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Rising

Text from the book
Reasons to Stay Alive
written by Matt Haig

90 Close your
eyes, hold
your breath
and every-
thing will turn
real pretty.

Close your **89**
eyes, hold
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how our
with you

When I was most severely depressed I had quite a vast collection of related mental illnesses. We humans love to compartmentalise things. We love to divide our education system into separate subjects, just as we love to divide our shared planet into nations, and our books into separate genres. But the reality is that things are blurred. Just as being good at mathematics often means someone is good at physics, so having depression means it probably comes with other things. Anxieties, maybe some phobias, a pinch of OCD. (Compulsive swallowing was a big thing with me.) I also had agoraphobia and separation anxiety for a while. A measure of progress I had was how far I could walk on my own. If I was outside, and I wasn't with Andrea or one of my parents, I wasn't able to cope. But rather than avoid these situations, I forced myself into them. I think this helped. It is quite gruelling, always facing fear and heading into it, but it seemed to work. On the days when I was feeling very brave, I would say something—ahem—impossibly heroic like 'I am going to go to the shop to get some milk. And Marmite.' And Andrea would look at me, and say 'On your own?' 'Yes. On my own. I'll be fine.' It was 1999. Lots of people didn't have mobile phones. So on your own still meant on your own. And so I would hurriedly put on my coat and grab some money and leave the house as quickly as I could, trying to outpace the panic. And by the time I reached the end of Wellington Road, my parents' street, it would be there, the darkness, whispering at

me, and I would turn the corner onto Sleaford Road. Orange-bricked terraces with net curtains. And I would feel a deep level of insecurity, like I was in a shuttle that was leaving the Earth's orbit. It was not simply a walk to the shop. It was Apollo 13.

'It's okay,' I whispered to myself.

And I would pass a fellow human walking a dog and they would ignore me, or they would frown or—worse—smile, and so I would smile back, and then my head would quickly punish me. **That's the odd thing about depression and anxiety.** It acts like an intense fear of happiness, even as you yourself consciously want that happiness more than anything. So if it catches you smiling, even fake smiling, then, well, that stuff's just not allowed and you know it, so here comes ten tons of counterbalance.

The weirdness. That feeling of being outside alone, it was as unnatural as being a roof without walls. I would see the shop up ahead. The letters 'Landis' still looking small and far away. So much sadness and fear to walk through.

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There is no way I can do this. There is no way I can walk to the shop. On my own. And find milk. And Marmite. *If you go back home you will be weaker still. What are you going to do? Go back and be lost and go mad?* If you go back the chances of living for ever in a padded cell with white walls is higher than it is already. *Do it. Just walk to the shop. It's a shop.* You've been walking to the corner shop on your own since you were ten. *One foot in front of the other, shoulders back.*

Breathe.
Then my heart kicked in.

Ignore it. But listen.

Ignore it.

But listen, but listen, but fucking listen. Just go to the shop, just carry on, just get there. The mind images, straight out of unmade horror films. The pins-and-needles sensation at the back of my head, then all through my brain. The numb hands and arms. The sense of being physically empty, of dissolving, of being a ghost whose existence was sourced by electric anxiety. **And it became hard to breathe.**

The air thinned. It took massive concentration just to keep control of my breathing.

boom

BOOM

BOOM

I got to the shop.

Shops, by the way, were the places I would panic in most, with or without Andrea. Shops caused me intense anxiety. I was never really sure what it was. A kind of death by Unilever. This was only Landis, hardly a hypermarket. And the door was open, the street was right there, and that street joined on to my parents' street, which contained my parents' house, which contained Andrea, who contained everything.

If I was running, I could probably get back there in little over a minute. I tried to focus. *Coco Pops*. It was hard. *Frosties*. Really hard. *Crunchy Nut Cornflakes*. *Sugar Puffs*. The honey monster had never looked like an actual monster before. What was I in here for, other than to prove a point to myself?

This is crazy. This is the craziest thing I have ever done. It's just a shop. It's just a shop you have been in, on your own, five hundred times before. Get a grip. Get a grip. But on what? There is nothing to grip onto.

Life is so infinitely hard. It involves a thousand tasks all at once. And I am a thousand different people, all fleeing away from the centre. The thing I hadn't realised, before I became mentally ill, is the physical aspect of it. I mean, even the stuff that happens inside your head is all sensation. My brain tingled, whirred, fluttered and pumped. Much of this action seemed to happen near the rear of my skull, in my occipital lobe, though there was also some fuzzy, TV-static, white-noise feelings going on in my frontal lobe. If you thought too much, maybe you could feel those thoughts happening. 'An infinity of passion can be contained in one minute,' wrote Flaubert, 'like a crowd in a small space.'

Was it the CCTV cameras?

Was it the lighting?

Was it the geometry of the shop?

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scream

Get the fuck out of this shop. It's too much.

You can't take this anymore.

Your brain is going to explode.

Brains don't explode. Life isn't a David Cronenberg movie. But maybe I could fall the same distance again. Maybe the fall that happened in Ibiza had only landed me halfway. Maybe the actual Underworld was much further down in the basement and I was heading there, and I'd end up like a shellshocked soldier from a poem, dribbling and howling and lost, unable even to kill myself. And maybe being in this shop was going to send me there. There was a woman behind the counter. I can still picture her.

She was about my age. Maybe she had gone to my school, but I didn't recognise her. She had that kind of dyed red hair that was a bit half-hearted. She was large and pale skinned and was reading a celebrity magazine. She looked calmer than calm. I wanted to jump ship. I wanted to be her. I wanted to be her so much. Does that sound silly? Of course it does. This whole thing sounds silly. *Indiana Jones and the Temple of Marmite*. I found the Marmite. I grabbed it as an old rap from Eric B. & Rakim played at high speed in my head. 'I'm also a sculpture, born with structure...' I was a sculpture with no structure. A structureless sculpture who still had to get the milk.

Rows of milk bottles in a fridge can be as terrifying and unnatural as anything, with the right (wrong) perspective. My parents got semi-skimmed, but the only semi-skimmed here was in pints, not the two-pint ones that they normally got, so I picked up two of the one-pinters, hooking my index finger through the handles and taking them to the counter. The woman I wanted to be was not particularly fast at her job. I think she was the slowest person there had ever been at her job. I think she may well have been the incentive for the later move towards self-service checkouts in many shops. Even as I wanted to be her, I hated her slowness.

Hurry up, I didn't say. Do you have any idea of what you are doing? I wanted to go back and start my life again at her pace, and then I would not be feeling like this. I needed a slower run-up.

'Do you need a bag?' I sort of did need a bag, but I couldn't risk slowing her down any more. When every bit of you is panicking, then walking is better than standing.

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Something flooded my brain. I closed my eyes. I saw dwarf demons having fun, laughing at me as if my madness was an act at a carnival.

'No. It's okay. I only live around the corner.'
Around the bend.

I paid with a five-pound note. 'Keep the change.'
And she started to realise I was a bit weird and I left the shop and I was out, back into the vast and open world, and I kept walking as fast as I could walk (to break into a run would be a kind of defeat), feeling like a fish on the deck of a boat, needing the water again. I turned the corner and I prayed more than anything not to see someone I knew on Wellington Road. No one. Just emptiness and suburban, semi-detached, late Victorian houses, lined up and staring at each other. And I got back to number 33, my parents' house, and I rang the bell and Andrea answered and I was inside and there was no relief, because my mind was quick to point out that being relieved about surviving a trip to the corner shop was another confirmation of sickness, not wellness.

But maybe, mind, there would come a day when you could be as slow as the girl in the shop at pointing out such things.

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'You're getting there,' said Andrea.

'Yeah,' I said, and tried so hard to believe it.

'We're going to get you better.'

It's not easy, being there for a depressive.

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ADAMS

Not just once, either. Repeatedly. Over and over. We had been together five years by the time I fell ill. What had Andrea gained in that time, since the night before her nineteenth birthday? A continued sense of financial insecurity? An inadequate, alcohol-impaired sex life? At university our friends always considered us to be a happy couple. And we were, except for the other half of the time when we were an unhappy couple. The interesting thing was that we were fundamentally different people. Andrea liked lie-ins and early nights, while I was a bad sleeper and a night owl. She had a strong work ethic, and I didn't (not then, though depression strangely has given me one). She liked organisation and I was the most disorganised person she had met. Mixing us together was, in some ways, like mixing chlorine with ammonia. It simply was not a good idea.

But I made her laugh, she said. I was 'fun.' We liked to talk. Both of us, I suppose, were quite shy and private people in our own way. Andrea, particularly, was a social chameleon. This was a kind of kindness. She never could cope if someone felt awkward, and so always bent to meet them as much as she could. I think—if I offered her anything—it was the chance to be herself. If, as Schopenhauer said, 'we forfeit more than three fourths of ourselves in order to be like other people', then love—at its best—is a way to reclaim those lost parts of ourselves. That freedom we lost somewhere quite early in childhood. Maybe love is just about

We are essentially alone. There is no getting around this fact, even if we try and forget it a lot of the time. When we are ill, there is no escape from this truth. Pain, of any kind, is a very isolating experience. My back is playing up right now. I am writing this with my legs up against a wall, and my back lying flat on a sofa. If I sit up normally, hunched over a notepad or a laptop in the classic writer position, my lower back begins to hurt. It doesn't really help me to know, when the pain flares up again, that millions of other people also suffer from back problems. So why do we bother with love? No matter how much we love someone we are never going to make them, or ourselves, free of pain. Well, let me tell you something. Something that sounds bland and drippy to the untrained eye, but which—I assure you—is something I believe entirely.

Love saved me. Andrea. She saved me. Her love for me and my love for her.

finding the person you can be your weird self with. I helped her be her, and she helped me be me. We did this through talking. In our first year together we would very often stay up all night talking. The night would start with us going to the wine shop at the bottom of Sharp Street in Hull (the street my student house was on) and buying a bottle of wine we couldn't afford, and would very often end with us watching breakfast TV on my old Hitachi, which required constant manoeuvring of the aerial to see the picture. Then a year later we had fun playing grown-ups, buying *The River Cafe Cookbook* and holding dinner parties at which we would serve up panzanella salads and expensive wines in our damp-infested student flat. Please do not think this was a perfect relationship. It wasn't. It still isn't. The time we spent living in Ibiza, particularly, now seems to be one long argument. Just listen to this:

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'Matt, wake up.'

'What?'

'Wake up. It's half-nine.'

'So?'

'I've got to be at the office at ten. It's a forty-five-minute drive.'

'So, no one will know. It's Ibiza.'

'You're being selfish.'

'I'm being tired.'

'You're hungover. You were drinking vodka lemon all night.'

'Sorry for having a good time. You should try it.'

'Fuck off. I'm getting in the car.'

'What? You can't leave me in the villa all day. I'll be stranded in the middle of nowhere. There's no food. Just wait ten minutes!'

'I'm going. I'm just so fed up with you.'

'Why?'

'You're the one who wants to be here. My job is what keeps us here. It's why we're in this villa.'

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But the arguments were surface stuff. If you go deep enough under a tidal wave the water is still. That is what we were like. In a way we argued because we knew it would have no fundamental impact. When you can be yourself around someone, you project your dissatisfied self outwards. And in Ibiza, I was that. I was not happy. And part of my personality was this: when I was unhappy, I tried to drown myself in pleasure.

'Okay, I'm getting ready... fuck.'

'You selfish cunt.'

'Oh fuck off, you're not really going, are you?'

'Bye, Matt.'

'You work six days a week. Twelve hours a day. They're exploiting you. They're still out clubbing. And no one's in the office till after twelve. They value you because you are a mantic. You bend over backwards for them and treat me like crap.'

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I was—to use the most therapy of terms—in denial. I was denying my unhappiness, even as I was being a tetchy, hungover boyfriend. There was never a single moment, though, where I would have said—or felt—that I did not love her. I loved her totally. Friendship-love and love-love. Philia and eros. I always had done. Though, of the two, that deep and total friendship-love turns out to be the most important.

When the depression hit, Andrea was there for me. She'd be kind to me and cross with me in all the right ways. She was someone I could talk to, someone I could say anything to. Being with her was basically being with an outer version of myself. The force and fury she'd once only displayed in arguments she now used to steer me better. She accompanied me on trips to doctors. She encouraged me to ring the right helplines. She got us to move into our own place. She encouraged me to read, to write. She earned us money. She gave us time. She handled all the organisational side of my life, the stuff you need to do to tick over. She filled in the blanks that worry and darkness had left in its wake. She was my mind-double. My life-sitter. *My literal other half when half of me had gone. She covered for me, waiting patiently like a war wife, during my absence from myself.*

There was **-69**
never a
single mo-
ment where
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not **love** her.

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An inconsequential moment

It came. The moment I was waiting for. Some time in April 2000. It was totally inconsequential. In fact, there is not much to write about. That was the whole point. It was a moment of nothingness, of absent-mindedness, of spending almost ten seconds awake but not actively thinking of my depression or anxiety. I was thinking about work. About trying to get an article published in a newspaper. It wasn't a happy thought, but a neutral one. But it was a break in the clouds, a sign that the sun was still there, somewhere. It was over not much after it began, but when those clouds came back there was hope. There would be a time when those painless seconds would become minutes and hours and maybe even days.

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A Conversation Across Time pt.II

I can't do this.

Why would I stay alive? Wouldn't it be better to feel nothing than to feel such pain? Isn't zero worth more than minus one thousand?

Listen, just listen, just get this through your head, okay—you make it, and on the other side of this there is life. L-I-F-E. You understand? And there will be stuff you enjoy. And just stop worrying about worrying. Just worry, but don't meta-worry.

You think you can't, but you can. You do. You will.

You won't.

You look old. You have crow's feet. Are you starting to lose your hair?

This pain, though. You must have forgotten what it was like. I went on an escalator today, in a shop, and I felt myself disintegrating. It was like the whole universe was pulling me apart. Right there, in John Lewis.

You don't.

I probably have forgotten, a little bit. But listen, look, I'm here. I am here now. And I made it. We made it. You just have to hold on.

You didn't.

I so want to believe that you exist. That I don't kill you off.

Yes. But remember, we've always worried about this stuff. Can you remember that holiday to the Dordogne when we were ten? We leaned forward into the mirror and started to worry about the lines in our forehead. We were worrying about the visible effects of ageing back then. Because we have always been scared of dying.

Yes.

Are you still scared of dying?

I need a rea-
 son to stay
 alive. I need
 something
 strong that
 will keep me
 here.

Okay, okay.
 Give me a minute...

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You are on fire.

Now take a break
Breathe in. Breathe out.

Important lists.

*Stolen, curated, and
compiled advice.*

Things
you
think
during
your
first.
panic
attack

1. I am going to die.
2. *I am going to go so mad there will be no coming back.*
3. This won't end.
4. Everything is going to get worse.
5. No one's heart is meant to beat this fast.
6. *I am thinking far too fast.*
7. *I am trapped.*
8. No one has felt this way before. Ever. In the whole of human history.
9. Why are my arms numb?
10. *I will never get over this.*

Things
you
don't
think
are
going
to
happen
will
happen
to
you

1. Here it comes.
2. I've been here before.
3. But wow, it's still quite bad.
4. I might die.
5. I'm not going to die.
6. I am trapped.
7. This is the worst ever.
8. No, it's not. Remember Spain.
9. Why are my arms numb?
10. I will never get over this.

Reasons to stay alive

5 The feeling that it's going to get worse, *is just a symptom.*

6 *Minds have their own weather systems.*
You're in a hurricane. Hurricanes run out of energy. Hold on.

7 *Ignore stigma. Every illness had stigma once. We fear getting ill, and fear tends to lead to prejudice before information.*
Polio used to be erroneously blamed on poor people, for instance. Depression is often seen as a 'weakness' or personality failing.

8 Nothing lasts for ever. This pain won't last.
The pain tells you it will last. Pain lies. Ignore it. Pain is a debt paid off with time.

9 Minds move. Personalities shift. To quote myself, from my book *The Humans*: 'Your mind is a galaxy. More dark than light. But the light makes it worthwhile. *Which is to say, don't kill yourself. Even when the darkness is total. Always know that life is not still. Time is space. You are moving through that galaxy.* Wait for the stars.'

1 *No one gets what you are going through.*
But actually, they do. You do not think they do because the only reference point is yourself. You have never felt this way before, and the shock of the descent is traumatising you, but others have been here.

2 Things aren't going to get worse. You want to kill yourself. *That is as low as it gets.*

3 You hate yourself. That is because you are sensitive. Pretty much *every human could find a reason to hate themselves if they thought about it as much as you did.*
We are all total bastards, but also totally wonderful beings trying to survive.

4 So what, you have a label? 'Depressive'.
Everyone would have a label if they asked the right professional.

10 You will one day experience joy that matches this pain. You will cry euphoric tears at the Beach Boys, you will stare down at a baby's face as she lies asleep in your lap, you will make great friends, you will eat delicious foods you haven't tried yet, you will be able to look at a view from a high place and not assess the likelihood of dying from falling. You will dance and laugh and have sex and go for runs by the river and have late-night conversations and laugh until it hurts. Life is waiting for you. *You might be stuck here for a while, but the world isn't going anywhere. Hang on in there if you can. Life is always worth it.*

How to be there for someone with depression or anxiety

Meet them where they are. Ask what you can do. ***The main thing you can do is just be there.***

Never say ‘pull yourself together’ or ‘cheer up’ unless you’re also going to provide detailed, foolproof instructions. (Tough love doesn’t work. ***Turns out that just good old ‘love’ is enough.***)

Educate yourself. Understand, above all, that ***what might seem easy to you might be an impossible challenge for a depressive.***

Know that ***you are needed, and appreciated,*** even if it seems like you are not.

Appreciate that it is an illness. ***Things will be said that aren’t meant.***

Don’t take anything personally, any more than you would take someone suffering with the flu or chronic fatigue syndrome or arthritis personally. ***None of this is your fault.***

Listen.

Relieve any work/life pressure if that is doable.

Where possible, don’t make the depressive feel weirder than they already feel. Three days on the sofa? Haven’t opened the curtains? Crying over difficult decisions like which pair of socks to wear? So what. No biggie. There is no standard normal. Normal is subjective. ***There are seven billion versions of normal on this planet.***

Be patient. Understand it isn’t going to be easy. Depression ebbs and flows and moves up and down. It doesn’t stay still. Do not take one happy/bad moment as proof of recovery/relapse. Play the long game.

Things that have happened to
me that have generated more

is
more
than depression.

HAVING TINNITUS.
LOSING A JOB.
BEING IN DEBT.
BREAKING A TOE.
ACCIDENTALLY SETTING MY LEG ON FIRE.
ECZEMA.
THREE-DAY MIGRAINES.
BEING A STREET AWAY FROM A TERRORIST ATTACK.
HAVING TO BE CIRCUMCISED WHEN I WAS ELEVEN.
HAVING A BLACKBOARD FALL ON ME.
RELATIONSHIP BREAK-UPS.
WORKING IN MEDIA SALES.
IRRITABLE BOWEL SYNDROME.
LIVING IN HULL IN JANUARY.
LOWER BACK PAIN.
BAD AMAZON REVIEWS.
CONSUMING A POISONED PRAWN.

An internal war.

A prison.

A devil inside.

A black dog (thanks, Winston Churchill).

A by-product of mortality.

Depression is

Dark and hopeless and lonely.

A living nightmare.

A pressure cooker.

A bell jar ('I would be sitting under the same glass bell jar,' wrote Plath, 'stewing in my own sour air').

An echo chamber.

A life-long fight.

A malicious code in the operating system of your mind.

An absence.

An invisible fire.

A black hole.

A fucking pain.

A collision between an ancient mind and a modern world.

Depression is also...

Smaller than you.

Always, it is smaller than you, even when it feels vast.
It operates within you, you do not operate within it.
It may be a dark cloud passing across the sky, but—
if that is the metaphor—you are the sky. You were
there before it. *And the cloud can't exist without
the sky, but the sky can exist without the cloud.*

End of im-
portant lists.
(but it's nev-
er really the
end).

*Stolen, curated, and
compiled advice.*

Let's get back into it.
*Keep breathing in,
keep breathing out.*

White

We spent three long months at my parents' house, then spent the rest of that winter in a cheap flat in a student area of Leeds while Andrea did freelance PR work and I tried not to go mad. But from, I suppose, April 2000, that good stuff started to become available. The bad stuff was still there. At the start, the bad stuff was there most of the time. The good stuff probably amounted to about 0.0001 per cent of that April. The good stuff was just warm sunshine on my face as Andrea and I walked from our flat in the suburbs to the city centre. It lasted as long as the sunshine was there and then it disappeared. But from that point on I knew it could be accessed. I knew life was available to me again. And so in May 0.0001 per cent became about 0.1 per cent.

Serious

Then, at the start of June, we moved to a flat in the city centre. *The thing I liked about it was the light.* I liked that the walls were white and that the unnatural laminated floor mimicked the blondest wood and that the square modern windows made up most of the walls and that the lowgrade sofa the landlord had put in was turquoise. Of course, it was still England. It was still Yorkshire. Light was severely rationed. But this was as good as it got on our budget, or just above our budget, and it was certainly better than the student flat with its burgundy carpets and its brown kitchen. Turquoise sofa beat turquoise mould. But so, increasingly, were books. I read and read and read with an intensity I'd never really known before. I mean, I'd always considered myself to be a person who liked books. But there is a difference between liking books and needing them. I needed books. They weren't a luxury good during that time in my life. They were a Class A addictive substance. I'd have gladly got into serious debt to read (indeed, I did). I think I read more books in those six months than I had done during five years of university education, and I'd certainly fallen deeper into the worlds conjured on the page. There is this idea that you either read to escape or you read to find yourself. I don't really see the difference. We find ourselves through the process of escaping. It is not where we are, but where we want to go, and all that. 'Is there no way out of the mind?' Sylvia Path famously asked.

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Light was everything. Sunshine, windows with the blinds open. Pages with short chapters and lots of white space and

Short.

Paragraphs.

Light was everything.

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I had been interested in this question (what it meant, what the answers might be) ever since I had come across it as a teenager in a book of quotations. If there is a way out, a way that isn't death itself, then the exit route is through words. But rather than leave the mind entirely, words help us leave a mind, and give us the building blocks to build another one, similar but better, nearby to the old one but with firmer foundations, and very often a better view.

'The object of art is to give life a shape,' said Shakespeare. And my life—and my mess of a mind—needed shape. I had 'lost the plot'. There was no linear narrative of me. There was just mess and chaos. So yes, I loved external narratives for the hope they offered. Films. TV dramas. And most of all, books. They were, in and of themselves, reasons to stay alive. Every book written is the product of a human mind in a particular state. Add all the books together and you get the end sum of humanity. Every time I read a great book I felt I was reading a kind of map, a treasure map, and the treasure I was being directed to was in actual fact myself. But each map was incomplete, and I would only locate the treasure if I read all the books, and so the process of finding my best self was an endless quest. And books themselves seemed to me to reflect this idea. Which is why the plot of every book ever can be boiled down to 'someone is looking for something'.

One cliché attached to bookish people is that they are lonely, but for me books were my way out of being lonely. If you are the type of person who thinks too much about stuff then there is nothing lonelier in the world than being surrounded by a load of people on a different wavelength. In my deepest state of depression, I had felt stuck. I felt trapped in quicksand (as a kid that had been my most common nightmare). Books were about movement. They were about quests and journeys. Beginnings and middles and ends, even if not in that order. They were about new chapters. And leaving old ones behind. And because it was only a few months before that I had lost the point of words, and stories, and even language, I was determined never to feel like that again. I fed and I fed and I fed. I used to sit with the bedside lamp on, reading for about two hours after Andrea had gone to sleep, until my eyes were dry and sore, always seeking and never quite finding, but with that feeling of being tantalisingly close.

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One of the books I remember (re-)reading was *The Power and the Glory* by Graham Greene. Graham Greene was an interesting choice. I had studied the writer while doing an MA at Leeds University. I don't know why I took that module. I didn't really know anything about Graham Greene. I knew about Brighton Rock but I'd never read it. I'd also heard once that he'd lived in Nottinghamshire and hated it. I had lived in Nottinghamshire and—at that time—had often hated it too. Maybe that was the reason. For the first few weeks I'd thought it was a major mistake. I was the only person who'd taken the module. And the tutor hated me. I don't know if 'hate' is the word, but he certainly didn't like me. He was a Catholic, always dressed formally, and spoke to me with delicate disdain. Those hours were long, and had all the relaxed and casual joy of a trip to the doctor's for a testicular inspection. Often I must have stank of beer, as I would always drink a can or two on the train journey to Leeds (from Hull, where Andrea and I were still living). At the end of the module I wrote the best essay I had ever written, and was given a 69 per cent. One shy of a distinction. I took it as a personal insult. Anyway, I loved Graham Greene. His works were filled with a discomfort I related to. There were all kinds of discomforts on offer. Discomforts of guilt, sex, Catholicism, unrequited love, forbidden lust, tropical heat, politics, war. Everything was uncomfortable, except the prose. I loved the way he wrote. I loved the way he'd compare a solid thing

to something abstract. 'He drank the brandy down like damnation.' I loved this technique even more now, because the divide between the material and nonmaterial worlds seemed to have blurred. With depression. Even my own physical body seemed unreal and abstract and partly fictional. *The Power and the Glory* is about a 'whisky priest' travelling through Mexico in the 1930s, at a time when Catholicism is outlawed. Throughout the novel he is pursued by a police lieutenant tasked with tracking him down. I had liked this story when I first read it at university, but I loved it now.

Having been a borderline alcoholic in Ibiza, empathising with a borderline alcoholic in Mexico wasn't too hard. It is a dark, intense book. But when you are feeling dark and intense these are the only kind of books that can speak to you. Yet there was an optimism too. The possibility of redemption. It is a book about the healing power of love.

In my deepest state of depression, I had felt stuck. I felt trapped in quicksand.

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'Hate is a lack of imagination,' we are told. But also: 'There is always one moment in childhood when the door opens and lets the future in.' Experience surrounds innocence and innocence can never be regained once lost. The book is about—like many of his books—Catholic guilt. But for me it was about depression. Greene was a depressive. Had been since a child, being bullied at the school where his unpopular father was headmaster. He'd semi-attempted suicide with a solitary game of Russian roulette. The guilt was—for me—not the spiritual guilt of Catholicism but the psychological guilt that depression brings. And it helped relieve the isolation that the illness brings.

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Running is a commonly cited alleviator of depression and anxiety. It certainly worked for me. When I started running I was still getting very bad panic attacks. The thing I liked about it was that many of the physical symptoms of panic—the racing heart, the problematic breathing, the sweating—are matched by running. So while I was running I wouldn't be worried about my racing heart because it had a reason to be racing. Also, it gave me something to think about. I was never exactly the fittest person in the world, so running was quite difficult. It hurt. But that effort and discomfort was a great focuser. And so I convinced myself that through training my body I was also training my mind. It was a kind of active meditation. It also, of course, gets you fit. And getting fit is pretty much good for everything. When I became ill I had been drinking and smoking heavily, but now I was trying to undo that damage. So every day I would go running, or do an equivalent type of cardiovascular exercise. Like Haruki Murakami—whose excellent book *What I Talk About When I Talk About Running* I would later read—I found running to be a way of clearing the fog. ('Exerting yourself to the fullest within your individual limits: that's the essence of running,' Murakami also said, which is something I've come to believe too, and is one of the reasons I believe it helps the mind.) I would come back from a run and stretch and have a shower and feel a gentle sense of release, as though depression and anxiety were slowly evaporating from inside me.

It was a wonderful feeling. Also, that kind of monotony that running generates—the one soundtracked by heavy breathing and the steady rhythm of feet on pavements—became a kind of metaphor for depression. To go on a run every day is to have a kind of battle with yourself. Just getting out on a cold February morning gives you a sense of achievement. But that voiceless debate you have with yourself—I want to stop! No, keep going! I can't, I can hardly breathe! There's only a mile to go! I just need to lie down! You can't!—is the debate of depression, but on a smaller and less serious scale. So for me, each time I forced myself out there in the cold grey damp of a West Yorkshire morning, and pushed myself to run for an hour, it gave me a little bit of depression-beating power. A little bit of that 'you'd better be careful with who you are messing with' spirit. It helped, sometimes. Not always. It wasn't foolproof. I wasn't Zeus. There were no magic thunderbolts at my disposal. But it is nice to build up, over the years, things that you know do—on occasion—work. Weapons for the war that subsides but that can always ignite again. And so writing, reading, talking, travelling, yoga, meditation and running were some of mine.

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Reasons to be strong

It was 2002. I was at that point in my recovery where I was continually feeling well, but only in contrast to the much worse stuff that had gone before. Really, I was still a walking mass of anxiety, too phobic to take medicine of any kind, and convinced my tongue was expanding every time I consumed prawns or peanut butter or any other food it is possible to be allergic to. I also needed to be near Andrea. If I was near Andrea I was infinitely calmer than when I wasn't. Most of the time, this didn't make me feel like a weirdo. Me and Andrea lived together and worked together in the same modest apartment. We did not really know anyone socially. Out of the two of us, I had always been the one with the drive to go out and meet other people, and that drive had gone now. But in 2002 Andrea's mother was diagnosed with ovarian cancer and things understandably changed. We went and stayed with her parents in County Durham while Freda underwent chemotherapy. Andrea, who had spent the last three years fixing a depressive boy-

friend, now had a mother with cancer. She cried a lot. I felt like the baton was being passed. This was my turn to be the strong one. When she first found out her mum was ill she sat on the edge of the bed and cried like I had never seen her cry. I put my arm around her and felt that sudden shrinking of language you feel when something terrible happens. Fortunately, Andrea was on hand to help. While waiting for them to come home with Andrea from the hospital I paced from room to room. They had lots of porcelain ornaments. Little Bo Peep. A Pink Panther sitting cross-legged, his legs hanging down off the windowsill. His wide yellow eyes followed me around the living room.

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The first ten minutes my heart was pounding. I could hardly breathe. Andrea was dead. Her parents were dead. I was picturing the car crash too vividly for it not to have happened. Then twenty minutes passed. I was going to die. There was a pain in my chest. Maybe it was lung cancer. I was only twenty-seven, but I had smoked a lot. At thirty minutes, a neighbour came around to see how Freda was. At forty minutes, the adrenaline was starting to settle. I had been forty minutes on my own and I was still alive. By fifty minutes, I actually wanted them to be gone over an hour, so that I could feel even stronger. Fifty minutes! Three years of separation anxiety cured in less than an hour! Needless to say, they came back.

Two months later, I was alone in the house of my future in-laws, pleading with Andrea to go with them to the hospital.

'I've got to take Mum to the hospital.'

'Okay. I'll come with you.'

'They want someone to wait and let David in.'

'I can come with you.'

David was Andrea's brother, travelling up from London.

But then it happened.
A switch flicked.

'Okay. All right. Okay. I will.'

'I won't make it. Can't you just tell your mum and dad I've got to come too?'

'You can do this.'

'Fuck. Shit. I'm sorry. But you don't understand.'

'Matt, I'm asking you. My mum's ill. I don't want to stress her out. You're being selfish.'

'I can't do this. Separation anxiety. I'll have a panic attack.'

'Matt, please.'

'No.'

'No what?'

'I'll do it. I'll stay. I'll stay in the house.'

'Really?'

'Yeah.'

'I'll leave the number for the hospital.'

'It's okay.'

'I could find it.'

I said, stupidly imagining these could be my last ever words to her.

'I'll leave it anyway.'

'Thank you.'

What Is It

Life on Earth to an

an intensifying, as though I had been living my life in a shell and now the shell wasn't there. It was total exposure. A red-raw, naked mind. A skinned personality. A brain in a jar full of the acid that is experience. What I didn't realise, at the time, what would have seemed incomprehensible to me, was that this state of mind would end up having positive effects as well as negative effects. I'm not talking about all that *What Doesn't Kill You Makes You Stronger* stuff. No. That's simply not true. **What doesn't kill you very often makes you weaker. What doesn't kill you can leave you limping for the rest of your days.** What doesn't kill you can make you scared to leave your house, or even your bedroom, and have you trembling, or mumbling incoherently, or leaning with your head on a window pane, wishing you could return to the time before the thing that didn't kill you.

This isn't a question of strength. Not the stoic, get-on-with-stuff-without-thinking-too-much kind of strength, anyway. It's more of a zooming-in. That sharpening. That switch from the prosaic to the poetic. You know, before the age of twenty-four I hadn't known how bad things could feel, but I hadn't realised how good they could feel either. That shell might be protecting you, but it's also stopping you feeling the full force of that good stuff. Depression might be a hell of a price to pay for waking up to life, and while it is on top of you it is one that could never seem worth paying.

It's hard to explain depression to people who have not suffered from it. It is like explaining life on Earth to an alien. The reference points just are not there. You have to resort to metaphors. **The main thing is the intensity of it.** It does not fit within the normal spectrum of emotions. When you are in it, you are really in it. You can't step outside it without stepping outside of life, because it is life. It is your life. Every single thing you experience is filtered through it. Consequently, it magnifies everything. At its most extreme, things that an everyday normal person would hardly notice have overwhelming effects.

The sun sinks behind a cloud, and you feel that slight change in weather as if a friend has died. You feel the difference between inside and outside as a baby feels the difference between womb and world. You swallow an ibuprofen and your neurotic brain acts like it has taken an overdose of methamphetamine. Depression, for me, wasn't a dulling but a sharpening,

Clouds with silver linings are still clouds. But it is quite therapeutic to know that pleasure doesn't just help compensate for pain, it can actually grow out of it.

'You've got a publisher.'

'What?'

'Just had the phone call. You are going to be a published author.'

'What? Seriously?'

'Seriously.'

This news kept me going for about six months. For about six months my lack of self-esteem had been artificially addressed. I would lie in bed and go to sleep smiling, thinking 'Wow, I'm quite a big deal, I'm going to be published.' But being published (or getting a great job or whatever) does not permanently alter your brain. And one night I lay awake, feeling less than happy. I started to worry. The worries spiraled. And for three weeks I was trapped in my own mind again. But this time, I had weapons. One of them, maybe the most important, was this knowledge: I have been ill before, then well again. Wellness is possible. Another weapon was running. I knew how the body could affect the mind, so I started to run more and more.

Abraham Lincoln
fearful
gift

Abraham Lincoln, when he was thirty-two, declared: 'I am now the most miserable man living.' He had, by that age, experienced two massive depressive breakdowns. 'If what I feel were equally distributed to the whole human family, there would not be one cheerful face on the earth. Whether I shall ever be better I can not tell; I awfully forbade I shall not. To remain as I am is impossible. I must die or be better.'

Yet, of course, while Lincoln openly declared he had no fear of suicide, he did not kill himself. He chose to live. There is a great article on 'Lincoln's Great Depression' in The Atlantic by Joshua Wolf Shenk. In it, Shenk writes of how depression forced Lincoln into a deeper understanding of life: he insisted on acknowledging his fears. Through his late twenties and early thirties he drove deeper and deeper into them, hovering over what, according to Albert Camus, is the only serious question human beings have to deal with. **He asked whether he could live, whether he could face life's misery. Finally he decided that he must...** He had an 'irrepressible desire' to accomplish something while he lived.

He was evidently a serious person. One of the great serious people of history. He fought mental wars and physical ones. Maybe his knowledge of suffering led to the kind of empathy he showed when seeking to change the law on slavery. ('Wherever I hear anyone arguing for slavery, I feel a strong impulse to see it tried on him personally,' he said.) Lincoln is not the only famous leader to have battled depression. Winston Churchill lived with the 'black dog' for much of his life too. Watching a fire, he once remarked to a young researcher he was employing: 'I know why logs split. I know what it is to be consumed.' Indeed he did. He was—in terms of career achievements—one of the most active men who ever lived. Yet he continually felt despondent and full of darkness. The political philosopher John Gray—one of my

favourite non-fiction writers (read *Straw Dogs* to see why)—believes Churchill didn't 'overcome' depression to become a good war leader, rather that the experience of depression directly enabled him to be one. Gray argues, in an article for the BBC, that it was Churchill's 'exceptional openness' to intense emotion that explains how he was able to sense dangers that more conventional minds failed to see.

'For most of the politicians and opinion-makers who wanted to appease Hitler, the Nazis were not much more than, a raucous expression of German nationalism,' writes Gray. It needed an unusual mind to address an unusual threat. 'He owed his foresight of the horror that was to come to visits of the black dog.' So, yes, depression is a nightmare. But can it also be a useful one? Can it be one that improves the world in various ways?

Can depression be a useful nightmare? Can it be one that improves the world in various ways?

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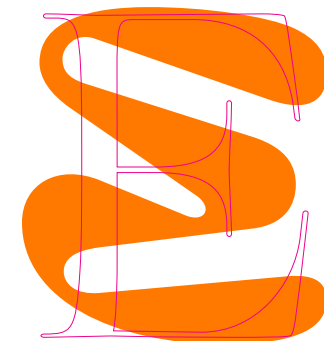
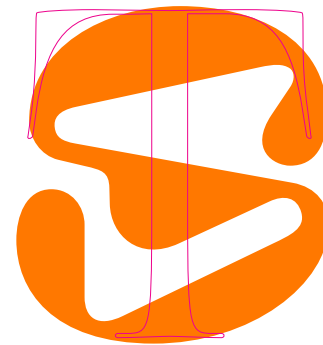
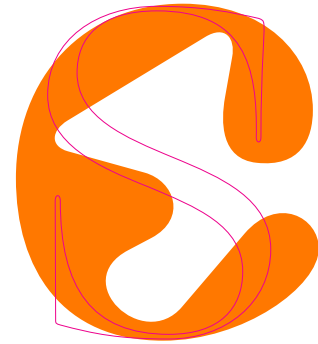
Sometimes the links between depression, anxiety and productivity are undeniable. Think of Edvard Munch's omnipresent painting *The Scream*, for instance. Not only is this a most accurate visual depiction of what a panic attack feels like, but it was also—according to the artist himself—directly inspired by a moment of existential terror. Here is the diary entry: *I was walking down the road when the sun set; suddenly, the sky turned as red as blood. I stopped and leaned against the fence, feeling unspeakably tired. Tongues of fire and blood stretched over the bluish black fjord. My friends went on walking, while I lagged behind, shivering with fear. Then I heard the enormous, infinite scream of nature.*

But even without the 'smoking gun' of a specific depressive episode inspiring a specific work of genius, it is impossible to ignore the sheer number of greats who have battled depression. Even without focusing on the Plaths and Hemingways and Woolfs who actually killed themselves, the list of known depressives is staggering. And many times there is a link between the illness and the work they produce. A lot of Freud's work was based on his analysis of his own depression, and what he believed to be the solution. Cocaine was what worked for him, but then—after dishing it out to other sufferers—he started to realise it could be a tad addictive. Franz Kafka is another member of the *Depression Hall of Fame*. He suffered from social anxiety and what people now

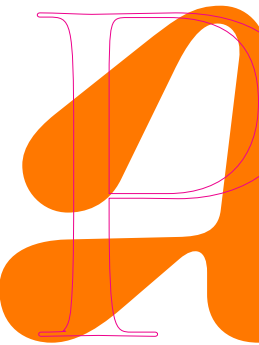
see as clinical depression all his life. He was also a hypochondriac living in fear of physical and mental change. But being a hypochondriac doesn't mean you won't get ill, and when he was thirty-four Kafka contracted tuberculosis. Interestingly, *all the things that were known to help Kafka's depression—swimming, horse riding, biking—were physically healthy pursuits.*

Surely the claustrophobia and sense of powerlessness in his works—so often interpreted in solely political terms—was also a result of him suffering from an illness that makes you feel claustrophobic? Kafka's most famous story is *The Metamorphosis*. A travelling salesman wakes up to find himself transformed into a giant insect, who has overslept and is late for work. It is a story about the dehumanising effect of capitalism, yes, but it can equally be read as a metaphor for depression, the most Kafkaesque of illnesses. For, like Gregor Samsa, the depressive can sometimes wake up in the room they fell asleep in, and yet feel totally different. An alien to themselves. Trapped in a nightmare. Likewise, could Emily Dickinson have written her poem 'I felt a Funeral, in my Brain' without deep mental anguish? Of course, most depressives don't end up being a Lincoln or a Dickinson or a Churchill or a Munch or a Freud or a Kafka (or a Mark Twain or a Sylvia Plath or a Georgia O'Keeffe or an Ian Curtis or a Kurt Cobain). But then, nor do most people.

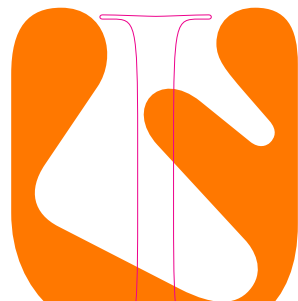
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People often use the word **despite** in the context of mental illness. So-and-so did such-and-such despite having depression/anxiety/OCD/agoraphobia/whatever. But sometimes that **despite** should be a **because**. For instance, I write because of depression. I was not a writer before. The intensity needed—to explore things with relentless curiosity and energy—simply wasn't there. Fear makes us curious. Sadness makes us philosophers.



Going back to Abraham Lincoln, the key thing to note is that the president always suffered with depression. He never fully overcame it, but he lived alongside it and achieved great things. 'Whatever greatness Lincoln achieved cannot be explained as a triumph over personal suffering,' says Joshua Wolf Shenk in that article I mentioned. 'Rather, it must be accounted an outgrowth of the same system that produced that suffering... Lincoln didn't do great work because he solved the problem of his melancholy; the problem of his melancholy was all the more fuel for the fire of his great work.' So. Even if depression is not totally overcome, we can learn to use what the poet Byron called a 'fearful gift'. We don't have to use it to rule a nation, like Churchill or Lincoln. We don't even have to use it to paint a really good picture. We can just use it in life. For instance, **I find that being grimly aware of mortality can make me steadfastly determined to enjoy life where life can be enjoyed. It makes me value precious moments with my children, and with the woman I love. It adds intensity in bad ways, but also good ways.** Art and political vigour are just one spillover of that intensity, but it can manifest itself in a million other ways, most of which won't make you famous but many of which will, in the long term, add as well as take away.



Going to the place where Oscar Wilde died wasn't making it any better. It just guaranteed I was going to die there. To die in Paris, just like Oscar Wilde. I also imagined the air would kill me. I hadn't been abroad for four years.

She was about to tell me my birthday surprise.

'We're going to Paris. Tomorrow.
We're going to Paris tomorrow!
We're going to get the Eurostar.'

I was shell-shocked.

I couldn't imagine anyone saying anything more terrifying.

'Well, we're going. We're staying until the sixth. It's going to be great. We're staying in the hotel Oscar Wilde died in. *L'Hotel*, it's called.'

'I can't go to Paris.'

'I can't.'

It was happening. A panic attack. I was starting to feel it in my chest. I was starting to feel like I was back in 2000 mode. Back in that feeling of being trapped inside my self, like a desperate fly in a jar.

'I don't think I'll be able to breathe the air.'

I knew this sounded stupid. I wasn't mad! And yet, the fact remained: I didn't think I'd be able to breathe the air.

At some point after that I was curled tight in a foetal ball behind the door. I was trembling. I don't know if anyone had been this scared of Paris since Marie Antoinette. But Andrea knew what to do. She had a PhD in this kind of thing by now. She said:

'Okay, we won't go. I can cancel the hotel. We might lose a bit of money, but if it's such a big deal...'

I could still hardly walk twenty metres on my own without having a panic attack. It was the biggest deal imaginable. It was like, I suppose, a normal person being told they had to walk naked around Tehran or something.

But.

If I said 'no', then I would be a person who couldn't travel abroad because he was scared. And that would make me like a mad person, and my biggest fear—bigger even than death—was of being totally mad. Of losing myself completely to the demons. So, as was so often the case, a big fear was beaten by a bigger fear. The best way to beat a monster is to find a scarier one.

And I went to Paris. The Channel tunnel held together and the sea didn't fall on our heads. The air in Paris worked okay with my lungs. Though I could hardly speak in the taxi. The journey from Gare du Nord to the hotel was intense. There was some kind of march going on by the banks of the Seine, with a large red flag swooping like the Tricolore in *Les Misérables*. When I closed my eyes that night I couldn't sleep for hours because I kept seeing Paris moving at the speed it had moved by in the taxi. But I calmed.

I didn't actually have a proper panic attack at any point during the next four days. Just a generalised high anxiety that I felt walking around the Left Bank and along the Rue de Rivoli and in the restaurant on the roof of the Pompidou Centre. I was starting to find that, sometimes, simply doing something that I had dreaded—and surviving—was the best kind of therapy. If you start to dread being outside, go outside. If you fear confined spaces, spend some time in a lift. If you have separation anxiety, force yourself to be alone a while.

When you are depressed and anxious your comfort zone tends to shrink from the size of a world to the size of a bed. Or right down to nothing at all. Another thing. Stimulation. Excitement. The kinds found in new places. Sometimes this can be terrifying, but it can also be liberating. In a familiar place, your mind focuses solely on itself.

There is nothing new it needs to notice about your bedroom. No potential external threats, just internal ones. By forcing yourself into a new physical space, preferably in a different country, you end up inevitably focusing a bit more on the world outside your head. Well, that's how it worked for me. Those few days in Paris. In fact, I felt more normal than I did at home, because here my general anxious awkwardness could pass quite easily for general awkward Britishness. A lot of depressed people turn to travel as an antidote to their symptoms. The great American painter Georgia O'Keeffe, like the many other artists that fit the cliché, was a life-long depressive. In 1933, at the age of forty-six, she was hospitalised following symptoms of uncontrollable crying, a seeming inability to eat or sleep, and other symptoms of depression and anxiety.

O'Keeffe's biographer Roxana Robinson says that the hospital stay did little for her. What worked instead was travel. She went to Bermuda and Lake George in New York and Maine and Hawaii. 'Warmth, languor, and solitude were just what Georgia needed,' wrote Robinson. Of course, travel isn't always a solution. Or even an option. But it certainly helps me, when I get the chance to go away.

I think, more than anything, it helps give a sense of perspective. We might be stuck in our minds, but we aren't physically stuck. And unsticking ourselves from our physical location can help dislodge our unhappy mental state. Movement is the antidote to fixedness, after all. And it helps. Sometimes. Just sometimes. 'Travel makes one modest,' said Gustave Flaubert. 'You see what a tiny place you occupy in the world.' Such perspective can be strangely liberating. Especially when you have an illness that may on the one hand lower self-esteem, but on the other intensifies the trivial. I can remember during a short depressive episode watching Martin Scorsese's *Howard Hughes* biopic *The Aviator*.

Andrea told me after that film that there was too much Matt Haig in Matt Haig.

There is a point in it where Katharine Hepburn, played rather brilliantly by Cate Blanchett, turns to Hughes (Leonardo DiCaprio) and says: 'There's too much Howard Hughes in Howard Hughes.' It was this intensity of the self that, in the film version of his life at least, was shown to contribute to the obsessive-compulsive disorder that would eventually imprison Hughes in a hotel room in Las Vegas.

Andrea told me after that film that there was too much Matt Haig in Matt Haig. She was kind of joking, but also kind of on to something. **So for me, anything that lessens that extreme sense of self, that makes me feel me but at a lower volume, is very welcome.** And ever since that Paris trip, travel has been one of those things.

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Resources

United Kingdom

National Emergency Number. Call 999 or 112

National Health First Response Service. Call 111

Samaritans UK: registered charity aimed at providing emotional support to anyone in distress or at risk of suicide. Call 116123

Campaign Against Living Miserably (CALM): registered charity aimed at bringing the suicide rate down among men aged 15–35. Call 0800-58-58-58 for nationwide service (every day from 5PM to midnight) or 0808-802-58-58 for London service (every day from 5PM to midnight)

Shout: UK's first free 24/7 text service for anyone in crisis anytime, anywhere. It is a place to go for those struggling to cope and in need of immediate help.
Text: 85258

United States

National Emergency Number. Call 911

The National Suicide Prevention Lifeline: 24-hour, toll-free, confidential suicide prevention hotline available to anyone in suicidal crisis or emotional distress. Call 1-800-273-8255 or 1-888-628-9454 for Spanish service or 1-800-799-4889 for deaf & hard of hearing options

The Veterans Crisis Line: 24-hour, toll-free hotline that provides phone, webchat, and text options available to military veterans and their families. It provides options for deaf and hard of hearing individuals. Call 1-800-273-8255 and press 1

The Crisis Text Line: the only 24/7, nationwide crisis-intervention text-message hotline. Text HOME to 741-741

Samaritans USA: registered charity aimed at providing emotional support to anyone in distress or at risk of suicide. Call 1-800-273-8255

The Trevor Project: nationwide organization that provides a 24-hour phone hotline, as well as limited-hour webchat and text options, for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and questioning youth. Call 1-866-488-7386 or text TREVOR to 1-202-304-1200 (Monday-Friday from 3PM to 10PM ET)

The Trans Lifeline: nonprofit organization that is created by and for the transgender community, providing crisis intervention hotlines, staffed by transgender individuals, available in the United States and Canada. Call 1-877-330-6366