

to be a man. This doesn't need to be an aggressive conversation. We don't need to fight for our rights or engage in a battle of the sexes. As we continue to move, albeit sluggishly, towards economic equality, we are also approaching the next stage of the Gender Transition Model — where men not only want but have emotional equality. Stoicism be damned.

FINDING HAPPINESS

Down a potholed lane in East Sussex, around the neatly tended vegetable patches, turn left at the chickens, right at the ducks and you'll find a shed. At 11am every Thursday, it will contain 12 old men.

On the face of it, these men have all been put — or have put themselves — out to pasture. They have retired or taken redundancy or just decided to step off the carousel. Some of them chose the precise moment of their departure. For others there was less control. A health scare or a restructuring or one Sisyphean task or bamboozling technological upgrade too many and that was it. The final P45. Game over.

Regardless of the circumstances, all of these men have survived that great challenge — to hang up their work boots and not immediately drop dead. For that is what we all face at the end of decades of toil — a significantly elevated chance of kicking the bucket. Statistically, the two most dangerous years of your life are the year you are born and the year you retire.

Set up last year, the shed is now one of more than 500 men's sheds across Britain — much-needed facilities for men who can't join the Women's Institute and can't face the knit-and-natter mornings at the local community centre.

Each week, the "shedders" meet up and make stuff. Their first project was to build the shed itself. Now they are turning out beautiful bird boxes and wooden bowls for sale in the local market. But, judging by today, this is not the shed's primary purpose. The main activity I witness is chat.

"There's a high rate of depression, loneliness and feelings of isolation among retired men," says Peter Brock, the former electrical engineer who founded the shed. "Unlike their female counterparts, they struggle to engage socially with others and adapt to retirement. Our shed is a community space for men to connect, converse and create. It reduces isolation and, most importantly, it's fun."

In the early months Peter and membership secretary Nic used their local market stall to drum up new recruits.

"You'd be surprised at the number of women who came up to the stall dragging their husbands behind them," says Peter. "They say, 'Will you take him?' and we say, 'Yes, we'll take him.'"

The reluctance is understandable. Studies show that men talk less as we get older. In extreme cases, we withdraw altogether, favouring a hermetic existence to anything approaching a social life. In the squeezed middle years, we do little more than work, parent and sleep. When the kids are old enough, we just work and sleep. So what do we do when we retire? We can't sleep all the time. Meeting up once a week in a shed provides community, it is a rebuilding of life outside work and family.

"When we started, people were a bit shy and backed off," says Peter to murmurs of agreement. "But as we've got together more, we talk a lot more, we take the mickey more, we go out, we go to the pub, we go out for breakfast. It's been a



Do go for a walk in the woods. But don't envy the woodlouse because he doesn't have a mortgage and lives in the moment

Matt Rudd's new weekly column starts in the next issue of The Sunday Times Magazine



complete transformation and it happened on its own, which is fantastic."

I attempt to glean the wisdom of the retired elders. "You need a passion," Nic suggests. "My advice is to pick one that isn't too expensive. It doesn't matter what it is as long as you make time for it. I was talking to a guy about the shed last week and he told me he had cultivated an interest in tools for 30 years. He had even written a book about it. I asked him what tools he was interested in. He said: 'Adjustable spanners.'"

"I've had a passion for woodwork since I was a kid," says Mick. "I had three kids and I don't know where the 1980s went, but that didn't stop me from keeping a workshop. I always had things going on besides work. I went fishing, I played in a band. Those things went away a bit when I had kids, but they come back again in later life."

So, there you have it. The answers to life, the universe and everything are adjustable spanners and woodwork. Or work hard, but not for ever, and get out when the going's good. Or you could negotiate a four-day week. Or work from home. Or — as is plain to see in all these marvellous men in their shed — cherish your friendships.

We all start out as dreamers — children with big plans involving spaceships, magic and monsters — and then, through the collective efforts of school, society and our own inner critic, we grow up and get real. We get caught up in the process. Our room for manoeuvre shrinks. Common sense replaces passion. Planning for the future replaces living every day like our hair is on fire. It doesn't have to be that way.

There is no doubt that our generation is under great strain. Technology has made our lives harder, not easier. Employment is more precarious than it has been since the 1930s. House prices have increased tenfold while salaries have barely kept pace with inflation. Our mental health is deteriorating. We are always connected, but rarely connect. We are in a state of flux — one manly foot in the old patriarchy, the other in modern equality. And now the whole world has been kicked off its axis by the coronavirus.

It is easy to get wrapped up in our own problems. The constant demands of work and home can leave us living an entirely reactive existence, lurching from one challenge to the next. What I've learnt is that breaking free is relatively simple. You don't have to wait until you're 70 and making bird boxes in a shed. It can start with a few minutes in the garden each morning. Or looking up an old friend. Or looking up an origami course. It can start by caring a little less about stuff that doesn't matter.

It has been interesting — as well as terrifying — to watch the world grind to a halt over the past few months. It has taken a crisis of an unprecedented magnitude to force us to pause. Perhaps everything will return to normal when it's all over. Perhaps we'll return to our rushed, fragmented, individual lives.

But it is at least a remote possibility that things will change. Success might no longer be measured entirely by how much stuff you have. A successful man might be a happy man. Or a passionate man. Or just a man who listened to his heart, not his head, for a few minutes each day.

And that would be a good thing ■

Extracted from Man Down: Why Men Are Unhappy and What We Can Do About It, by Matt Rudd, published on September 10 (Little, Brown £14.99)