



LEARNING WEEK 2021



A creative approach to support mental health with Rossie Stone from Dekko Comics

Hi there, my name is Rossie Stone and I am the creator and founder of Dekko comics Limited. What that is is basically a company that turns school information like Maths and English and Science and all these different topics you learn at school, into fun daft colourful comic strips to make it more fun to engage with and remember.

It's not just with things like school information but also important topics that we sometimes don't give enough attention to, like mental health. You might look at the front cover and think that has nothing to do with mental health, it just looks like an octopus doing lots of crazy things - but actually - yes, it covers everything from anxiety, health, emotions, change and rest, gratitude - and all these different things.

It does it through being comic stories - focused on being entertaining first, before educational, remember that - just trying to angle this to the camera right. So shameless promotion aside - I'm here to talk to you today about ways in which you can turn any kind of information - no matter if it's difficult, or frustrating, or boring, or complicated - how you can turn any information into a form of fun or entertainment for yourself.

To smash through barriers to learning, to smash through barriers of motivation, in particular, and just get you enjoying yourself twice as much, while also learning all kinds of really important stuff that might have been difficult before.

I mean mental health being an example, you know I don't know what you think of when you think of mental health but certainly me when I was growing up I didn't understand it very much. I would have associated that term with big, long complicated words to do with the brain, big Latin phrases, long articles of text explaining how mental health works in a roundabout way that

I would feel I would struggle to understand.

So that's why it's important for people like me to have a way of absorbing that information that uses more than just words. I'll explain why. When I was at school I struggled a lot. I found Maths, English, Science, History - all the academic subjects at school, from a young age, really difficult. You know, I don't know if you've ever felt that yourself, if you've ever really struggled with a school subject and if struggling with that school subject has really made you frustrated or embarrassed or flustered about the whole thing? Made you maybe have low self-esteem about yourself or made you feel bad about yourself as a result.

I had that for most of the subjects at school, you know I was good at Art I was good at Creative Writing and I was good at Drama - I was good at all the subjects where there was less of a right and wrong answer and you could use your imagination more and it was more loose in that regard and there's certainly more creativity but all those other subjects I really struggled with, and why I struggled with them was because when I was at school they most often came in the format of worksheets, textbooks, copying notes off the board and listening carefully to the teacher.

I struggled with all that because I struggled with words. I found it difficult to read, write and listen well -certainly as well as everyone else in the class, and that's why all these worksheets and text-based ways of learning were really hard and really frustrating for me. I mean, don't get me wrong, I could read right from my first year of primary school, I knew what words meant and I was able to listen to people and so on, but I would so often get to the end of a sentence like for a textbook question for example, and realise I don't know what I've just read.

I understand the words but the information hasn't gone in yet. I have to read that again and sometimes it would be even harder the second or third time than it was the first time. I could spend an hour trying to read two pages of a normal novel and still not really know what was going on by the end of it.

Maybe you've felt that before yourself? But, I had that difficulty not just with words and reading them, but also with listening to them on a more lecture based format, you know when the teacher was explaining something to me or to the whole class - that was very hard for me to follow and to this day still kind of is, and I would be trying to pay attention to the teacher, trying to keep up with what she was saying while also understanding and remembering what she was saying like, it felt like I was trying to use two

different parts of my brain at once and I would just end up fading off into a daydream. Then snapping out of it and trying to catch up with what the teacher was talking about now, while also trying to remember what she was talking about before.

It was even harder so I would fade off into more daydreams and that would be my relationship with schoolwork. Finding it difficult and boring and frustrating and emotionally draining as well, you know it made me think I was stupid! Like there was something wrong with me.

It actually did tie in quite naturally to mental health, you know when I look back at it, because I didn't feel very good about myself and I thought there was something wrong with me. Because the subjects I was good at - Art and Creative Writing and so on, weren't considered "smart" subjects when I was at school. Being good at Maths and English was. So I was going into school every day knowing I was going to do badly, and knowing that I was doing badly at things that determined whether I was smart or not, as far as the system went, and as far as my peers and fellow pupils were concerned.

That was my journey of primary school, but when I got into secondary school I was diagnosed with dyslexia. And that was actually a huge relief off my shoulders because it turned out that this was nothing to do with stupidity, it was just a different way of absorbing information, a different way for my mind to be working. Basically my dyslexia wasn't very severe it wasn't the words floating around in front of me or anything, yet it was enough of an impediment to really impact my schoolwork. My dyslexia was a processing difficulty, you know reading information or hearing it, was one thing - but processing it and understanding it and retaining it through words was another thing. And I didn't mind at all that I had dyslexia you know.

We don't call someone stupid because they struggle with drawing and they find it hard to get good at drawing, why on earth should we do that with reading? If you put all the great academic professors into an Art school and said from now on your intelligence is going to be marked on how well you can draw. I think some of them would have a heart attack! (laughs) Because it's...like I say, reading words and reading are a hugely valuable skill, but it's still a skill. We're not all expected to be good at the same skill as each other.

So anyway, I was grateful that I had dyslexia I had very supportive secondary school as well, and very supportive parents. They all did their best to try and make sure I was getting the support I needed for my secondary school exams, you know I was given extra time in my exams -if you don't know what

exams are yet, you know if you're on the younger side of the school spectrum - they are like mega tests that you've got to revise for. Which means studying notes at home again and again until you learn them. I was given extra time in exams, I was taught the mind map technique and the highlighting technique, and all of that was appreciated. None of it worked. My mind maps became a mind mess! Just spaghetti on a page.

My highlighting technique - I would end up highlighting pretty much most of the page, because the highlighting technique is all about highlighting the keywords, so you don't get bogged down by all the text. But if processing information is my difficulty - how am I supposed to find those keywords in the first place? And, you know the extra time in exams was very much appreciated, and to a degree it helped. But in the end, it was just more extra time to fail because it wasn't just a reading speed issue, it was also an issue with understanding the information and what it was telling me and what the questions were.

This really came to a head because I was starting to get really unhappy with myself at this point secondary school. I was working harder than ever because I was getting unwanted attention from pupils in my school, who were calling me stupid, I was known as a stupid kid. There was a point where kids would not want to sit next to me at lunchtime because I was getting considered like a clown and whatever. I really, really wanted to change this I really wanted to get good grades because I was associated with getting bad grades and thus I was stupid and so on. So when it came to my exam revision I worked into the night, I worked into the weekends, and still it did not make a difference.

Yet I had friends who I knew were not doing that, and yet they almost by default were getting A's and B's and it was so frustrating for me! I actually broke down in tears during my standard grade revision because no matter how hard I was reading this text and rereading it - it wasn't going in, I wasn't understanding it, I couldn't understand why - I didn't know why it was so difficult to read even though I was trying my best and felt I was doing all I could. Just that sheer frustration of it and that it had been going on for so long in my life it really got to me.

So ironically my journey with schoolwork did tie in with my mental health quite significantly. But when I got to my final year of secondary school, my final year of exams anyway. I had one more academic exam to do - and it was mental health, sorry it wasn't mental health sorry, it was Modern Studies, and after this I could just go and focus on Art for the rest of my life.

I remember looking at the sheet of words and just thinking of all the years before, all my difficulty with exams and so on, and I just thought "NO!" I'm not going to put myself through that frustration again, that I've gone through all throughout primary and secondary school. I'm not going to put myself through all that frustration of trying to learn this and read all this information and retain it that way, all that frustration, all that stress, all that disappointment just so I can get another low grade - another D or a C like I kept on getting in all my other exams.

So what I thought to myself next genuinely changed my life! I don't mean that in a cliché way, it turned my view of the world upside down - or would lead on to anyway - and it's where the seed of Dekko comics was planted. What I thought to myself was "if I'm going to fail anyway I might as well enjoy it". Now take that with a pinch of salt when you first hear that, but what that basically meant was, I can't seem to control what grade I get - even when I work hard. I know I have to work hard, I owe that to myself and my parents and if I don't - then I'm definitely gonna fail you know, but I can control how I revise.

I can control how I work and how much fun I have and how good a time I had during revision period, rather than a miserable time. So I had a think about things that I enjoyed since reading was the main issue, I tried to have a think about ways of reading that weren't such a problem, and I knew I had never found it difficult to read when it came to a comic. Comics and story-based computer games with no voice actors and just text - all of that was never a problem to read. It had more than just words to go with it, but also they were fun and enjoyable - you never had to ask me twice to pick up a comic.

I could remember very easily what happened in the comic. I would happily reread comics with ease - it was actually comics that got me into reading in the first place ironically, so I just thought "what's the worst that can happen?" I'll take a page of my modern studies revision notes and I'll turn that into a fun little comic strip and just see what happens - just for the sake of it. So I did that, but I took the aim of making it fun for myself first before anything else, you know I had to enjoy this if I was going to use this as a study note this comic and reread it again and again I wanted it to be enjoyable.

So I did that, and I put effort into the drawings, I put effort into the characters and I put in jokes that made me laugh and I wouldn't mind showing to my friends and family - and two weird things started to happen. First of all they were fun to make, and I suspected as much, but secondly they were even more fun to read. Not just because they were fun stories, but I suddenly had a

visual and a point of narrative to remember all my Modern Studies notes by. It suddenly started clicking together bits of Modern Studies in my head that had never happened for me before in class.

I was starting to understand it more, it felt like it was speaking my language, and I say "feel" because I didn't know if this was working or not, but it certainly felt like it was going in as naturally as I assumed it did for the rest of my class. It was making me enjoy the comic not just for the story, but also because I was enjoying learning about the information and actually understanding it. So I just went nuts! I turned more and more of my Modern Studies revision notes into daft fun comic strips that I liked to read, and it was fun to make them. It was fun to read back on them and I promise you, I found a way to make exam revision genuinely fun and one that I could associate with happiness and good feelings rather than frustration and depression. I was running up the stairs to make and read more of these comics - all the while knowing I was going to fail - because I knew I was going to get that bad grade.

Nobody told me this was an okay way to revise, but I did not care because at least this time I was feeling good about myself. My mental health was in the right place. I was feeling good about myself, I was enjoying it, it felt like it was going in, and it felt like I was using my strengths. It was in a format that I recognised and loved and felt I was good at. So, if I was going to get another bad grade - bring it on! It will be the best fail of my life. I couldn't turn the exam itself into a comic when the day came, I had to sit the exam, but I answered the questions as best I could from the memory of my revision comics and I left feeling confidently good about myself. Just thinking "it is what it is, I'm proud of myself, I worked hard and I tried" but I really enjoyed and had a good time while I was doing it.

Long story short, I got an A in that exam. An A! the best of the four grades you can get beyond a fail, and this was a good A I got. I was shocked when I saw this. This was an A on par, if not better than, a lot of the high flyers in my class who I thought we're always going to be doing better than me regardless. It was the same information they had to learn for their exam and all I had done differently was, I had presented it in a way that made better sense to me.

I didn't just rely on words, I used pictures and story and cartoons - things that I liked and was good at. That is what eventually led on from - you know I left school and studied Art and Animation - but this idea was always at the back of my head. It would eventually lead on to me starting my company Dekko Comics which produces these daft fun but highly effective things. And...that's just it, you know, they teach through their comic format and their

entertainment, and I'm saying right now that you guys can do the same.

I mean like for example; look at the front cover of this Mental Health and Well-being comic. You look at that and it's one of our characters multitasking a bunch of different things. He's called the Doctopus so he's doing lots of you know, mending and fixing and health health representative things. But through that picture it's already actually teaching stuff about mental health and well-being.

For example; anxiety - it's got a head with a big bulging inflatable brain coming out, with anxiety on it, and he's taking out the little pin (I don't know what you call it) but he's taking that out and the air is coming out and deflating it a bit. That alone already shows a preview for the comic. It shows about how anxiety can feel like your brain is just about to burst and your head's going to explode, but relaxing the brain calms it down and makes that feeling become less and less and can help it go away.

Rest...over there. Rest you know, he's pouring water into a head, like filling it up - like a cup. That's showing that rest actually replenishes you - your body needs it, like a source of energy. It drains and you have to fill it up again.

There you've got a head of a person with who's got a brain that's represented by a ball of different coloured threads of wool, and the Doctopus is knitting a scarf out of it and it says emotions on it. From that, you know, it's to show that with emotions when it comes to getting a handle on your emotions, it's not about getting rid of them. It's about organising them and learning how to recognise the patterns of emotions, and making them into something that you can wear with pride. Rather than being afraid of, or worried about your emotional reactions and so on.

So even in the front cover, even with one single picture, you can teach a lot of stuff in a fun way - whereas if I wrote all that down in a sheet of text - people who love reading and are really good at reading would be fine with it. But if you're someone who struggles with that, or that really puts you off, it would be harder to get into.

Even if you could understand it, it might not connect you with it and you might not feel motivated to put it into practice. Whereas, entertainment is designed to be intriguing, so it naturally creates motivation, and that's why we use entertainment as a tool - I'll talk about that more in just a second. Even with the comics themselves; the comics themselves are stories that are really just stories about the characters, but we teach the mental health

lessons through it.

For example; here's a comic about four, five, six (I forget) - a bunch of friends who are having an obstacle course race and they all go to prepare for it because they're gonna have the race the next day and they all prepare for it in very extreme, silly cartoony ways but they actually forget to, you know they neglect their mental health as a result. One of them forgets to get any sleep, one of them obsesses over how they're going to win too much and becomes a bit paranoid over it, and it all affects their performance on actually racing the obstacle course the next day. It ends up being the one who doesn't care that much. She gets plenty of sleep, and you know she doesn't take it too seriously and she ends up winning the obstacle course.

That's a very basic summary, but you know through that there's also a big fun daft adventure as well. And we do that with all the comics, and not just comics but also posters. Here's a poster about "50 coping strategies" to do with mental health. It gives you lots of suggestions like riding a bike, asking for help, listening to music and so on, and it's done through pictures rather than relying on the words it's got a picture of each of our characters doing one of those things, and there's no reason why you can't make a poster of coping strategies that work for you when it comes to mental health.

Rather than using Dekko characters or any random characters, you can maybe use characters from your favourite tv show, or your favourite franchise and they're doing the things that they do, or the things that you know works for you. That can be your own coping strategies poster, you know. So, it's using pictures, it's using comic stories, it's using jokes and daft humour and all the things you would expect in a funny colourful comic. Yet all the information is there - and it is more effective. Because I'm telling you now there's lots of reasons why a comic is a good idea when you're trying to make information interesting and helpful, and there's a lot of reasons why the comic format works.

It splits all the information into boxes, you can only have so much information in a box, if you have too many words it's going to turn good readers off, not just ones who struggle. We use colour coding, and footnotes as well, but by far the secret sauce is that it's entertaining. We use entertainment first and foremost as our tool, because when you are enjoying yourself naturally you are motivated naturally, it breaks down a lot of the fear barriers and a lot of the frustration, and you're much more open to learn.

For example, if you start a computer game and if you're not enjoying it, you're probably going to put that controller down soon. But if you enjoy a computer game it doesn't matter if you're struggling at the first level or not, you will become amazing at that game by the end of it and teach yourself everything about that game, even though it doesn't feel like you have. Because if you enjoy, it keeps you motivated and energised to try and overcome it and overcome the challenge. But a boring or uninteresting game, or a game that's too difficult for you to get into, you probably won't have that same experience, most likely.

That's with anything, if you're not enjoying yourself you usually don't put in your best. It's usually much easier to put in your best when you're having a good time and feeling good about yourself. That's why I want to recommend, just before I finish this talk, that it is not about turning information into a comic. If you're wanting to use this technique yourself and turn information or mental health into a comic story, or just if you want to make it more accessible, and more interesting, and more motivational - it doesn't have to be a comic or a poster or anything like that. They don't work for everyone, not everyone's going to be into that same sort of stuff.

The secret that I'm going to tell you, the technique that I use - and I've been using for Dekko and it's gone super well - is finding something that you are good at and enjoy. Good at; because it's easy for you to do, and enjoy it; because it gives you good feelings. That could be anything from listening to music or cooking or your favourite sport or anything. Find something that you're good at and enjoy, and then be creative with what you do with it. Be creative with how you apply that to helping you with Maths or English, or helping you with practicing mental health exercises.

It could be, for example, if you do want to make a comic, you can make a fun comic story with stick figures and about a particular kind of Maths that you're struggling with. But it can be a funny story of how they learn that Maths, or if you're struggling with spelling, make a fun comic of that with stick figures - but then you can just include words that you find difficult to spell in that story.

Or, if you don't want to do a comic, why not do it with cooking? Each ingredient has to represent a math sum and you have to figure out that math sum before you put it in or so on. With mental health you know, what if you love football. Why not practice, for example, the gratitude exercise where you don't do this in your football time, you're doing a football gratitude exercise. Football first, and you're doing that for your gratitude exercise and

the gratitude exercise is quite hard to motivate yourself to do.

Just go out to the garden, practice penalty shootouts - but before you do - breathe in...all the things you're grateful for to do with kicking this ball. The fact that you have a working leg that can kick a ball - not everyone has that. The fact that you have a ball to play with - not everyone has that - that's a blessing. Just breathe in all the things to do with kicking this ball that you're about to kick, breathe out that gratitude, and you'll find it actually sharpens your mind and actually can help make you kick a more accurate shot. Then you kick the ball and then do it again. That can be really short, it can be a quick gratitude breathe in, breathe out, and then kick. Then you just do three four or five of those - however many you want to do. But that's a way to use it for mental health exercises.

But that is my point, the secret behind Dekko - what worked for me as a case study, and what works for the other people who like our content, and what has worked for me ever since my school days - is finding something you're good at and enjoy and then just be creative about how you apply it to whatever you're wanting to apply it to.

Thank you very much for listening. If you're interested, you can find these comics - both free versions and the full set, if you want to buy them - at <https://dekkocomics.com/> and we've got lots of treats there for you.

But like I say, if you just want to have a browse there's some free stuff for you to check out too. I hope you guys are doing okay during the pandemic, and I wish you all the very best through your journey of smashing down learning motivational barriers for whatever your needs are. Bye!