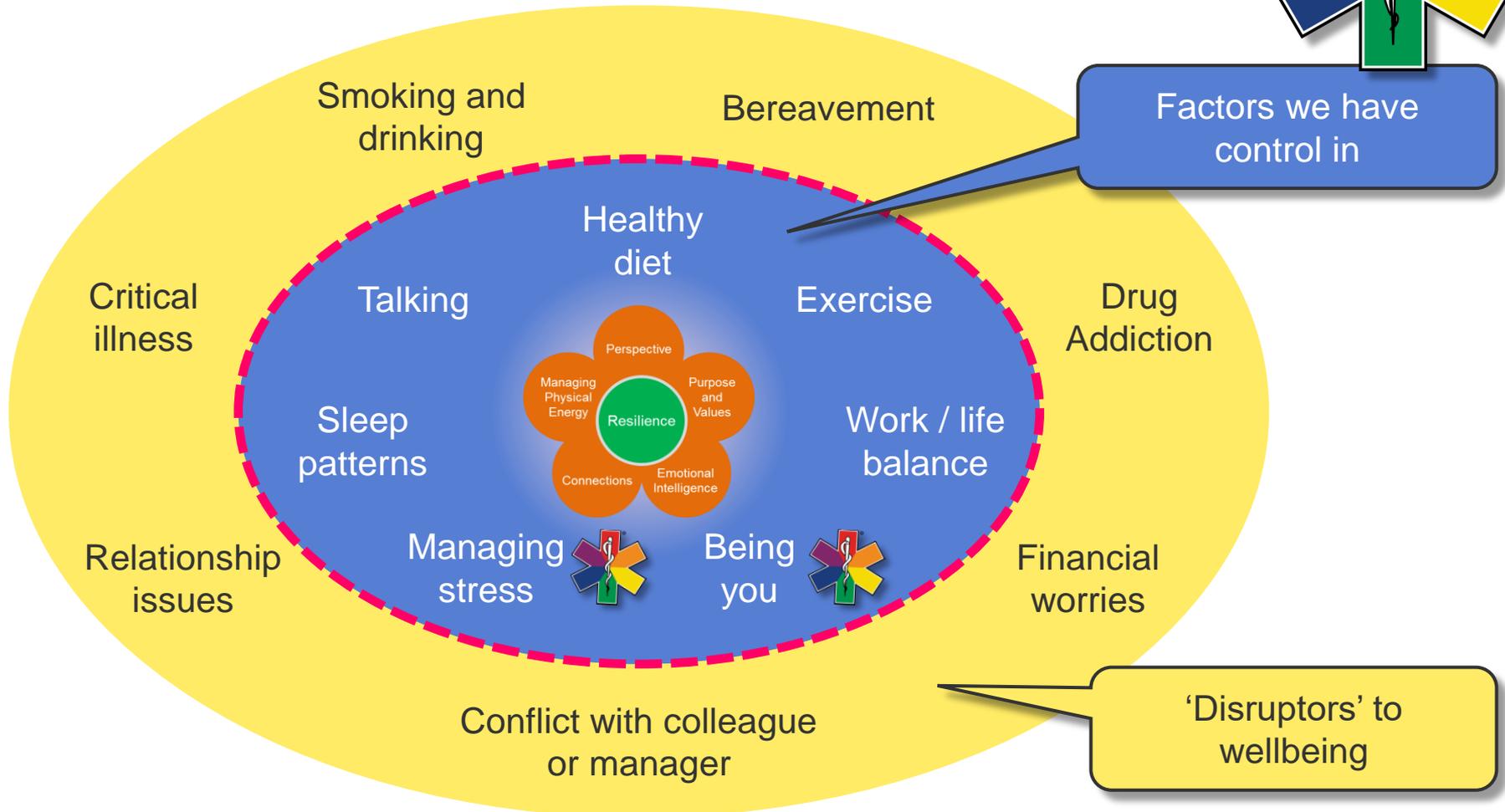
# Photo View



'You'll do'. Patrick when he was two months old. If my article hasn't made you smile, hopefully this photo will!



# Our Wellbeing Framework



# Our Wellbeing Framework



The National Ambulance LGBT+ Network Wellbeing Framework was created in 2019 to help people understand factors that have an impact on people and the additional vulnerabilities for LGBT+ people.

At the heart of the framework is the Resilience Flower, which is a set of factors that impact on how resilient we are. This varies from person to person, and can change over time in any of us. The blue circle is a series of factors which we have control in, that impact on wellbeing and resilience.

Two of the factors in the blue area are particular vulnerabilities for LGBT+ staff. These are associated with the stressful nature of some of the work we do, and whether people can be themselves at work, or not. The latter applies to all LGBT+ people in whatever role they undertake.

In the yellow area are a series of things that are disruptors to wellbeing. Most of these are critical

incidents or events that can have a life-changing impact on an individual.

A report by the LGBT Foundation released in 2020 looked at the impact of the pandemic on LGBT+ people's mental health. This can easily be summarised by the idea that any impact on, or disruptor of, wellbeing was likely to be exacerbated by the circumstances created by the pandemic. A relationship break up, for example, would have more impact on the basis people are living in isolation and supporting services are harder to access.

Have a look at some of the resources on our website, including our wellbeing recipe book. This is available at: [ambulanceLGBT.org](https://ambulanceLGBT.org) ■



# A Breath of Fresh Air [1]



I was quite sold on the content of this book when I read the cover... 'This book is about switching off from social media and finding contentment in the here and now - taking time out to enjoy small tasks, connect with other people and enjoy all the beauty of nature throughout the year.' Social media is part of many of our lives and comes with an equal number of pros and cons. We can see what people are doing and feel connected. If we're not feeling great, this will be likely to reaffirm our negative conviction that everyone else is having a better time than you.

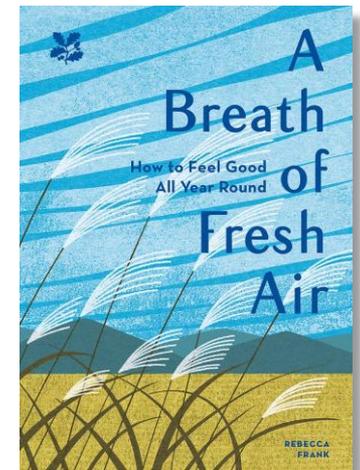
I would suggest many of us do not question our wellbeing when everything is okay, but it becomes an over-riding concern when things aren't. The first thing we need to do is give ourselves space to concentrate on ourselves. That's where social media really needs to take second place. As hard as it sounds, it's time to switch it off and really make space to do simple things that are solely about you. Now over to the headings in the

introduction of my book to work out what we do with that extra time.

## Living With the Seasons

Warm summer days and light evenings are great but, at this time of year, when days start to shorten it can dampen the mood. As someone who has definitely suffered from Seasonal Affective Disorder (SAD) Syndrome I know that autumn can be a tricky time, but actually there are things you can do to help.

I used to go swimming after work, which not only releases important endorphins but also you're in the light and this gives an extension to the day. It doesn't matter whether you find solace in a sport or retail therapy, being in a well-lit place in the evening really can help.



# A Breath of Fresh Air [2]



I also know people who look forward to dark evenings and like nothing more than curling up on the sofa with the fire on and a good film. Now this year might not be the best one to keep the fire on, given recent fuel price hikes, but how about making yourself a nice meal or finding a way to treat yourself at least once a week? We can't change the seasons, so finding a way to muddle through is the bit we can control.

## The Green Cure

That weekly walk with my sister that I mentioned earlier became strangely addictive. As things transitioned from late summer into autumn we were treated to the most impressive show nature can provide. Trees turning different colours, the ground singing with frost, watching your breath disappear, seeing robins become more visible as snow fell for the first time... I could go on. Whenever we talk mental health people always say eat and sleep well and take lots of exercise. You know what, take it from me, it really does help.

That lovely tiredness as you cross that ten-thousandth step feels even better when you know the guilty pleasure treat that follows is easier to justify. What's more the green cure is available to all of us for free!

## Why People Matter

I'm one of those odd people that likes my own space and time to contemplate but equally love bouncing off people in social and work situations. The pandemic, however, has had a strange impact on me and I have to admit to getting very used to my own space. I wouldn't go as far as saying I have developed *social anxiety*, but I do have to be persuaded to go out and do things I used to do without question.

In some of our work lives face-to-face meetings were replaced by Teams and Zoom. Thank goodness the technology was there to support us, but I think its fair to say that fatigue of these media has well and truly crept in. So many of



# A Breath of Fresh Air [3]



those little concerns and issues are easily 'put to bed' in those informal natters we used to take for granted. There's no wonder we're all feeling a little but more delicate at the moment; we've been missing our most important therapy.

## Never Stop Learning

I'm not talking about academic qualifications here when I mention learning. This is really about setting yourself a personal challenge. Learning something new is a complete diversion from the norm and that in itself can be very cathartic. It could be a new skill, rekindling an old one or maybe something as simple as learning a new recipe. It could be anything you want, but making that decision to do something and making it happen is all about *you* being in control.

If you're really stumped, and you haven't already completed our two professional development packages, maybe its time to do just that. You might learn something new, feel good about doing it and

be able to give a better experience to patients. That's a win, win, win in my book!

## Giving Back

This may be stupid idea but it worked for me. In one of those moments I didn't feel great I withdrew a tenner and set off to find things to make as many people smile as I could. If you are not too precious about the shop you choose, you'll be amazed how far you can stretch that tenner. Doing something to make other people feel nice is good for the soul and actually a great way to make you feel connected.

There was another lovely bonus about this too. When the favour was repaid by people who really do care, it lead to some of the loveliest moments I've had in a long time. So, if you're wondering what to do this evening, get yourself off to the cashpoint and begin your search! ■



# The Mental Health Continuum



The Association of Ambulance Chief Executives have released a diagnostic resource to help people assess their own, and other people's mental health. The continuum contains four strands which are thriving, surviving, struggling and in crisis (shown on the next page), and considers a range of factors including emotional, psychological and social.

This sector-specific resource was developed with the College of Paramedics and is likely to become a standard tool across all Ambulance Trusts. The associated online information provides contact information for a range of supporting services, which includes Blue Light Together.

You can find a range of other mental health support information, including resources for LGBT+ people, at the National Ambulance LGBT+ Network website:

[ambulanceLGBT.org/resources/mental-health/](http://ambulanceLGBT.org/resources/mental-health/)

## Useful Mental Health Contacts

**The Ambulance Staff Charity (TASC)**  
TASC is for colleagues and families of colleagues who need advice or support.  
Telephone: 0800 1032 999  
Email: support@theasc.org.uk

**Unmind**  
Unmind is a site that offers free access to NHS colleagues with a variety of mindfulness, meditation and yoga sessions.  
<https://home.unmind.com>

**Our Frontline**  
Direct access for emergency service workers through Our Frontline.  
<https://www.samaritans.org/how-we-can-help/workplace/our-frontline/>

**Samaritans**  
Telephone: 116 123 (free 24 hours a day)  
Email: jo@samaritans.org  
[www.samaritans.org](http://www.samaritans.org)

**Mind**  
The leading mental health charity available with online resources for support, personal advice and assistance.  
Telephone: 0300 123 3393  
Text: 86463  
[www.mind.org.uk/information-support/helplines](http://www.mind.org.uk/information-support/helplines)

**Our NHS People**  
Telephone support service for NHS staff.  
Confidential support by phone on: 0800 06 96 222 (7am-11pm)

**Shout UK**  
Heads Together provide SHOUT with offering helplines to meet a variety of mental health needs.  
Shout Text Response: 85258 (text the word SHOUT)  
[www.headstogether.org.uk/get-support](http://www.headstogether.org.uk/get-support)

[www.ambulanceLGBT.org](http://www.ambulanceLGBT.org)

National Ambulance LGBT Network    @NatAmbLGBT

*[Left] We regularly update our Useful Mental Health Contacts poster.*

*[Right] The full Mental Health Continuum poster.*

**How are you really doing?**  
Thinking about your wellbeing in the past week, do you feel...

	THRIVING	SURVIVING	STRUGGLING	IN CRISIS
EMOTIONAL	In good spirits with usual ups and downs	Sometimes irritable, impatient, nervous or sad	Often impatient, nervous or sad	Angry, anxious, hopeless or always sad
PSYCHOLOGICAL	Positive about life most of the time	Mostly able to cope with stresses of daily life	Coping with the stresses of daily life is often hard	Overwhelmed by the stresses of daily life
PHYSICAL	A sense of purpose in life most of the time	Positive about life some of the time	Negative about life some of the time	Negative about life most of the time
SOCIAL	No thoughts of suicide or fleeting thoughts of suicide	Unsure about your sense of purpose in life	Disoriented or a sense that life lacks purpose sometimes	Disinterested or that life lacks purpose most of the time
FUNCTION	Thoughts of suicide and active plans to act on these	Some thoughts of suicide with no plans to act on these	Thoughts of suicide including some planned related to these	Thoughts of suicide and active plans to act on these
EMOTIONAL	Physically well for you	Mostly physically well	Rarely able to part in social activities or hobbies sometimes	Mostly unable to take part in social activities or hobbies
PSYCHOLOGICAL	Supported by family, friends and colleagues	Disconnect from family, friends and colleagues to some extent	Withdrawn from or avoiding family, friends and colleagues	Withdrawn from or avoiding family, friends and colleagues
PHYSICAL	Considering your shift pattern (if you have one), you are able to get quality rest and sleep	Mostly physically well	Aside from any disruption caused by shift pattern (if you have one), you are unable to get quality rest and sleep	Aside from any disruption caused by shift pattern (if you have one), you are unable to get quality rest and sleep
SOCIAL	Physically well for you	Aside from any disruption caused by shift pattern (if you have one), you are unable to get quality rest and sleep	Unable to do as much physical activity within your usual capability	Unable to do as much physical activity within your usual capability
FUNCTION	Physically well for you	Aside from any disruption caused by shift pattern (if you have one), you are unable to get quality rest and sleep	Unable to do as much physical activity within your usual capability	Unable to do as much physical activity within your usual capability
FUNCTION	Physically well for you	Aside from any disruption caused by shift pattern (if you have one), you are unable to get quality rest and sleep	Unable to do as much physical activity within your usual capability	Unable to do as much physical activity within your usual capability

We all experience times when we struggle or reach crisis. It is ok to not be ok.  
Your loved ones, employer and professionals can help.

**MAINTAIN YOUR WELLBEING**

Connect with others  
Be physically active  
Learn new skills  
Give  
Be present in the moment

**PROMOTE YOUR WELLBEING**

Actively engage in coping techniques and self care  
Engage in peer support and clinical supervision  
Use  
Reflective practice—what are your support needs?

**FOCUS ON YOUR WELLBEING**

Connect with your line manager, employee support or others in your  
Talk about how you are feeling  
Consider trying a new coping technique

**PRIORITISE YOUR WELLBEING**

Prioritise asking for support from employee support or your line manager  
Staff Charity, your GP, or a professional (e.g. counsellor, person you know, etc.)

Scan here for more information about wellbeing, actions you can take and where to get more support or visit [bluelighttogether.org.uk](http://bluelighttogether.org.uk)

# The Mental Health Continuum



## Thriving

### Maintain Your Wellbeing

Connect with others.  
Be physically active.  
Learn new skills.  
Give.  
Be present in the moment.

## Surviving

### Promote Your Wellbeing

Actively engage in coping techniques and self-care.  
Engage in peer support and clinical supervision.  
Reflective practice: what are your support needs?

## Struggling

### Focus On Your Wellbeing

Connect with your line manager, employee support services or GP Talk about how you are feeling.  
Consider trying a new coping technique.

## In Crisis

### Prioritise Your Wellbeing

Prioritise asking for support from employee support services, The Ambulance Staff Charity, your GP, or in an emergency 999 (you're a person too, 999 is there for you).

More information is available at: [aace.org.uk/mental-health-continuum/](https://aace.org.uk/mental-health-continuum/)



# Our New Look for 2022



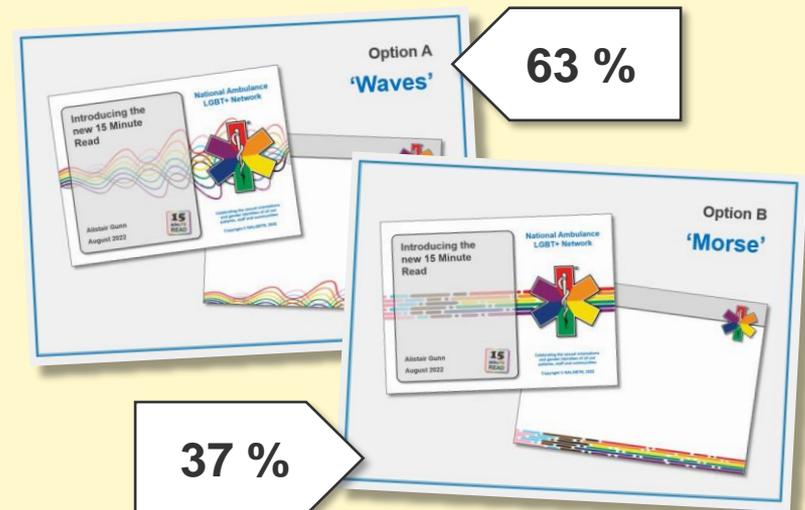
Post-pandemic, the world has moved forward and so have we. As we relaunch the 15 Minute Reads we wanted to introduce a bespoke new design that embraces new ideas.

We have now added the + to LGBT+ to reflect a wider spectrum of sexual orientations and gender identities. Hand in hand with this is adopting the new 'progress flag' to represent our LGBT+ communities. We have decided to leave our rainbow star of life symbol alone – the six prongs and six colours works too well – but our new design includes people of colour and trans elements.

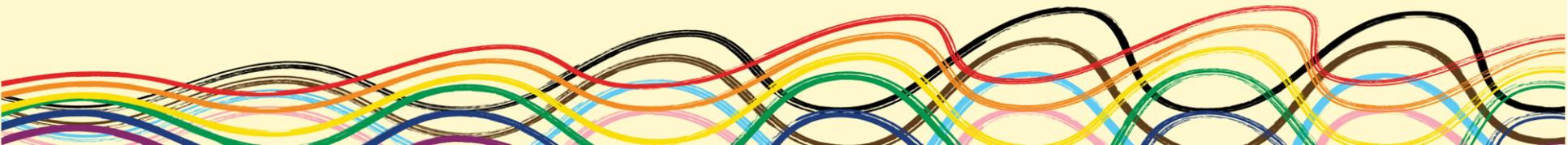


*The LGBT+ Progress Flag*

The waves graphic device was chosen from three designs in a social media poll in July 2022. Many people commented that the 'waves' emphasises the idea of fluidity which is especially relevant to sexual orientation and gender identity.



The poll generated 80 responses and the results are shown above. The third option, 'pulse' received no votes. ■



# Photo View



The committee seen at our task and finish event at the National Emergency Services Museum in Sheffield on 16 August.