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Why I . . . do calligraphy

Medical registrar Sneha Narayanaswami tells **Adrian O'Dowd** how calligraphy is an ideal hobby that almost anyone can pick up and how it helps her to switch off from work worries

Adrian O'Dowd

A simple request from a friend led medical registrar Sneha Narayanaswami to take up a hobby that has not only helped her to cope with working life much better but also to create a small business.

A general medicine trainee, Narayanaswami is currently an internal medicine year 3 in neurology and a medical registrar on-call at the Lister Hospital in Stevenage, part of the East and North Hertfordshire NHS Trust. But she performs much better at work, she says, because of her outside interest—calligraphy.

“My interest in calligraphy started a few years ago because a friend was getting married and she wanted help designing her wedding invitations,” she says.

“Calligraphy was something that I had considered but never really got into before. This gave me the drive to go to the local craft store and purchase the tools. I started learning and what I found very quickly was how immersed in it I became, and also how wonderful the art of calligraphy is.

“I took it from there and started teaching myself. I looked at YouTube tutorials and Instagram to learn the strokes.”

She turned to the hobby again when she started a new job, moving from being a foundation doctor to a senior house officer.

“I would struggle to switch off and sleep,” she says. “I decided to tap back into calligraphy. Every night before I went to bed I would put away my phone and everything else, light some candles, drink some herbal tea, and practise writing some alphabets.”

She finds the art destressing. “It was actively helping me switch off. I found my quality of sleep dramatically improved.”

Alongside her colleagues, she found the covid-19 pandemic brought additional pressure and demands. “When we worked through the pandemic, I had to step up—as we all did—to match clinical demand.

“Once again, I found myself struggling to switch off—not only because of the increased physical workload but also the emotional toll.

“I delved back into calligraphy. As adults we get to a point where we are too fixated on perfection and that’s where calligraphy allows you to switch off.”

Narayanaswami created her own Instagram page and set up a small business called Paint Pots and Quills, which sells beginner calligraphy kits, runs workshops, and offers courses online. She has now received many commissions.

“I started picking up jobs in my free time as a freelancing project—it went from there to brands

contacting me asking if I would be free on certain days to come and do some on-site work or launch events.”

She has since been featured in Harper’s Bazaar and Glamour Magazine and her clients include Oliver Bonas, Jo Malone, Dorothy Perkins, the Cannes Film Festival, and the Royal College of Physicians.

Finding the time for this is achievable, as she explains: “It can be challenging, but I find the time because I enjoy it and because I now know that I need it for my mental health.”

As for her daytime job, she says, “I wouldn’t cut back on my work as a doctor. I don’t think there’s anything I do that gives me greater satisfaction. The reason my day job and the calligraphy work so well is because they’re so different and they complement each other perfectly.”

She has already encouraged work colleagues to take up the hobby, saying, “I’d recommend trying it because it doesn’t require you to be artistic or to have good handwriting. All you need to know is how to put pen to paper.”

How to make the change

- Get the right tools—calligraphy kits are available in shops or online
- Decide what it is you want to write—a quote, song lyric, or practise the alphabet
- Watch tutorials on YouTube to learn about calligraphy or follow enthusiastic calligraphers on Instagram
- Adopt the right mindset—turn off the perfectionist in you. You are doing this to allow your mind some reprieve from work thoughts