

Unhappy? Well, maybe that's your own fault

Gary John Bishop is a straight-talking British life coach loved by America's alpha males. Harry Wallop meets him

It takes something remarkable to break the golden rule adhered to by all Londoners: do not catch the eye of a fellow commuter on the Tube. And never, under any circumstance, engage a stranger in conversation. So, Gary John Bishop, take a bow. I was reading his debut book on the Central Line when a smartly dressed man across the aisle smiled and said: "Wow, that's an interesting title for a book." It certainly is. It's called *Unf*ck Yourself*.

The tone of this forceful title is replicated inside the book, which promises to offer "a slap from the universe to wake you up to your true potential and get spectacularly into your life". Most self-help books are the literary equivalent of a yoga class, a soothing stretch liberally sprinkled with some "because you're worth it" aphorisms. This one is the equivalent of those British Military Fitness boot camps where the instructor screams at you to do squats in the pouring rain.

Here's a typical passage: "Act on the moment and in line with what the item in front of your face demands of you. F*** how you feel. ACT! Not in a minute. Not after this show is over. Now." It's an approach that has won a legion of fans, not least men of a certain age.

Bishop is a life coach. These are to Generation X what psychiatrists were to baby boomers. You can hire him for \$300 to \$500 an hour — although he has a waiting list. And he'll listen to you over the telephone then tell you where you are going wrong. He says that among his clients are celebrities, chief executives, professional

sportsmen and even a few politicians. "But I am more interested in who you are, rather than who you have been up to this point."

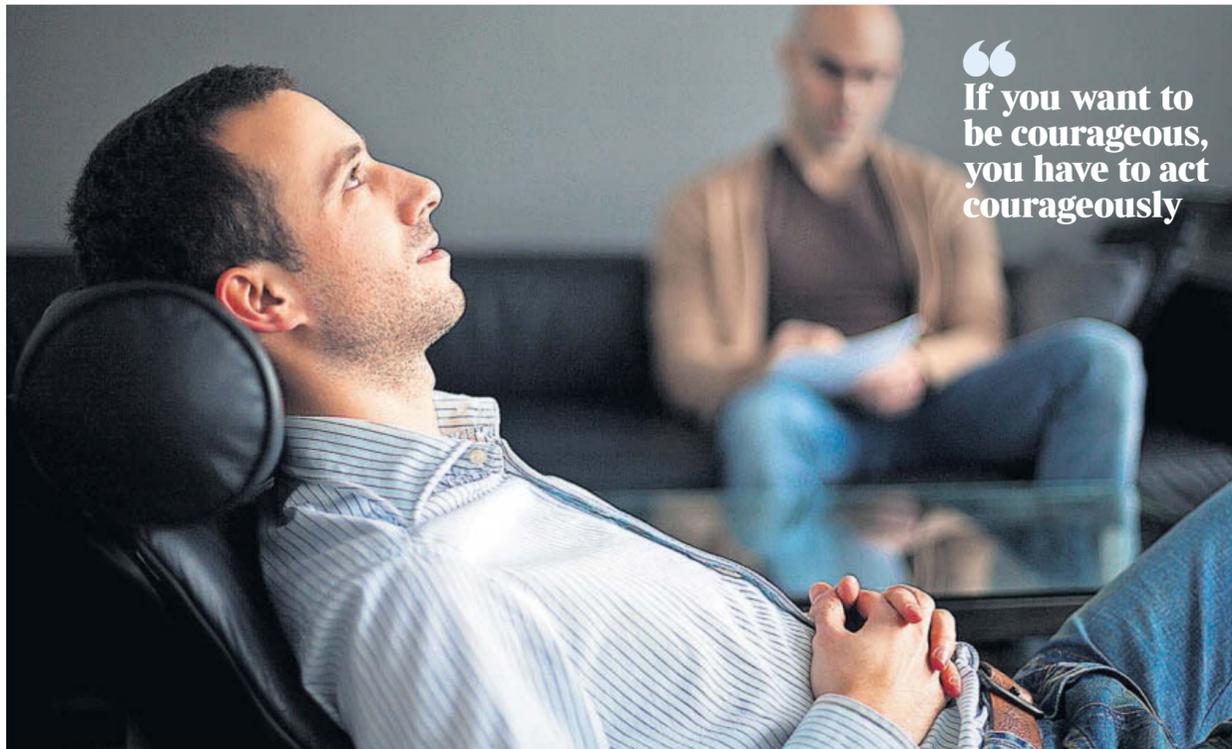
Bishop is a plain, simple Gary — Gary John is his Sunday name, as he calls it. "I threw it in for a bit of formality, but also part of it is if you google 'Gary Bishop' one of the things that comes up is a mass murderer." Glaswegian by birth, he has lived in America for 23 years. "That's why my accent is so messed up. I've got this hybrid accent. I am like the bastard love child of Tammy Wynette and Sean Connery."

It's an accurate description. He speaks to me via Skype from Florida, where he lives, and sometimes it is a struggle to untangle his vowels. "Way" comes out halfway between "why" and "weir".

His book is noteworthy not only for its title and tone, but for the reaction it has received. He self-published it last year as an ebook. He gladly admits that the primary purpose was to add a bit of heft to his coaching business. "My initial idea was if I could sell a couple thousand copies I'd be pretty happy."

It has sold 40,000 self-published copies. The reviews on Amazon verge from enthusiastic to evangelical. Here is one: "DUDE Gary. Wow man, this has me on a whole new level and love how you were straight forward with it :) Thank you Homie, Hope to meet you one day! :)"

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“If you want to be courageous, you have to act courageously”

Unf*ck Yourself: Get Out of Your Head and Into Your Life by Gary John Bishop, left, is published by Yellow Kite on Thursday, £12.99

Bishop explains what happened next. "When I hit 30,000 copies sold I was contacted by HarperCollins in publishing. I then googled the top ten literary agents in the world. I contacted six of them. I got a response back from all of them within an hour." He picked Jenny Bent, who "then put the book up for auction and I had 18 publishers express an interest in purchasing the rights to the book in the United States alone. Everyone wanted a piece of the book." It is being

published in the UK by Yellow Kite, part of Hodder & Stoughton. The publisher hopes to replicate what Random House did in 2011 when it took up EL James's *Fifty Shades of Grey*. It has since sold more than 100 million copies. Did the publishers not want to change the title? "Nobody wanted to mess with it. The title had already proved itself, I guess," he says. "I am still a Glaswegian at heart, and that word is a particular favourite of mine." Bishop, who is 50, left school at 16.

His father was a cooper, making whisky barrels. "Unfortunately he drank most of what was in them." His mother brought up the children. "We were a very ordinary Glasgow family. I was from the side of the tracks where they stole the tracks — the East End of the city, Shettleston." He went to work for the Inland Revenue in Glasgow. "I dealt with people querying whether they were on the right PAYE code. In 1994 I just upped sticks and headed to the US."

He was 27 and had decided to make a go of his sideline, a band. They were called Choke and enjoyed modest success supporting the Black Crows and Creed. "I didn't make money, but it was a brilliant time. I met my wife when I was a musician. She's a proper blond-haired beautiful American woman. It's pretty strange for her being married to a gnarly Glaswegian."

Yet despite the outward happy family life, first in a band, then running his own construction company, he wasn't happy. "I was driven, selfish, self-centred and pretending to be kind and considerate, but really just looking to see what I could get out of it. My marriage was in trouble. My version of demonstrating my love to my wife was showing her the number of hours I worked. There are many men like that. They don't quite know how to express their love."

It all changed when he went on a life-coaching course. "It was mind-blowing to me, like the sky had opened up." So much so that he sold his construction business and became a life coach, first for a big personal development company and then for himself. He is still married to Maria, and they have three boys. He describes his marriage as "awesome". His book is a distillation of all he has

learnt coaching clients, as well as from what he has read. It is a strange mixture of no-nonsense "pull your finger out" advice mixed with bite-sized nuggets of classical philosophy. Heidegger, Socrates, Marcus Aurelius, Seneca, Disraeli, Aristotle, Jung, Napoleon, Theodore Roosevelt and Epictetus appear. There's an awful lot of Epictetus, which is nice, because he deserves a new audience. "I tinker a bit with philosophy. I love philosophy. I guess I rank myself a C-grade philosophy student, but an A-plus for applied philosophy."

One thing that links these men (women don't get much of a look-in) is that many are stoics. Positive thinking is all well and good, but will only take you so far. You need to get off that sofa. "If you want to be courageous, act courageously. If you want to be happy, one must pursue the act of happiness by taking happy actions," Bishop tells me, paraphrasing Epictetus. "Your emotional state then shifts with it. You can habitually build up new actions, which by default habitually builds up new emotional states, and new ways of being."

Don't sit around feeling aggrieved that you aren't paid enough; go and ask your boss for a pay rise. "Do you think Gandhi, or Rosa Parks, or Abraham Lincoln weren't gripped by thoughts of doubt, fear or uncertainty? HELL NO! They were racked by the same kind of shit you are, but they acted ANYWAY," he writes.

It's appealingly direct advice. And in part it explains why the book has struck a chord with a certain breed of American men: Trump supporters. "I can see people on the right are really drawn to the book, because they are full of, 'Yeah, just do it!' But I am more interested in what I can give somebody to empower them, rather than just telling them to do it."

Maybe they like it because the only living person discussed at length is not the Dalai Lama, but Arnold Schwarzenegger, who is cited as the ultimate getting-off-your-arse-and-achieving-your-goal kinda man.

"I'm not a gym guy. I don't really do the gym, I'm more of a pub guy," says Bishop. "But Arnie appeals to me because it struck me — what must it have been like for him aged 15 or 16, living in Austria and having some of the dreams he must have had? It must have seemed impossible to him. But he did it. And I find that fascinating."

The lesson? Be relentless. Because sometimes relentlessness is all you have if you want to transform yourself from a skinny Austrian teenager into a world champion bodybuilder and the governor of California.

Bishop is the first to acknowledge that much of the self-help industry is "bullshit, nonsense pop-psychology", but says he's happy to be part of that industry if he can genuinely help people. "I've had someone contact me who said the book had made such a difference that he'd checked himself into rehab. It was moving; it moved me to tears." He gets a little choked up at the memory. "That's why I did it. I want people to realise they are great." He then rather ruins the moment, by adding: "Your access to realising you are great is first realising you're an asshole."

'Grounding', the new A-list buzzword



“Paltrow's website Goop brought it into the spotlight”

Naomie Harris and below, Gwyneth Paltrow and her Instagram photograph

Now that the word "clean" has been exiled from the health world, celebrities are inventing new ways to prove they can do dirty. Kelly Brook has declared gardening her new "full-time hobby". Liz Hurley has started modelling her swimwear line while holding the unlikely prop of a garden hosepipe.

On Thursday the actress Naomie Harris went a step filthier: posing barefoot on Instagram and declaring herself a devotee of grounding — "whip your shoes and socks off and connect with the earth for a good 20-45 minutes!! Do that whenever you fly and you won't get #jetlag!!" she enthused.

Thanks to one well-pedicured foot-selfie, going barefoot — an act once reserved for wedding dancefloors or catching a verruca — might suddenly have more legs. The theory (term used loosely) is that placing our bare feet and/or hands on the earth

Clint Ober. After spending 30 years working — nope, not in a science lab — in cable television, Ober wondered if a similar benefit to grounding electrical cables (reduced static interference from the environment) would also apply to grounded humans.

In the 18 years since, Ober has got his "science" to a place beyond TV aeriels. The gist is that our immune systems release free radicals to destroy pathogens. The problem is that free radicals are electrically charged (still with us), so they have to steal an electron from a healthy cell — but this damages it, triggering more free radicals (and so on). The earth, however, has infinite free electrons, "so when a person is grounded, those electrons naturally flow between the earth and the body, reducing free radicals", he told Goop.

Given that free radical-generating substances are ever-present — in pollutants, smoke, even booze — will drinking barefoot prevent a hangover? So far, Ober and his fellow earth therapists have linked it to pretty much everything else: arthritis, insomnia, depression, Harris's jet lag.

Are there grounds for these claims? "There are a handful of studies suggesting that grounding has beneficial effects, including reduced pain, better sleep and normalised day-night cortisol rhythm, but these are from a small network of researchers," admits Dr Jenna Macciochi, a doctor of immunology. "There's scant scientific basis for the far-reaching claims that it can cure jet lag, insomnia and depression."

The GP Dr Clare Morrison is also sceptical that it's anything more than clever psychology — and good old fresh air — at play. "If you believe in it, the placebo effect could take hold."

Don't have a garden? Don't like ants? Like... shoes? The Barefoot Sales Corp (earthing.com) sells an earthing kit — with a throw and mat — that you plug in to recreate the grounding effect inside. It costs \$199. But what price on better electrons, right? **Gemma Askham**



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