

# MADE OF STRONGER STUFF



We hear from  
psychologist  
Kimberley Wilson  
about her radio  
programme / podcast  
with Dr Xand van  
Tulleken

## ‘The human body is the intersection between personal and population change’

radio  
**Made of  
Stronger Stuff**  
[www.bbc.co.uk/  
programmes/  
p094py21](http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/p094py21)

### How did you come up with the idea? Was it medically or psychologically driven?

The idea came out of the question ‘Can humans change?’ especially given how much and how suddenly life across the planet has changed over the last year. As a practitioner psychologist I am inherently optimistic about our capacity to change. It’s not easy, of course, but I think it can and does happen. I was interested and a little surprised to hear that Xand, as a medical doctor, was much more pessimistic about whether humans can change. From his perspective he had advised people on the importance of, for example, smoking cessation and seen little change. We thought it would be interesting to explore the nature of change from our personal and professional positions.

The human body is the intersection between personal and population change. In order for groups or systems to transform, there has to be alteration on an individual level. What could we learn about the change that might be happening inside each one of us, and what would that tell us about broader societal change?

**You and Dr Xand seem to get on very well; did you know each other before this or were you brought together to do it? What do you think working together on it brings to the podcast?**

Xand and I met working on a programme for Channel 4 at the start of lockdown (*Coronavirus: How to Isolate Yourself*).

When making TV there can be a lot of waiting around so we had a chance to talk and just got on really well. When the opportunity to work together on the podcast arose it seemed like a fun and fitting project given some of the previous conversations we had had.

### What do you hope people will get out of the series?

Lots! Foremost, I hope listeners develop a deeper knowledge and respect for their brains. It’s an enduring artifact of Cartesian thought that the physical brain is still subject to extensive neglect, even in psychology. We think about the mind and mental life as distinct from the organ that underlies those functions. It’s very strange, outmoded and unhelpful. Many of the episodes touch on the profound impact the brain has on the body such as in takotsubo cardiomyopathy in the Heart episode. We need to think about the brain and its needs much more.

Relatedly, I’d like people to appreciate their bodies more. We tend to objectify the body, valuing it only for how it looks. But from deep sea divers to contortionists your body is incredible and, I think, we’d all be so much better off if we were taught how to love and care for it before media gets the chance to teach us to hate it.

### What’s your favourite body part, psychologically speaking?

It’s the brain but I am also exceedingly fond of the vagus nerve, the main structural component of the gut-brain axis.

### What felt the most cutting edge to discuss?

Using modified HIV to reprogramme immune cells to treat cancer sounds like science-fiction. It's just utterly incredible to think of the many decades of research in disparate fields that come together to make CAR T-Cell therapy a reality. I find it life-affirming. And the potential role of the gut, immune system and the body in general in the aetiology and progression of common mental health disorders (and neurodegeneration) promises to change everything we thought we knew about how the brain works. I just hope as a profession we'll have sufficient humility to be able to hear it.

### What needs to change in this area, e.g. should psychologists know more about the biology of the body?

Of course. Other than a bit of neuroanatomy at undergrad level the brain actually gets very little consideration in applied psychology, let alone the rest of the body. We continue to work under a 400-year-old philosophical proposition that the mind somehow functions independently of the rest of the organism. How could that possibly be? For starters the brain is made of nutrients that can only be attained through the diet – so diet, nutrition, digestion, absorption – and barriers to those processes – have a direct impact on the physical structure of the brain. Nutrients like calcium, iron and vitamin B6 are co-factors for serotonin synthesis. But these biological fundamentals don't feature when we are thinking about mental illness. By leaving the body out of the conversation on mental health and illness we inevitably miss identifying important predisposing and perpetuating factors and, by extension, treatment opportunities.

### Should medics know more about the psychology of the mind? Is this even taught anywhere, or did you feel you were doing something that's not been done before?

Yes, they should. We need to move away from thinking and practice that considers anything that goes awry from the neck up as unrelated to anything from the neck down. We need more cross-pollination in training, research, hospitals, conferences and care teams. We need to ditch Descartes and start treating the whole person. It's why I call it 'Whole Body Mental Health'.

### Any lessons / advice for other psychologists producing podcasts?

I host two different podcasts; my own one Stronger Minds, which is a one-woman project and Made of Stronger Stuff, which as a BBC Sounds/R4 programme has a much higher production value! That said I think a couple of principles do generalise:

- Care about what you talk about. Audiences, in my experience, respond to the host's own interest and enthusiasm.
- Be well-researched – as health professionals using these platforms it is our responsibility to make sure the information we share is up-to-date, accurate and balanced.



## 'Closed doors, closed files, hard, closed hearts'

**M**other and Baby Homes were Catholic-run institutions in Ireland where unwed women were sent to deliver their babies. In 2015 the Irish government established the Commission of Investigation into Mother and Baby Homes between 1922 (the formation of the Irish State) and 1998. In January 2021, the final report detailed that around 57,000 children were born into these institutions, 9000 of whom died.

play  
**Home: Part One, a response to the Commission of Investigation into Mother and Baby Homes (January 2021)**

*produced by the Abbey Theatre, Ireland (March 2021)*

The report has been profoundly criticised by survivors, voluntary organisations, and academics (amongst others) for being much too

narrow in its remit to examine only a small number of institutions involved; for not accurately recognising the duress experienced by the women and children; and for downplaying the forced nature of the adoptions which took place in these institutions without the consent of birth mothers.

Silence, secrecy, and shame has kept many survivors of the Mother and Baby Homes silent for decades. *Home: Part One* produced by the Abbey Theatre in March 2021 creates a platform that invites a virtual audience to listen to the stories of survivors of Ireland's Mother and Baby Homes. As the testimonies evidence, their stories have been suppressed by various institutional powers and their narrators obstructed from telling their stories via 'closed doors, closed files, hard, closed hearts' (Mary Coll, survivor) in order to maintain 'the culture of silence in our society' (Margaret Wouters, survivor).

Described by the Abbey as 'readings', *Home: Part One* is a three-hour production that involves the reading of testimonies from survivors and witnesses by 51 actors and public figures. The excerpts are interspersed with other sources and documents. These readings are complemented by filmed portraits of five survivors, and live music by Mary Coughlan accompanied by Johnny Taylor. The concept for *Home* was developed by Graham McLaren and Neil Murray, Directors of the Abbey, in collaboration with artist and Mother and Baby Home survivor Noelle Brown who curated the event with support from a six-person editorial panel (including

archivist Catriona Crowe and Conall Ó Fátharta who has written about Ireland's Institutions for over a decade) and dramaturg Louise Stephens.

The minimalist production design foregrounds the words and experiences of survivors. Each reader is dressed in black everyday clothes, glancing, when necessary, to a grey page upon which each testimony is printed. The lighting is functional – readers are spotlighted centre stage facing outwards towards the auditorium. The readers exit the stage after each testimony concludes. These staging choices remove any sense of illusion and allow for direct address to the audience, a crucial mode of address when orienting the audience into a different kind of listening that encourages critical, reflective thinking: 'can you imagine how I felt?' (Philomena Lee, survivor).

In response to Philomena Lee's question to the audience, a review of *Home* cannot be addressed by 'How good is it?', but, rather, 'What effect does it have on you?' Watching and listening to the survivors tell their experiences is difficult, but compelling. It is fitting that

the readings were produced by Ireland's national theatre and first streamed on the Abbey stage on St Patrick's Day. Sharing testimonies on the stage of the national theatre demands the attention of the nation as listeners. In this way, *Home* reflects the symbiosis between psychology and theatre where the audience and performers attempt to delve into the 'psychology' of the storyteller. In a series of readings using the verbatim testimony of survivors, *Home* speaks truth to power, confronting existing power relations between the Irish State, Religious Orders, and our most vulnerable citizens, contesting a hidden history.

**Reviewed by Jennifer O'Mahoney** (Lecturer in Psychology) and **Kate McCarthy** (Lecturer in Drama), Waterford Institute of Technology

*Home: Part One* is available to stream for free until 17 July from [www.abbeytheatre.ie/whats-on/home-part-one/](http://www.abbeytheatre.ie/whats-on/home-part-one/) and it is also available in Irish Sign Language signed by Amanda Coogan.

## Changing senses

film  
**Sound of Metal**  
Director:  
Darius Marder

*Our reviewer, Jo Atkinson, is a clinical psychologist who works with people who have experienced life-changing brain conditions, and is also a deaf person who has lost most of her sight.*

This is a must-see film for anyone interested in the human capacity to adapt to unwanted change. It is a painstaking study of a musician learning how to be deaf. We follow Ruben (Riz Ahmed), a heavy metal drummer with addiction issues, as he grieves the near-total loss of his hearing. The film explores his fierce resistance and the drive to keep moving forward, if only we can allow ourselves to stop looking back.

It is a story about the restoration of wholeness, and not feeling broken. We see this in Joe, a deafened Vietnam veteran, who runs a retreat for deaf people with addiction, and found existential peace through embracing American Sign Language. He encourages Ruben to look for stillness among the experts, people who have always been deaf and do not see deafness as something that needs to be fixed. A deft touch is that the deaf people are also struggling with change.

This film explores loss of hearing, but does not ignore the gains of deafness. It offers the restless Ruben a place to be, and powerful validation in Deaf space. It presents deafness

as an identity, a community and a rare sense of togetherness that transcends wider societal division. It intimates the joy that can be found in broader sensory awareness, and highlights a deaf superpower – the enviable ability to switch off noise.

The loss of a sense encourages existential exploration, revealing hidden dimensions and possibilities. The film hints at how Ruben, who, in the opening scene, gives an intensely physical drumming performance, with every sinew an embodiment of sound, might come to embrace the physicality of sign language. A scene where he taps out vibrating rhythms to communicate with a deaf child, as he lies on a playground slide, points to an opportunity for expansion, in both music, and life.

The film has a rare authenticity when it comes to its portrayal of the Deaf Community. Everything in the film rings true, from thumping the table to get visual-attention, to the shrug when a glass is knocked over by exuberant signing. We see Ruben bestowed with the sign name 'Owl', in a nod to his wide-eyed bewilderment. He, and the hearing audience, may not register the rite of passage, yet his potential to belong is clear. This realistic portrayal of deaf people on film, with deaf mannerisms, natural communication, and characters who

are more than totems, is a welcome relief after misrepresentation.

The storytelling forces a binary medical or cultural choice on Ruben. I winced as he was asked to leave the therapeutic community after cochlear implant surgery. Implantation does not prevent cultural membership of the Deaf community, and does not cure deafness, it simply brings more change, and another whole way of being deaf, to adjust to. Nonetheless, the effective plot asks whether Ruben is being rejected or doing the rejecting. With or without medical intervention there is no going back.

It is an ableist film told wholly from the hearing audience's viewpoint, but we do get a genuine glimpse of the deaf perspective. The open-captions describe every sound in detail, adding intensity and inclusion for both hearing and deaf audiences. Amazon Prime robs us of a deeper artistic experience by removing them. I recommend switching on the closed-captions.

The opening lyrics howled, 'Take me there!', but only Ruben can choose the direction of travel. Some doors close and others stand ajar. Which will he push? The film's achievement lies in inviting us to occupy both his ears and his mind; and to ponder how we would respond to such monumental change.

## The ultimate hidden truth?

From the 1990s onwards, Adam Curtis has become known as an English documentary filmmaker with a distinctive style. Dynamic collages of incongruent pieces of archival footage and music are presented, accompanied by his own brand of assertive, level-headed voiceover; narrating how psychology, sociology, philosophy and political theory feature in the history of ideas.

His latest documentary, *Can't Get You Out of My Head: An Emotional History of the Modern World* was released on BBC iPlayer in February 2021 as a six-part series, setting out to address political, cultural and technological links between the west and other parts of the world, such as Russia and China. The documentary series attracted mixed reviews from critics across the political spectrum – some bemused by its incoherence and taste for conspiracy, others gripped by its shocking and ambitious messages regarding political change (or lack of). In any case, there are several themes that arise in this far-reaching series that might be, or perhaps should be, of further interest to psychologists.

Something very relevant to psychology at the heart of the documentary concerns tensions in our cultures, politics and societies between individualism and collectivism. Curtis uses the stories of strikingly diverse individual figures such as Afeni Shakur and her son Tupac, Edward Limonov, Abu Zubaydah and Julia Grant to illustrate how individuals battle to express themselves and achieve social change in the face of uncaring societies and oppressive political systems. In some cases, individuals are both victims and proponents of new forms of psychological thinking, and both individual and

collective forms of psychology can be shown as bound up with forms of scientific and technological power and control.

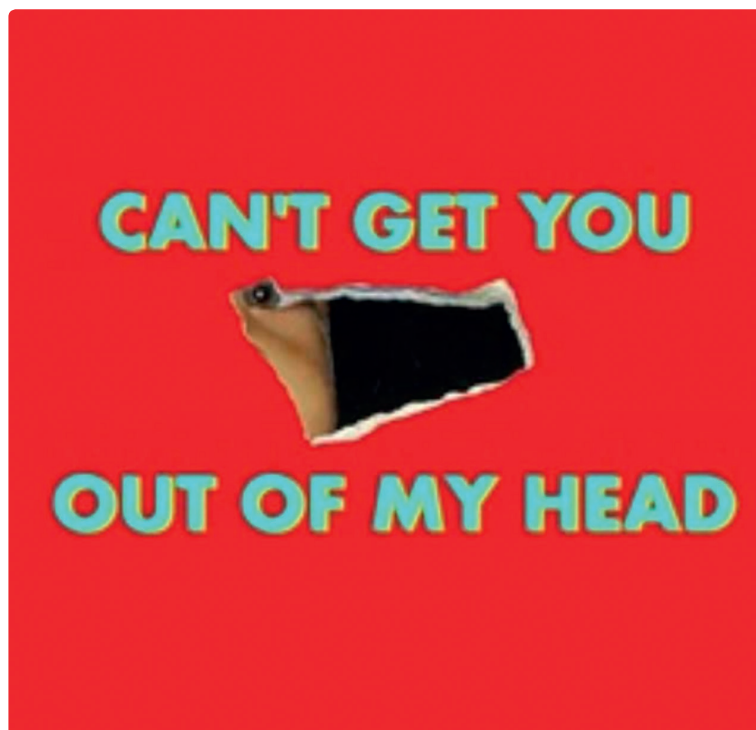
The documentary also shows how the psychological effects of forms of political and corporate organisation and leadership can give rise to a sense of absurdity, where a false sense of stability and control gives a temporary illusion of normality and reality that can be ruptured (a theme also touched upon in a previous Curtis documentary from 2016, *HyperNormalisation*). Figures like Dominic Cummings and BF Skinner believe they have new ways of running, controlling and predicting the world through altered systems of meaning and ideologies, often including and accompanied by psychological paradigms, experiments, worldviews and theories. The ongoing existential and absurdist struggle to make sense of a confusing and complex world where things seem like they could be handled differently and can be shockingly reversed and upended is a profoundly psychological one.

Besides the psychological content of the documentary, its form or medium is also of psychological interest in its own right. Curtis' refined film-making and narrative methods involving pastiche, montage, collage, cut-up, and juxtaposition of diverse archival images and sounds can serve to create a psychological spectacle intended to engage and shock viewers. The transitions between footage of violence, political protest, people dancing and other scenes of everyday life and events around the world can be disorienting, but also prompt us to think about surprising connections and associations in our shared psychological worlds. These types of technique surely have implications for psychological research methods and public engagement.

Watching Curtis' latest documentary is itself a psychological experience; sometimes erratic, incoherent, intellectually reductive and disorienting. Yet at the same time, the loose connections, associations and overarching ideas are provocative and imaginative food for thought for many viewers. The documentary points to shared forms of struggle across different countries, timeframes, stories and experiences. The series also starts and finishes with a captioned quote from the late anthropologist David Graeber – 'The ultimate hidden truth of the world is that it is something we make and could just as easily make differently'. I suggest psychologists would do well to play their part in uncovering, and not further concealing, this hidden truth.

Reviewed by Thomas Calvard, University of Edinburgh

tv  
**Can't Get You  
 Out of My Head**  
 Dir: Adam Curtis



also online...  
**Promising Young  
 Woman  
 Innocence**  
 ...and more