

Why you need a role model

You can't be it if you don't see it – having people to look up to can help you fulfil your potential and be a better influence yourself



OUR EXPERTS



FIONA MURDEN

is a psychologist, public speaker and author of the books *Defining You* and *Mirror Thinking: How Role Models Make Us Human*.



DR GARY WOOD

is a social psychologist, life coach, broadcaster and author of books including *Unlock Your Confidence* and *The Psychology of Wellbeing*.

Captain Sir Tom Moore was the role model we didn't know we needed in 2020. He aimed to raise £1,000 for the NHS by walking 100 lengths of his garden, but famously ended up raising £33 million and receiving a knighthood. He helped us all feel we have a part to play, and inspired countless others around the UK to raise hundreds of thousands of pounds for charity.

Most people say their biggest role models are their parents or a particularly inspiring teacher at school, but we are all influenced by people we meet or are exposed to throughout our lives.

In psychologist Fiona Murden's new book, *Mirror Thinking: How Role Models Make Us Human*, she links role models to the brain's mirror neuron. The mirror neuron fires even when we're not doing something ourselves, for instance whether we're actually walking in the countryside or simply watching *Countryfile*. It learns by imitation, enabling us to grow and develop through the transfer of knowledge and behaviour. So how can we get the most from our role models and, in turn, model good behaviour to others?

1 REFLECT ON ROLE MODELS FROM YOUR PAST

How have people in your past, especially your parents, influenced you? Studies have shown that mirroring our parents while growing up can influence how empathetic, kind or co-operative we are. 'Some of our characteristics are predisposed, but others will be shaped by our families and others,' says Murden.

DO IT Murden suggests drawing a timeline of your life, plotting major events that have happened to you. 'Think about who and what influenced you,' she says. 'Some will be negative and some will be positive.' Recognising how they have affected you will boost your self-awareness and help you to reject the behaviours you don't want to mirror and choose ones that will make you happier.

2 THINK ABOUT THE ROLE MODELS YOU SEEK NOW

Psychologist Gary Wood says that when we're thinking about who we admire we should 'never take the whole package because we are all flawed. But someone might have one aspect we can learn from, like being really focused.' Your role models should inspire you to do similar things yourself. 'Think about: what does this person stand for? And what do I want to stand for?' says Wood.

'Sometimes if we've got a problem, we can be so connected to it emotionally that we can't think rationally. It can help to think about somebody we admire and wonder, "What would they do?"'

DO IT 'Reading autobiographies is a way of finding out how people did well in their lives,' says Wood. Concentrate on the behaviours, then mirror the good and discard the bad.

3 MIRROR THE CHARACTERISTICS YOU WANT TO HAVE

Be methodical and think about where you want to do better in your life – family relationships? Work? Physical activity? Who in your close circle does that thing well?

DO IT Murden suggests we map our role models against specific areas in our lives by drawing concentric circles, with ourselves in the middle. Coming out from the middle, write the names of personal role models (close family members and friends), situational role models (someone we observe from a distance such as a gym instructor, colleague or doctor), and aspirational role models (famous people and historical figures). Then think about which behaviours we can mirror – eg, thinking about a neighbour's impressive commitment to running might help you power on with an exercise regime.

4 IF YOU MIRRORING A GOOD BEHAVIOUR

A 32-year American study found that with close friends, if one became obese the chance of the other also doing so rises by a staggering 171%. But this doesn't mean you shouldn't be friends with people who exhibit these behaviours. 'I don't like it when people say to audit your friendship group. Your friends are your friends,' says Murden. 'But if there's something less positive about your friend, can you try to influence them?'

DO IT It's important to focus on the decisions we make when we're around others, says Murden, and 'listen to the dissenting voice in your head'.

5 BECOME A GOOD ROLE MODEL YOURSELF

Whether we like it or not, we all model behaviour to others. Awareness of your own role models and focusing on the best ones will help you bring out the best in yourself. Wood talks about moving into a new house and doing up his garden, after which several of his neighbours suddenly improved their gardens too. 'If we do positive stuff, people will notice and it will spark an idea in them,' he says. Barack Obama has credited his grandmother for much of his success, saying, 'She's the one who taught me about hard work.' Almost

two-thirds of grandparents in the UK regularly look after their grandchildren, which is a great opportunity to model positive behaviour.

DO IT Murden says role models need to nurture trust, and be present and committed. Good communication skills are important too – she suggests listening to interviews and thinking about passages in books that resonate with you. Even things like being polite to the person serving us at a shop will model positive behaviour.