



## How to survive burnout if you're a high-flyer like me

Plus: Why I wrote Adolescence



times2

## My invite to the Bezos wedding? It's in a brown box somewhere, surely

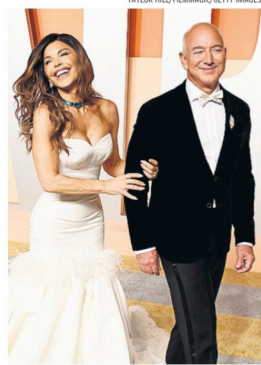
### Kevin Maher



There are few certainties in the lives of the mega-rich and shameless yet it seems likely that, any day now, both Bill Gates and Leonardo DiCaprio will wake up to the sound of a mid-sized Amazon parcel thumping violently against their front doors. They'll peek out just in time to see a stressed-out van man screeching away while they hurriedly open the package, tear through several layers of bubble wrap and a mile of loosely folded brown paper, to discover a gilt-edged invitation for what will doubtlessly be the mother of all weddings.

Yes, Jeff Bezos, 61, founder of Amazon, and world's second richest man (the first is that bloke off Twitter), has finally set the date and place for his wedding to TV journalist Lauren Sánchez, 55. They will be married, according to the New York Post, in Venice in June. The pair celebrated their engagement in August 2023 with a star-studded mega-party on the Amazon king's \$500 million mega-yacht Koru (a Maori symbol representing harmony, strength and peace, naturally) in Positano, Italy. Chief among the mega-guests there were DiCaprio and Gates. I bet they're already fretting about the upcoming nuptials — what to wear, what to bring and, for DiCaprio (whose girlfriend Vittoria Ceretti turns a positively ancient 27 this summer), where to find a younger plus-one?

Little is known, as of yet, about the scope of the wedding or whether it will interfere with Bezos's previously stated intention



Lauren Sánchez and Jeff Bezos

of placing Sánchez into one of his Blue Origin rockets and blasting her into space with several other high-profile women, including singer Katy Perry and CBS News anchor Gayle King, as part of an all-female expression of proudly feminist intergalactic ambitions. Because, well, few things say "feminist" more explicitly than a bunch of media glamazons being strapped inside a bald male billionaire's giant proxy penis and thrusting outwards into the virginal cosmos.

Anyone, however, with experience of Amazon services or who understands the driving DNA of the Bezos brand can probably predict, and possibly with a degree of accuracy, how that glorious Amazon energy might define the Venetian bash.

Everything, for instance, arrives in overstuffed cardboard boxes, preferably dropped by a fleet of drones, just as the first guests appear. Place cards? Champagne flutes? Canapés,

bouquets and boutonnières? All unceremoniously plummeting, from a great height, onto the deck of the Koru. I picture the guests excitedly opening their boxes and then discovering, to their chagrin, that they've been subscribed to pointless deliveries of wedding canapés every three months because that "one-time purchase" option is never highlighted.

Some of the guests are late, of course. But Bezos will inevitably get "driver updates", letting him know that DiCaprio's still in the back of the van, still bubble-wrapped, and with only two stops to go.

And the ceremony itself? Does Bezos get pinged at the altar, in the middle of the vows, with an Amazon message that says, "Customers who chose this item also chose ..." followed by a picture of another sultry brunette? Hmm, tempting. And 95 per cent five-star reviews! And is there a "Frequently Bought Together" alert for Sánchez and a pre-nup? And does her dress have a QR code on the side so Bezos can, when interpersonal times inevitably get tough, bring her to the nearest post office to send her back, but only if that post office is compatible with the Amazon returns process and the staff there don't just stare blankly and send him off, fuming, to a Co-op in Hounslow where a tiny hatch near the hardware shelf does, in fact, accept the QR codes?

Oh, and there's another one! The guests are all brought, by helicopter, to a giant warehouse where they're locked inside and forced to pee in bottles. Nothing to do with Amazon, obviously. Just a really fun party game. Right?

# Stressed out!

## Neeltje van Horen was an adviser to the Bank of England when she suffered debilitating anxiety — and turned to neuroscience. By Julia Llewellyn Smith

When Neeltje van Horen, a professor of financial economics, was appointed a financial research adviser at the Bank of England nine years ago, after years of establishing herself in a highly competitive field working for the World Bank and as a visiting scholar at the International Monetary Fund, her delight was tempered by huge anxiety that she wasn't smart enough for the job.

As time passed, rather than seeing her confidence growing, she became paralysed with a sense that — despite her impressive qualifications — she was stupid. "Feeling overwhelmed and stressed and always doubting yourself became a normal sense of being," says Van Horen, 50. "From the outside people wouldn't have guessed what was going on, but it got so tiring to always hear that voice throughout the day telling you you're not smart enough, you can't do this. It started affecting my personal and professional life, I felt stressed all the time and took it out on people in various ways. There was a grey layer over my life. The brightness wasn't there."

She began considering a sabbatical to focus on her academic research before a friend made a shocking suggestion. "She said, 'Why don't you take a real sabbatical, as in not working?'" Van Horen was horrified. "In my profession that's not what you do. It's a rat race, you never take a break voluntarily because if all your peers continue then you're going to lose."

Yet a seed was sown. Eventually — just after she had also been asked to become a professor at the University of Amsterdam — the Dutch-born Van Horen resolved to take five months to "devote to life's simple pleasures. Taking a sabbatical because I thought I was stupid when I'd just reached the highest level in academia shows how warped my perspective was, but that was genuinely how I felt."

Her break began in February 2020, just weeks before lockdown hit and plans for fun and travel went out of the window. Isolating alone in her London flat, she decided she might as well carry on working. Within days the nagging voice was back. "It whispered my ideas were shallow, my contributions to economics insignificant and I simply wasn't smart enough for this role. I really felt I needed either a solution for this or to find another job in another field where I didn't have to use my brain at its maximum capacity so much, because I couldn't go on like this."

Wondering if there was more she could do to boost her brain, which she

felt — albeit illogically — was letting her down, she discovered an online course, Superbrain, taught by Jim Kwik, a renowned brain and memory coach. Sceptical but curious, Van Horen decided to give it a go.

Within 30 days she could rapidly remember lists, facts and sequences she'd previously found impossible. She began exploring how else to train her brain, which she now realised in economic terms she'd been "operating with surprising inefficiency".

Her Bank of England boss Andy Haldane, then its chief economist, introduced her to Philip Bond, a professor of creativity and innovation at the University of Manchester, who's in the Guinness Book of World Records for having memorised the first 10,000 digits of Pi. "He said, 'You should talk to Philip, he's the smartest man I know.' To me Andy was the smartest man I knew, so I thought, this will be interesting."

Under Bond's guidance, Van Horen embarked on a programme of cognitive training to improve not only her memory but her problem-solving abilities and creativity, composed first of half-hour-long mental workouts, which grew longer and longer, using the app Human Benchmark, testing her memory, pattern recognition and reaction speed. "The process [was] demanding, requiring considerable time and effort, but very quickly I saw

“**I felt stressed all the time and took it out on people**

improvements." Three months on she was scoring in the top 1 per cent of several working memory tests.

She moved on to RaiseYourIQ, which presented ever-more challenging logic puzzles, followed by practising exercises in image streaming trying to recall a couple of scenes from the previous day in vivid and precise detail. Boosting her memory so, for example, she could learn long lists of numbers, hugely helped with general concentration. "I'd do something like 30 minutes of trying to remember one sequence of lights lighting up in a box and that really trained my focus."

She also found she was thinking more quickly. "In the same way you might walk at a certain pace when you could actually walk a bit faster, we can also push ourselves to think faster and that speeds up all these other processes. For my job I need to take in a lot of information, to combine it together and think new things and when your brain works

## Dogs are meant to die early

It's official. The dog wellness industry has lost the plot. It's off the leash. It's rolling in fox poo. It's running rabid through a summer picnic at ... (OK, we get it). A new US biotech firm, called Loyal, is in the final testing stages of a radical once-a-day pill designed to extend a dog's life by "at least a year". Loyal's founder, Celine Halioua,

explained her motivations for developing the pill by saying, "I'm a huge dog person. Dogs don't live long enough."

No. They do. They really do. Dogs are supposed to die early. That's the whole point of dogs! You only get them for a short, sharp, heart-breaking burst, and then they go. You learn the lesson, your kids learn the lesson, we're all mortal, life is finite, the pain you feel now is part of the happiness before, yada yada. Engineering extra years for your dog is a gross disservice to the

animal and only reflects that same embarrassing human impulse that makes you dye your hair, tweak your wrinkles, lie about your age and feed your dog kibble.

Yes, that's the other thing. The pill is designed to mimic the metabolic benefits that come from "caloric restriction". You know what else stimulates the benefits of caloric restriction in your dog? Not feeding them buckets of nutrient-free, high-fat, low-moisture hell-pellets — aka kibble! Or just take them for longer walks.

Be with them. Have fun with them. Don't drag out their lives like a creepy soul-sucking Dementor. When writer, historian and canine enthusiast Sir Walter Scott famously bemoaned "the misery of keeping a dog is his dying so soon" he was contemplating an eternal truth, not seeking a solution. Now, I suppose, he'd have to add, "But thankfully there's this new once-a-day pill that means I can probably stretch an extra year out of the old decrepit hound. So that's great!"



# Brain training saved me

COVER AND BELOW: CHRIS MCANDREW FOR THE TIMES



Neeltje van Horen

faster, you can just do that more quickly. I also noticed I could just pull things out from the back of my mind as required."

Now she has written a book, *Ignite*, outlining the many techniques employed to maximise her brain's potential. I'm still unconvinced — why do we need to strengthen our memories when we have Google to find any fact we need? "But you still have to search for the facts, that takes time and the more you have in your brain, the more you can also very quickly make connections," Van Horen argues.

Hearing this makes me a little weary. I already struggle to motivate myself to keep fit-ish with Joe Wicks online sessions, Pilates and dog walks. But now, it seems, I must devote the remaining downtime reserved for Netflix and doomsscrolling to memorising long lists of random facts in order to stave off dementia.

But Van Horen, smiley and composed, sitting in the north London home she shares with her boyfriend, who runs a post-production house, assures me this is the future. "We'll start thinking about our brains in the same way as our bodies. In the 1970s and 1980s we didn't consciously exercise, unless you were playing football or something like that, but now people know they should do 150 minutes per week. I think people will

start developing their brains more and more. The question is, what is the most effective way to do this?"

Unfortunately my daily ten minutes or so spent doing The New York Times's Wordle and Connections won't cut it. "The apps say these things are very effective but neuroscientists don't, because although you get better at the game it doesn't necessarily transfer to something else." Nor can one dabble: for results you need to brain train consistently and for decent chunks of time.

Rather than evangelising about a certain approach, Van Horen lays out various methods for us to choose from. These include time-management skills, such as the time-honoured quadrant technique, popularised by Stephen Covey in his bestselling book *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People*, where tasks are grouped into four different priority areas, to be dealt with at different times depending on their urgency. She also adopted the Pomodoro technique, where you concentrate on one task for a set period — traditionally 25 minutes, interspersed by short breaks to pay bills/read emails/browse Vinted — allowing you to avoid multitasking, which slows down your brain, and instead enter a desired state of flow.

"I can work for two hours quite easily on just one topic — no email, no phone, noise-cancelling headphones

on — and then take a break and then do another two hours. At the end I'm exhausted but that's fine because then I do other things that don't require full focus."

Just as a seven-stone weakling might feel empowered after six months of gym sessions, Van Horen's brain workouts transformed her self-esteem. "The biggest thing was realising your brain is not a fixed entity, it can adapt. And seeing how highly I scored in the tests made it hard for me to keep telling myself I was stupid. That gives you power. Instead of feeling like I was at the mercy of things, I started to feel more 'I am in control of this, I can do something about it'."

Even though Van Horen found she was working much more effectively, she still felt beleaguered by impostor syndrome and — as a conscientious perfectionist — struggled to manage her work/life balance. So the next phase of her investigations involved a few months as visiting professor at the Donders Institute in Nijmegen, the Netherlands, which specialises in brain and behavioural issues. There she spoke to many neuroscientists to understand how she could alter these fundamental attitudes.

"I understood how through our parents, or maybe through society, we're conditioned to fulfil certain goals — like find a life partner, have children, get a promotion. I don't think we really sit back and think, what am I taking away for me?"

She's not sure where her insecurities come from, but having worked tirelessly since she was a student at the University of Amsterdam, with just a year's break to travel after graduating, she realised she had been on a relentless treadmill, always chasing the next achievement rather than basking in her successes. "There's a never-ending cycle where you're always in a state of wanting," she says.

A turning point came when she undertook an exercise of writing her own eulogy, imagining how she'd like various speakers to remember her. "I've always been so focused on my publications, my conferences — but in my eulogy no one mentioned them. Suddenly you wonder, why am I so focused on those successes? It's very liberating to think, OK, I want to write the best papers I can write, but that's no longer my guiding light. I can enjoy the rest of my life — evenings and weekends."

Today Van Horen is still working at the Bank and only indulges in occasional brain workouts, favouring daily meditation sessions — also proven to strengthen cognitive function. When she began talking about her experiences she was amazed at how many other highly qualified academics felt the same way. "These were very senior people, professors at various universities. I just couldn't believe it. You feel like you're the only one battling these things but you're not."

She's far happier: "I'm much more relaxed, less reactive, much more proactive and open to what other people say and think. I feel less that I have to prove myself. For a long time my brain was my big adversary, now it feels like my ally."

## The hot new £360 shoes are ... socks Hannah Rogers

Sometimes, as a fashion editor, it is my job to explain — perhaps even persuade you to try — some of the more, let's say "challenging" trends going on each season. Occasionally, I come across a much hyped viral item that leaves even me a little perplexed.

Such is the case with what the New York-based brand Brave Pudding (yep) is peddling as its must-have this spring. They're certainly cosy, which is about as complimentary as I can be about them. Can I interest you in some £360 shoes designed to look like grey, navy or camel cashmere socks?

That's shoes to wear out, just to clarify. You'd certainly have to be a brave pudding to wear these slip-on creations beyond the confines of your home, and yet that does appear to be what they are designed for. Indeed, a certain type of woman does. Influencers and yummy mummies are reportedly regularly modelling them on Manhattan's Upper East Side.

The Hampton Strolls shoe is described by its creator as "the epitome of understated cool". OK, but to be clear: it's a recycled cashmere sock with a bit of structure and recycled rubber sole attached. Nice to wear around the kitchen — but surely not at the school gate?

The 45-year-old New Yorker Sarah Fiszal, Brave Pudding's founder, and her many fans would disagree. She is said to have started her brand because she wanted to show her posh designer socks off. She made herself a pair,



posted them on Instagram and soon had hundreds of orders.

These days they are made in Portugal rather than her apartment. They have been worn by the billionaire heiress Aerin Lauder, influencer Leandra Medine, Vogue staffers and even on a New York Fashion Week catwalk.

Is there something subversive in boldly appearing to be barefoot? Probably, but these aren't for the edgy cool crowd per se: like Ugg boots they are most likely to be worn to brunch or with leggings to Pilates.

We all like to be comfortable. I for one love tucking my toes into posh socks. If leaving the house, however, I then put those socked feet into shoes. There is just one exception to this rule in my adult life: when I am feeling lazy and putting out the bins.

**Ignite: Unlock Your Brain's True Potential and Change Your Life by Neeltje van Horen is out now (Bedford Square £20). To order a copy go to [timesbookshop.co.uk](https://timesbookshop.co.uk) or call 020 3176 2935. Free UK standard P&P on orders over £25. Special discount available for Times+ members**