The art of being ill

Olivia Parker, The Telegraph

Winter. For weeks now, they've been everywhere. Infecting buses, contaminating classrooms, polluting offices. Without resorting to hibernation throughout the colder months, it is quite impossible to avoid the Great British Unwell simply because they refuse to stay at home. You only need take a short journey through a public space to feel besieged by germs being sneezed, coughed and snorted unchecked by other people. It's like a great illness carnival.

How many times a day do you find yourself wishing that that snotty colleague/friend/stranger who insists on struggling along on a tide of tissues and self-pity had just stayed in, sparing the rest of us their obvious discomfort and the risk of contagion? Anyone who watched Sports Personality of the Year 2014 will have recoiled as Gary Lineker, dosed to the eyeballs against a clearly ferocious cold, spluttered through his presentation duties. "A day of rehearsals for @BBCSPOTY then live in front of 12,000 here in Glasgow & millions at home, and I currently have no voice #manflu" tweeted Gary rather pitiably before the show.

Why couldn't he have handed over the gig to an able colleague and gone to bed? This is not something many of us are good at, apparently. According to the most recent Labour Force Survey by the Office for National Statistics, British workers took, on average, 4.4 days off for sickness in 2013, a decrease of 1.9 days over a decade. And while the Government might hail this as a success for the country's national interests, does it actually mean we're any healthier? Couldn't it, in fact, mean that we've just become less good at accepting when we're unwell? The author of a new book, 'The Art of Being Ill', thinks so. "By struggling on and on, you'll have a low-grade illness for about 10 days, or you'll have to take time off later because you've become really ill," says Jill Sinclair.

Hospitals even report a rise in the number of flu patients presenting themselves unnecessarily at A&E, where waiting times are currently at their worst for a decade, because they don't know how to treat themselves at home.

Somewhere along the way, we've forgotten both how to accept that we're ill and what to do about it. Modern life just doesn't accommodate days wasted in a sickbed, we think. "A lot of people don't understand that being ill is something to take seriously," says Sinclair. "Everybody just assumes that if they go to the chemist and get some Lemsip or a drug from the doctor, that's an instant fix. We've become very impatient but actually the clue is in the title: the thing about being a patient is that you have to be patient."

She hopes her book, a handbag-sized guide to being a better invalid, will encourage people to slow down, stay at home when they're ill and relearn the skill of recuperation.

It contains practical advice such as "store cupboard Essentials", "the importance of water" and "convalescing in style". The tone is more humorous than prescriptive ("a bit like those African porcupines that empty their bowels at the first hint of danger … one of the first signs of illness might be diarrhoea") and the material is presented in small chunks for invalids with trouble digesting. There's also a disclaimer at the start: "This book is not intended for someone critically ill or in need of urgent medical attention."
Sinclair herself, who left her job as a freelance television producer a couple of years ago to care for her sick father got used to navigating her way around illness after spending large amounts of her childhood in bed with tonsillitis.

Her mother would care for her using home-made remedies such as vinegar in warm water or chicken soup, and made sure she always recovered fully before allowing her to get up.

Sinclair, now 60, has little patience for those who don't understand these basic principles. "I get so irritated with my friends who say, 'Well, I've taken these antibiotics for two days now and I'm still not feeling better'," she says. "You just think, 'Hang on a minute, that's not how it works.'"

So how have we reached the state of affairs where we can justify a book like this, full of information that many (particularly older generations) will see as simple common sense? One reason may be that children now receive so many immunisations, Sinclair thinks. "In the past, being ill was part of your childhood because everybody got measles, mumps, chickenpox, German measles. You had to learn how to deal with it."

In the Fifties and Sixties it wasn't uncommon to attend "measles parties" where children were brought together to catch the disease and get it out of their systems early on. As a consequence, children learnt how to stay in bed and entertain themselves until they were well again. "You just had to be good at being ill because you didn't have a choice," says Sinclair. "There weren't miracle drugs or parents pushing you out of the door to go back to school." Miranda Hart, the comedian, even credits her frequent spells of childhood illness as a creative time that helped develop her imagination.

Now, however, because it is possible to avoid illness throughout childhood, we are unprepared when we grow up and contract flu or a bout of some nasty "itis" or other. We will struggle against staying at home until it cannot be avoided, and then complain loudly about being ill without knowing how to make the experience less painful.

During her research, Sinclair spoke to several nurses and GPs who found this lack of awareness frustrating. "Often [doctors] are called out to things that ought to be self-managed, but people have gone beyond the point where they know how to help themselves and they expect the medical profession to step in."

"If you've got a sore throat, it's unlikely to be something that requires antibiotics. It probably does require not spending your whole day on the phone but, instead, gargling with salt water and drinking honey and lemon, all of these old-fashioned things that my mum used to do for me."

An overinflated sense of self-importance is another cause of the problem, it seems. "Everyone's lives are so stressful and pressured that they simply feel there isn't the time to be sick," says Telegraph health columnist Dr Max Pemberton. "People refuse to believe that a cold or a cough takes time to get over so they go to the doctor expecting a magical cure … and there isn't one."

"There's a sense of 'I'm too special to be allowed to be ill'," continues Sinclair. "I'm always wondering whose jobs are so important that if they took a day off, the world would stop turning."

Of course, there's also the view that succumbing to sickness somehow signifies a frailer moral fibre, something men are particularly guilty of. "It's become the thinking that illness is a sign of weakness," Sinclair says. "We're not 'allowed' to be ill for fear of it being equated with a kind of feebleness."
The truth is that illness is not a sign of weakness, merely a sign that we are unwell. But sickness is now so undesirable that it's become something to fear. "Look at the language we use around illness – 'battling' flu and 'fighting' off a cold, and it's always 'us and them' – when, in fact, the thing about an illness is that you really need to be on its side, and you need to know how to give your body the best possible chance of recovery."

A change of vocabulary, a different attitude and a better awareness of home remedies, rather than always resorting to antibiotics, are clearly needed. "We have to take responsibility for our own health because we know the health service is already creaking," Sinclair adds. But above all, she prescribes the need for more general sympathy.

"We just have to be a bit kinder to people and encourage them to take better care of themselves. Then if people do get genuinely ill, you don't have to threaten them with losing their jobs or terrible things that will happen if they don't turn up to work."

Ideally, they'll then stay at home and spare the rest of us, too. So perhaps if you make just one resolution this year, forget wearing yourself out at the gym and, instead, make life a little easier by embracing the art of being ill.