

Some friendly advice

FORGET *Big Brother*, *Survivor*, Zimbardo's prison and the like, I've just got back from the latest episode of my own 'real-life' series. The annual gathering of Bangor University rugby and football 'Old Boys', including partners, children and pets, is a potent mixture of healing pilgrimage, spiritual rejuvenation and survival weekend that has been going on for 24 years.

As the only psychologist in the group, I feel a professional responsibility to pass on any psychological pearls from this month's rather diverse collection of press cuttings. What advice and reassurance can I offer friends as the years gradually lap us and we replace half-time oranges with oxygen?

Don't worry about the ravages of time Eileen Bradbury at the Alexandra Hospital in Cheadle, an expert on the psychology of plastic surgery, expresses concern at this particular route to 'perma-youth' (*The Independent*, *Welsh Daily Post*). She warns about it becoming an obsession that, although beneficial for some, 'can't make you beautiful or change you fundamentally as a person'. The former is certainly true of some rugby forwards I know.

Don't worry about performance The male menopause may be a myth. Lorraine Boul of Sheffield University claims that 'life really does begin at 40' (*Daily Telegraph*). In her study of 185 men only 16 percent over the age of 46 experienced erectile problems. David Weeks, a clinical neuropsychologist at the Royal Edinburgh Hospital studied 3500 people who looked young for their age. He concluded they had 50 per cent more sex than the national average and suggested endorphins and the human growth hormone may be responsible for the benefits (*Top Santé*, *Health & Beauty*).

For those with an orthopaedic diagnosis of 'the knees have gone', you may be able to improve your game from the comfort of your armchair. Paul Holmes (Manchester Metropolitan University) and Dave Smith (Chester College) found that golfers using visualisation techniques improved their putting performance by 57 per cent (*Kidderminster Express & Star*; see also conference report on p.307, this issue).

BY GED BAILES

Pre-match superstitions may also help to improve performance, according to sports psychologist Peter Clough (University of Hull). He says preparing for a match in the same way each time can be relaxing (*Huddersfield Daily Examiner*), although I wonder what Freud would have made of the rugby player who apparently put a small model of Thomas the Tank Engine down his sock before each game.

Put work in its place For high-powered executive friends, Cary Cooper (Manchester School of Management) suggests improved motivation could result from staff being allowed to work from home more (*Belfast Telegraph*). Cooper also advises managers to regularly praise staff performance (*Liverpool Echo*).



Don't pressurise your children Kathy Sylva from Oxford University suggests that too formal a programme of education too early, can make children over-anxious and reduce self-confidence. The *Shropshire Star* also reports the late Michael Howe warning competitive parents. Provide lots of opportunities, stimulation and support for children, but keep games and play situations informal. So take heed all those parents screaming from the touchline – it's only a game. Penney Hames, child psychologist, gives advice on managing the 'toddler tornado' (*Junior*). One suggested child distraction technique is 'put some pants on your head or sing a nonsense song in a yodelling voice'. So that's what everyone was doing in the pub!

Laugh at life Mike Lewis (University College Northampton) advocates humour as a coping mechanism for survival and something that can bring creativity to bear

on life's problems (*Western Daily Press*). Any dogs present know all about this: Patricia Simonet, an experimental psychologist at the University of Nevada, has been studying canine laughter (defined as a 'forceful breathy exhalation'). She believes that dogs may enjoy a good laugh, but is more cautious as to whether they actually grin with pleasure (...*Barking Echo?*).

Honesty is the best policy Psychology really does get everywhere. James Goudie (University of Northumbria) has been tasked to draw up psychological profiles and identify different categories of TV licence dodgers (*Exeter Express & Echo*, *Burton Trader*). In an article on how to detect liars, Richard Wiseman (University of Hertfordshire) advises that people telling lies will leave out references to themselves in stories and give too detailed an account (*Cosmopolitan*). I can therefore say with total honesty that someone else said have another drink, but can't remember exactly who it was.

Eat early and sleep well A number of stories were triggered by the disastrous news for chocaholics about American research claiming violent nightmares may be a symptom of a sleep disorder aggravated by eating chocolate. Cliff Arnall, a psychologist specialising in stress and sleep, believes that eating spicy and other foods late at night may influence the way we dream and cause nightmares. Kevin Morgan (Loughborough University) is widely reported in the locals agreeing that factors such as alcohol, caffeine, stress and only getting small amounts of sleep can influence the way in which we dream.

But for now the late nights, excessive fluid replenishment, late eating and constant laughter have all caught up with me, so I'm off to soak in a hot bath containing a well-known blend of herbs and minerals. But I'll be there next year, even with these knees!

■ *Ged Bailes is a consultant forensic psychologist at the Norvic Clinic, Norwich, and is a member of the Society's Press Committee. Co-ordinating Editor is Professor Pam Briggs.*