

Livind

29

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

And thus the

heart will

break, yet

live on.

And thus the

And thus the

heart will

break, yet

brokenly

live on.

-27

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The world is increasingly designed to depress us. Happiness isn't very good for the economy. If we were happy with what we had, why would we need more?

How do you sell an anti-ageing moisturiser? You make someone worry about ageing. How do you get people to vote for a political party? You make them worry about immigration. How do you get them to buy insurance? By making them worry about everything. How do you get them to have plastic surgery? By highlighting their physical flaws. How do you get them to watch a TV show? By making them worry about missing out. How do you get them to buy a new smartphone? By making them feel like they are being left behind.

To be calm becomes a kind of revolutionary act. To be happy with your own non-upgraded existence. To be comfortable with our messy, human selves, would not be good for business. Yet we have no other world to live in. And actually, when we really look closely, the world of stuff and advertising is not really life. Life is the other stuff. Life is what is left when you take all that crap away, or at least ignore it for a while. Life is the people who love you. No one will ever choose to stay alive for an iPhone. It's the people we reach via the iPhone that matter. And once we begin to recover, and to live again, we do so with new eyes. Things become clearer, and we are aware of things we weren't aware of before.

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Prägnante

Stimmen

Skills

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I have a thin skin.

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I think this is part and parcel of depression and anxiety, or—to be precise—being a person quite likely to get depression and anxiety. I also think that I will never fully get over my breakdown fourteen years ago. If the stone falls hard enough the ripples last a lifetime. I have gone from never feeling happy to feeling happy—or at least somewhere in the ballpark—most of the time.

So I am lucky. But I have blips. Either blips when I am genuinely depressed/anxious or blips caused by me fighting the onset of depression/anxiety by doing something stupid (getting excessively drunk and coming home at five in the morning after losing my wallet and having to plead with taxi drivers to take me home). But generally, day to day, I don't fight it. I accept things more. This is who I am. And besides, fighting it actually makes it worse.

The trick is to befriend depression and anxiety.

To be thankful for them, because then you can deal with them a whole lot better. And the way I have befriended them is by thanking them for my thin skin. Sure, without a thin skin I would have never known those terrible days of nothingness. Those days of either panic, or intense, bone-scorching lethargy. The days of self-hate, or drowning under invisible waves. I sometimes felt, in my self-pity, too fragile for a world of speed and right angles and noise.

(I love Jonathan Rottenberg's evolutionary theory of depression, that it is to do with being unable to adapt to the present: 'An ancient mood system has collided with a highly novel operating environment created by a remarkable species.') But would I go along to a magical mind spa and ask for a skin-thickening treatment? Probably not. You need to feel life's terror to feel its wonder. And I feel it today, actually, right now, on what could seem like quite a grey, overcast afternoon. I feel the sheer unfathomable marvel that is this strange life we have, here on earth, the seven billion of us, clustered in our towns and cities on this pale blue dot of a planet, spending our allotted 30,000 days as best we can, in glorious insignificance.

I like to feel the force of that miracle. I like to burrow deep into this life, and explore it through the magic of words and the magic of human beings (and the magic of peanut butter sandwiches). And I am glad to feel every tumultuous second of it, and glad for the fact that when I walk into the vast room with all the Tintoretos in it in the National Gallery my skin literally tingles, and my heart palpitates, and I am glad for the synesthesia that means when I read Emily Dickinson or Mark Twain my mind feels actual warmth from those old American words. Feeling. That is what it is about. *People place so much value on thought, but feeling is as essential.* I want to read books that make me laugh and cry and fear and hope and punch the air in triumph.

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I want a book to hug me or grab me by the scruff of my neck. I don't even mind if it punches me in the gut. Because we are here to feel. I want life. I want to read it and write it and feel it and live it. I want, for as much of the time as possible in this blink-of-an-eye existence we have, to feel all that can be felt. I hate depression. I am scared of it. Terrified, in fact. But at the same time, it has made me who I am. And if—for me—it is the price of feeling life, it's a price always worth paying. I am satisfied just to be.

The Big A

-20

Anxiety is the partner of depression. It accompanies half the cases of depression. Sometimes it triggers depression. Sometimes depression triggers anxiety. Sometimes they simply co-exist, like a nightmare marriage. Though of course it is perfectly possible to have anxiety minus depression, and vice versa. Anxiety and depression are an interesting mix. In many ways they are opposite experiences, and yet mix them together and you don't get a happy medium. Quite the opposite. Anxiety, which often bubbles up into panic, is a nightmare in fast-forward.

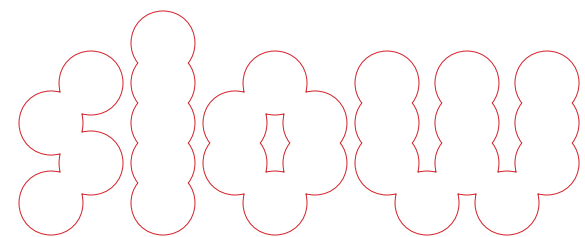
Anxiety, even more than depression, can be exacerbated by the way we live in the twenty-first century. By the things that surround us. Smartphones. Advertising (I think of a great David Foster Wallace line—'It did what all ads are supposed to do: create an anxiety relievable by purchase.') Twitter followers. Facebook likes. Instagram. Information overload. Unanswered emails. Dating apps. War.

The rapid evolution of technology. Urban planning. The changing climate. Overcrowded public transport. Articles on the 'post-antibiotic age'. Photoshopped cover models. Google-induced hypochondria. Infinite choice ('anxiety is the dizziness of freedom'—Soren Kierkegaard). Online shopping. The *should-we-eat-butter?* debate. All those TV dramas we should have watched. All those prize-winning books we should have read. All those pop stars we haven't heard of. All that lacking we are made to feel. Instant gratification. Constant distraction. Work work work. Twenty-four-hour everything. Maybe to be truly in tune with the modern world means anxiety is inevitable. But here we must again distinguish between anxiety and 'Anxiety'. For instance, I was always an anxious person. As a child I used to worry about death a lot. Certainly more than a child should. I also used to climb into my parents' bed as a ten-year-old and tell them I was too scared to go to sleep in case I woke up without the ability to see or hear. I used to worry about meeting new people, I'd get stomach aches on Sunday nights about Monday mornings, *I even cried once—when I was fourteen—about the fact that music wasn't as good as it had been when I was little. I was a sensitive child, it's fair to say.* But Anxiety—proper generalised anxiety disorder and the related panic disorder that I was diagnosed with too—can be (but isn't always) a desperate thing.

It can be a full-time occupation of gale-force worry.

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**That said, from my personal experience, anxiety—
even more than depression—is very treatable.**



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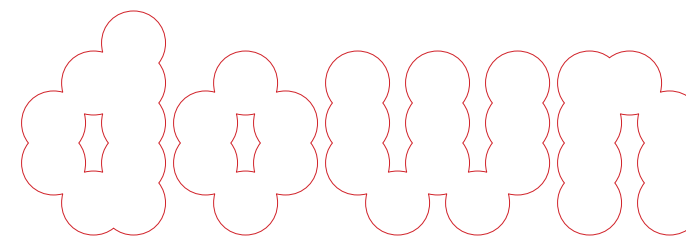
If you suffer from anxiety on its own, or the fast-speed kind of depression that comes when it is fused with anxiety, there are things you can do. Some people take pills. For some they are a literal lifesaver. But finding the right pill is a tricky science because the science of the brain is not quite there. The tools used to analyse the processes of living human brains—things like CAT (computed axial tomography) scans and, later, MRI (magnetic resonance imaging) scans have only been in existence a few decades. Of course, these things are very good at providing pretty, multi-coloured pictures of the brain, and telling us which parts of the brain are most active. They can point to things like the part of the brain responsible for the pleasurable feeling we get when we eat a chocolate bar, or for the distress when we hear a baby cry. Clever stuff.

But there are weaknesses.

Neuroscience isn't perfect.

'Most parts of the brain do different things at different times,' says Dr David Adam, author of *The Man Who Couldn't Stop*. 'The amygdala, for example, plays a role in both sexual arousal and terror—but an MRI scan cannot differentiate between passion and panic... So what should we think when the amygdala lights up on an MRI scan when we are shown a picture of Cameron Diaz or Brad Pitt—that we are afraid of them?' So, the tools aren't perfect.

Some things are known, but more isn't. Maybe this lack of true understanding explains why there is still stigma about mental health. Where there is mystery, there will be fear. Ultimately, there remains no sure-fire cure. There are pills, but only a liar would say they work every time or that they are always an ideal solution. It is also rare that they cure someone without additional help. But when it comes to the anxiety side at least, there does seem to be one thing that works across the board, to a greater or lesser degree. **Namely: slowing down. Anxiety runs your mind at fastforward rather than normal 'play' speed, so addressing that issue of mental 'pace' might not be easy. But it works. Anxiety takes away all the commas and full stops we need to make sense of ourselves.** This is not selfishness, even though people read it as such. If your leg is on fire, it is not selfish to concentrate on the pain, or the fear of the flames. So it is with anxiety. People with mental illnesses aren't wrapped up in themselves because they are intrinsically any more selfish than other people. Of course not. They are just feeling things that can't be ignored. Things that point the arrows inward. But having people who love you and who you love is such a help. This doesn't have to be romantic, or even familial love. Forcing yourself to see the world through love's gaze can be healthy. Love is an attitude to life. It can save us.



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Here are some ways to add back that mental punctuation:

- **Yoga.** I was a yogaphobe, but am now a convert. It's great, because unlike other therapies, it treats the mind and the body as part of the same whole.
- **Slow your breathing.** Not crazy deep breaths. Just gentle. In for five, out for five. It's hard to stick to, but it is very hard for panic to happen if your breathing is relaxed. So many anxiety symptoms—dizziness, pins and needles, tingling—are directly related to shallow breathing.
- **Meditate.** You don't have to chant. Just sit for five minutes and try and think of a single calming thing. The face of someone you love. Or just focus on your breathing.
- **Accept.** Don't fight things, feel them. Tension is about opposition, relaxation is about letting go.
- **Live in the present.** Here is meditation master Amit Ray: 'If you want to conquer the anxiety of life, live in the moment. Live in the breath.'
- **Love.** Anai's Nin called anxiety 'love's greatest killer'. But fortunately, the reverse is also true. Love is anxiety's greatest killer. Love is an outward force. It is our road out of our own terrors, because anxiety is an illness that wraps us up in our own nightmares.

peaks:

-16

and

As I have said, whenever I panicked I wished for a real danger. If you are having a panic attack for a reason then it is not really a panic attack, but a logical response to a fearful situation. Likewise, whenever I felt that downward gearshift towards that heavy and infinite sadness, I wished it had an external cause. But, as time grew on, I knew something I hadn't known earlier. **I knew that down wasn't the only direction. If you hung in there, if you stuck it out, then things got better.** They get better and then they get worse and then they get better. Peaks and troughs, peaks and troughs, as a homeopath had told me, while I was living at my parents' house (the homeopath's words had worked better than her tinctures).

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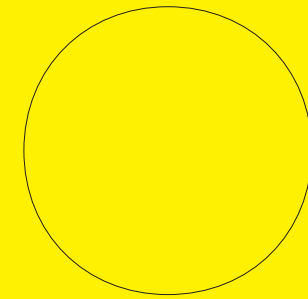
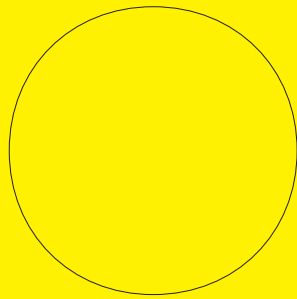
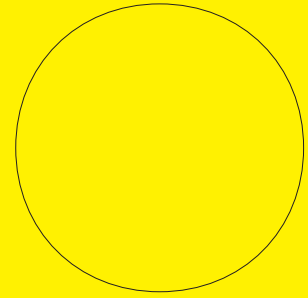
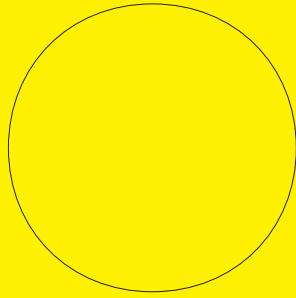
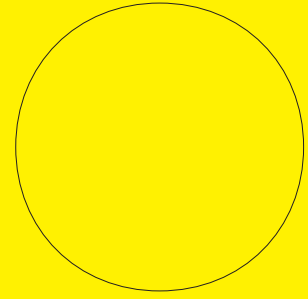
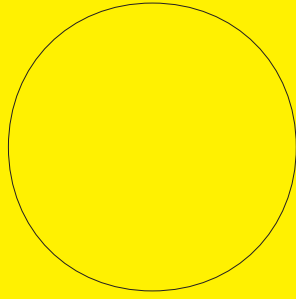
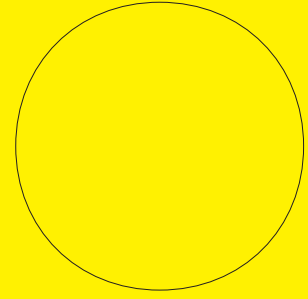
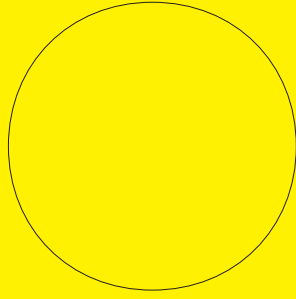
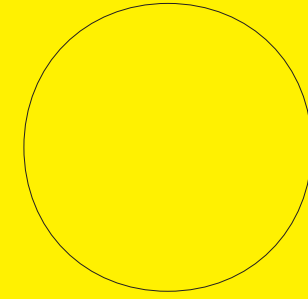
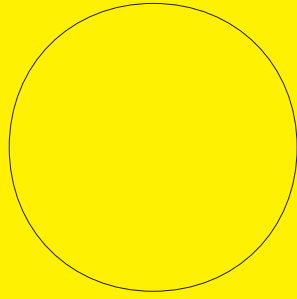
throughs:

Now take a break
Breathe in. Breathe out.

The most im-
portant lists.

*Stolen, curated, and
compiled advice.*

(It's a weird thing, depression. Even now, writing this with a good distance of fourteen years from my lowest point, I haven't fully escaped. You get over it, but at the same time you never get over it. It comes back in flashes, when you are tired or anxious or have been eating the wrong stuff, and catches you off guard. I woke up with it a few days ago, in fact. I felt its dark wisps around my head, that ominous life-is-fear feeling. But then, after a morning with the best five- and six-year-olds in the world, it subsided. It is now an aside. Something to put brackets around. **Life lesson: the way out is never through yourself.**)



#reasonstostayalive

I asked some people online who have experience of depression, anxiety or suicidal thoughts, 'What keeps you going?'

These were their reasons to stay alive:

@legallyogi My last depression was a severe post-natal. It was an awful time. My #reasonstostayalive were my family and knowing it would pass.

@GoodWithoutGods #reasonstostayalive Because 7×10^{49} atoms won't arrange themselves this way ever again. It's a one-off privilege.

@Book_Geek_Says The support of my mum and now my boyfriend who got together with me at one of my lowest points three years ago. #reasonstostayalive

@ayaanidilsays #reasonstostayalive I'd say best friends. The Great Perhaps.

@lordofl The dogs always need walking in the morning. #reasonstostayalive

@UTBookblog The experience to know that tomorrow will be a better day. My family, boyfriend, friends... and my TBR pile! #reasonstostayalive

@Teens22 #reasonstostayalive Love is the best reason to stay alive. Self-love, love for other people, love of life and noticing the good. #reasonstostayalive

@stueygod Music. #reasonstostayalive

@Halftongue Sometimes my #reasonstostayalive amount to no more than 'people would be sad and angry if I didn't.' Those are bad days.

@jaras76 Possibilities. Overcoming the next challenge. Soccer. #reasonstostayalive

@ZODIDOG #reasonstostayalive Some days it's as simple as blue skies & sunshine. Or the cuteness and reward from my pet chinchilla.

@ylovesgok The realisation I can get help. #reasonstostayalive

@mirandafay Fresh air. The uncompromising love of a good dog. #reasonstostayalive

@ameliasward Sunny mornings. #reasonstostayalive

@DolinaMunro Bacon rolls. #reasonstostayalive

@ilonacatherine Not everyone thinks you're as much of a waste of space as you do when in the depths of depression. Trust others. #reasonstostayalive

@tara818 #reasonstostayalive
I had to feed my baby. I had crippling anxiety & post-natal depression, only here because of having to nurse him.

@wolri #reasonstostayalive Simple things—husband’s support, not crowding me when I’m having a bad time, mainly my family & my little dog.

@BlondeBookGirl My #reasonstostayalive include ‘picturing my cat’s little face if I wasn’t here’, ‘my mum/sister’ and ‘all the books I really want to read.’

@jeebreslin Because inside there is a golden you who loves you and wants you to win and prevail and be happy. #reasonstostayalive

@groznez #reasonstostayalive
Yoga. Couldn’t be here without it.

@Matineegirl Friends, family, acceptance, sharing, knowing the black dog will leave eventually. #reasonstostayalive

@wilsonxox Sunsets. And that particularly unspecific musical genre with access to your spine. #reasonstostayalive

@HHDream Wolf Suicide may lead to my friends and family becoming depressed, I would never wish depression on anyone. #reasonstostayalive

@BeverlyBarnbury Don’t always know why I kept moving, but it never—for long—felt like an option not to. Grim determination? #reasonstostayalive

@Lyssa_I234 Not wanting to hurt parents/sibling/partner. No matter how low I get, I know that these people would miss me. #reasonstostayalive

@MagsTheObscure The brother I look after. This is one of the main reasons I remain a carer. He’s my lighthouse in the storm. #reasonstostayalive

@Ginny_Bradwell #reasonstostayalive Realising it was ok to be ill and that there were no quick fixes.

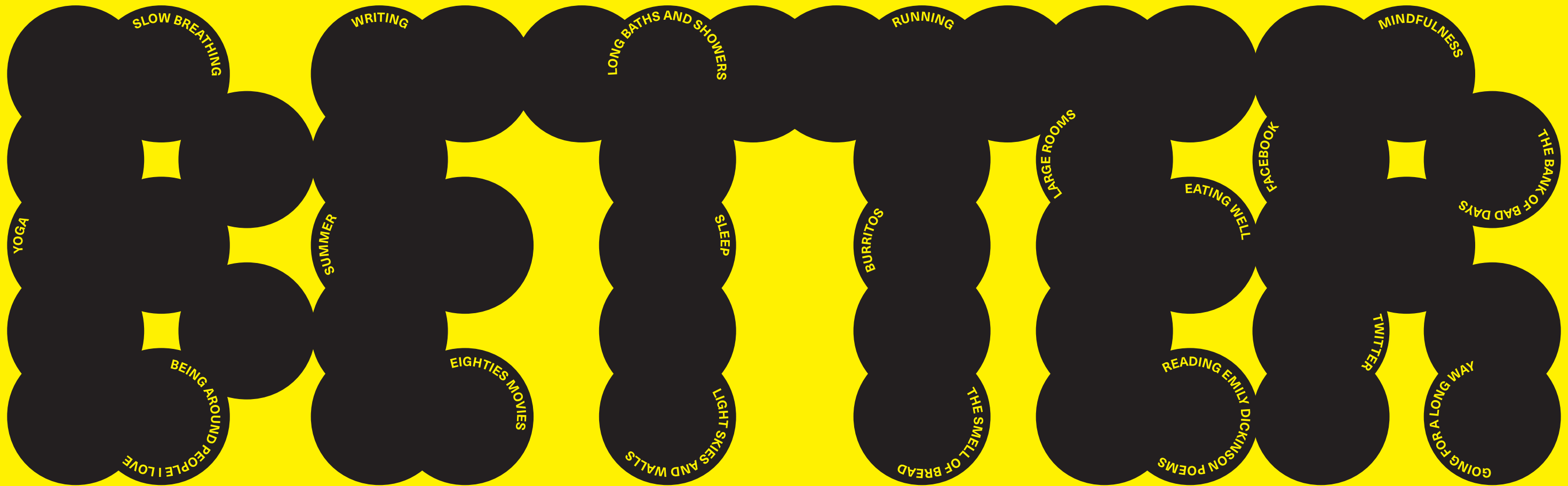
@Deb Wonda Everything passes—joy follows pain, warmth melts the ice. #reasonstostayalive

@Despard It’s been better before and it will be again. #reasonstostayalive

@vivatrampv The surgeons worked so hard to give me the future that I deserve to have. #reasonstostayalive

@gourenina Knowing my depression has never lasted forever, and there has always been a way out. #reasonstostayalive

Things that sometimes make me



Knowing that
someone else
may read these
words and
that, maybe,
the pain I
felt wasn't
for nothing.

How to Live

Forty pieces of advice I feel to be helpful but which I don't always follow.

1. Appreciate happiness when it is there.
2. Sip, don't gulp.
3. Be gentle with yourself. Work less. Sleep more.
4. There is absolutely nothing in the past that you can change. That's basic physics.
5. Beware of Tuesdays. And Octobers.
6. Kurt Vonnegut was right. 'Reading and writing are the most nourishing forms of meditation anyone has so far found.'
7. Listen more than you talk.
8. Don't feel guilty about being idle. More harm is probably done to the world through work than idleness. But perfect your idleness. Make it mindful.
9. Be aware that you are breathing.
10. Wherever you are, at any moment, try and find something beautiful. A face, a line out of a poem, the clouds out of a window, some graffiti, a wind farm. Beauty cleans the mind.
11. Hate is a pointless emotion to have inside you. It is like eating a scorpion to punish it for stinging you.
12. Go for a run. Then do some yoga.
13. Shower before noon.
14. Look at the sky. Remind yourself of the cosmos. Seek vastness at every opportunity, in order to see the smallness of yourself.

15. Be kind.
16. Understand that thoughts are thoughts. If they are unreasonable, reason with them, even if you have no reason left. You are the observer of your mind, not its victim.
17. Do not watch TV aimlessly. Do not go on social media aimlessly. Always be aware of what you are doing, and why you are doing it. Don't value TV less, value it more. Then you will watch it less.
18. Sit down. Lie down. Be still. Do nothing. Observe. Listen to your mind. Let it do what it does without judging it. Let it go, like the Snow Queen in Frozen.
19. Don't worry about things that probably won't happen, or things that haven't happened yet.
20. Look at trees. Be near trees. Plant trees.
21. Listen to that yoga instructor on YouTube, and 'walk as if you are kissing the Earth with your feet.'
22. Live. Love. Let go. The three Ls.
23. Alcohol maths. Wine multiplies itself by itself. The more you have, the more you are likely to have. And if it's hard to stop at one glass, it will be impossible at three.
24. Beware of the gap. The gap between where you are and where you want to be. Simply thinking of the gap widens it.

25. Read a book without thinking about finishing it. Just read it. Enjoy every word, sentence, and paragraph. Don't wish for it to end, or for it to never end.
26. No drug in the universe will make you feel better, at the deepest level, than being kind to others.
27. Listen to what Hamlet—literature's most famous depressive—told Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. 'There is nothing either good or bad, but thinking makes it so.'
28. If someone loves you, let them. Believe in that love. Live for them, even when you feel there is no point.
29. You don't need the world to understand you. It's fine. Some people will never really understand things they haven't experienced. Be grateful for those who will.
30. Jules Verne wrote of the 'Living Infinite'. This is the world of love and emotion that is like a 'sea'. If we can submerge ourselves in it, we find infinity in ourselves, and the space we need to survive.
31. Three in the morning is never the time to try and sort out your life.
32. Remember that there is nothing weird about you. You are just a human, and everything you do and feel is a natural thing, because we are natural animals. You are nature. You are a hominid ape. You are in the world and the world is in you. Everything connects.
33. Don't believe in good or bad, or winning and losing, or victory and defeat, or up and down. At your lowest and at your highest, whether you are happy or despairing or calm or angry, there is a kernel of you that stays the same. That is the you that matters.
34. Don't worry about the time you lose to despair. The time you will have afterwards has just doubled its value.
35. Be transparent to yourself. Make a greenhouse for your mind. Observe.

36. Read Emily Dickinson. Read Graham Greene. Read Italo Calvino. Read Maya Angelou. Read anything you want. Just read. Books are possibilities. They are escape routes. They give you options when you have none. Each one can be a home for an uprooted mind.
37. If the sun is shining, and you can be outside, do it.
38. Remember that the key thing about life on earth is change. Cars rust. Paper yellows. Technology dates. Caterpillars become butterflies. Nights morph into days. Depression lifts.
39. Just when you feel you have no time to relax, know that this is the moment you most need to make time to relax.
40. Be brave. Be strong. Breathe, and keep going. You will thank yourself later.

Seeking help for a mental health problem

A guide to taking the first steps, making empowered decisions and getting the right support for you.

How do I take the first step?

Seeking help for a mental health problem can be a really important step towards getting and staying well, but it can be hard to know how to start or where to turn to.

When is it okay to seek help?

It's common to feel unsure about seeking support for your mental health, and to feel like you ought to wait until you can't handle things on your own. But it's always okay for you to seek help—even if you are not sure if you are experiencing a specific problem. Some reasons why you might choose to seek help include:

- Finding it difficult to cope with your thoughts and feelings.
- Thoughts and feelings having an impact on your day-to-day life.
- Wanting to find out about available support.

Who can I talk to?

The best way to start is normally by talking to a health care professional such as your doctor (also known as your General Practitioner or GP).

Your GP can:

- Make a diagnosis.
- Offer you support and treatment.
- Refer you to a specialist service.

What should I say to my GP?

It can be hard to know how to talk to your doctor about your mental health—especially when you're not feeling well. But it's important to remember that there is no wrong way to tell someone how you're feeling. Here are some things to consider:

- Be honest and open.
- Focus on how you feel, rather than what diagnosis you might meet.
- Try to explain how you've been feeling over the past few months or weeks, and anything that has changed.
- Use words and descriptions that feel natural to you—you don't have to say specific things to get help.
- Try not to worry that your problem is too small or unimportant—everyone deserves help and your doctor is there to support you.

How can I prepare?

GP appointments are usually very short, and if you're feeling nervous you might forget to say things you think are important. Being prepared can help you get the most out of your appointment. Here are some suggestions:

- Write down what you want to say in advance, and take your notes with you.
- Give yourself enough time to get to your appointment, so that you don't feel rushed or stressed.
- If you're feeling nervous, let your doctor know.
- Think about taking someone with you to support you, like a close friend or family member.
- If you've talked to your family or friends about how you feel, practice what you might say to your GP with them.
- Highlight or print out any information you've found that helps you explain how you're feeling.
- If you have a few things to talk about, you can ask for a longer appointment.

Steal from
other lists,
add to this
list, create
your own.

*Stolen, curated, and
compiled advice.*

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

A Conversation Across Time pt.III

-14

-13

Life. My mind. The weight of it.

Shhh. Stop that. You are just a bit trapped inside a moment. The moment will change.

What is?

It's terrifying.

And it always will be. You will always be quite intense. And the depression might always be there, waiting for the next fall. But there is so much life waiting for you. The one thing depression has told you is that a day can be a long and intense stretch of time.

You already have.

I'll try.

Yes. Have faith.

No. I suppose I'll just have to hope.

Oh God, yes.

Andrea will leave me.

But it's still so intense.

Well, then, don't worry about the passing of time. There can be infinity inside a day.

I can't prove it. There is no time machine.

-14

-13

No. No, she won't. She'll marry you.

Ha! As if anyone would tie themselves to a useless freak like me. Would they?

See? So you know things aren't always going to be the same. I mean, things today weren't always the same.

I could be bounded in a nutshell and count myself a king of infinite space.

I want proof.

It's true. You do. And you have a family of your own. You have a life. It is not perfect. No human life is. But it is yours.

Yes. And look, you are making progress. You go to the shop now and you don't have a panic attack. You don't feel that weight on you all the time.

Actually, yes. Yes. That's true. I had another this morning. I was lying in bed just wondering if we had any cereal left. That was it. It was just a normal thing, and it lasted over a minute. Just lying there, thinking about breakfast.

Hamlet? Impressive. I've forgotten all those lines by now. It's been a long time since university.

I mean, the possibility of you. The possibility that I exist more than a decade in the future. And that I feel a lot better.

I do.

No. There was that time last week when I—when you—were out in the sunshine walking through the park, and you felt a lightness. A moment you weren't really thinking.

I am starting to believe in you.

Thank you.

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I went back to visit my parents in Newark about a month ago. They don't live in the same house, but the street they are on is parallel to the street where we used to live. It is a five-minute walk. The corner shop is still there. I walked there on my own and bought a newspaper and could happily wait for the shopkeeper to give me my change. The houses I passed were the same orange brick houses. Nothing much had changed. Nothing makes you feel smaller, more trivial, than such a vast transformation inside your own mind while the world carries on, oblivious. Yet nothing is more freeing.

To accept your smallness in the world.

Parties

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For ten years of my life I could not go to a party without being terrified. Yes, here was me, who had worked in Ibiza for the largest and wildest weekly party in Europe, unable to step into a room full of happy people holding wine glasses without having a panic attack. Shortly after I became published, and was worried that I would soon be dropped, I felt obliged to attend a literary Christmas party. I was sober, as I was still petrified of alcohol, and I headed into a room and instantly felt out of my depth as famous brainy people (Zadie Smith, David Baddie!, Graham Swift) seemed to be everywhere, with their famous brainy faces, totally in their element.

Of course, it is never easy walking into a room full of people. There is that awkward moment of hovering around, like a serious lonely molecule, while everyone else is in their tight little circles, all laughter and conversation. I stood in the middle of the room, looking for someone I knew for reasons other than that they were famous, and couldn't see anyone. I held my glass of sparkling mineral water (I was too scared of caffeine and sugar to have anything else) and tried to think my discomfort made me a genius. After all, Keats and Beethoven and Charlotte Bronte hated parties. But then I realised there were probably millions of historical non-geniuses who also hated them too. For a couple of seconds, I kind of accidentally locked eyes with Zadie Smith. She turned away. She was clearly thinking I was a weirdo.

The Queen of Literature thinks I am a weirdo!

One hundred and ninety-one years before this party, and only a couple of miles away, Keats had sat down to write a letter to his friend Richard Woodhouse. 'When I am in a room with People,' he wrote, 'if I ever am free from speculating on creations of my own brain, then not myself goes home to myself: but the identity of every one in the room begins to press upon me so that I am in a very little time annihilated.' As I stood there, and those bubbles of carbon dioxide rose in my glass, I felt a kind of annihilation. I began to be not entirely sure I was there at all, and I felt floaty. This was it. A relapse. Weeks, maybe months, of depression awaited me.

Breathe, I told myself. Just breathe. **I needed Andrea. The air was getting thinner. I was in the zone. I had passed the event horizon. It was no good. I was lost in a black hole of my own making.** I put my glass down on a table and got out of there. I left a coat in the cloakroom that could still be there for all I know. I stepped into the London night and ran back the short distance to the cafe where Andrea, my eternal saviour, waited for me.

I thought about it. **How did I feel? Like an idiot, obviously.** But also, my panic attack had gone. In the old days, my panic attacks didn't just go. They simply morphed into more panic attacks, breaking me down, like an army, until depression could come in and colonise my head. But no. I was feeling quite normal again. A normal person who was allergic to parties. I had wanted to die in the party, but not literally. Really, I had just wanted to escape the room. But I at least had walked into the room in the first place. That itself was progress. A year later I would be better enough to not only go to the party, but to travel there on my own. Sometimes on the rocky, windy path of recovery, what feels like failure can be a step forward.

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'Well, you are out. How do you feel?'

'I couldn't. I needed to get out of there.'

'I thought you were going to be an hour?'

'What's the matter?' she asked.

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For the author Schopenhauer, the depressive's favourite philosopher (and one who influenced Nietzsche, Freud and Einstein in varying but significant ways), life was the pursuit of futile purposes. 'We blow out a soap-bubble as long and as large as possible, although with the perfect certainty that it will burst.' In this view, happiness is impossible, because of all these goals. Goals are the source of misery. An unattained goal causes pain, but actually achieving it brings only a brief satisfaction. In fact, if you really think about it, a life made of goals is going to be disappointing. Yes, it might propel you forward, keep you turning the pages of your own existence, but ultimately it will leave you empty.

How to be a bit happier than Schopenhauer

Because even if you achieve your goals, what then? You may have gained the thing you lacked, but with it, what then? You either set another goal, stress about how you keep the thing you attained, or you think—along with 'the millions of people having mid-(or early-or late-) life crises right now—This is everything I wanted, so why am I not happy? So what was Schopenhauer's answer? Well, if wanting things was the problem, the answer had to be in giving things up. In his language, the cause of suffering is intensity of will. Schopenhauer believed that by seeing the bigger picture, by viewing humanity as a whole and its suffering as a whole, a person would turn away from life and deny their instincts. In other words, the Schopenhauer plan involves no sex, very little money, fasting and a fair bit of self-torture. Only that way—by totally denying human will—can we see the truth that in front of us 'there is certainly only nothingness'. Bleak, huh? Well, yes. Although Schopenhauer didn't recommend suicide, he recommended a kind of living suicide, in which anything pleasurable had to be scorned. But Schopenhauer was a major hypocrite. He talked the talk but couldn't walk the walk. As Bertrand Russell explained in his *History of Western Philosophy*: He habitually dined well, at a good restaurant, he had many trivial love-affairs, which were sensual but not passionate; he was exceedingly quarrelsome and unusually avaricious. On one occasion he was annoyed by an elderly seamstress who was talking to a friend outside the door of his apartment.

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He threw her downstairs, causing her permanent injury... It is hard to find in his life any virtue except kindness to animals... In all other respects he was completely selfish. Schopenhauer—the ultimate pessimist—actually illustrates how unhappiness works. His work set out anti-goal goals that he couldn't meet. Now, I don't endorse throwing old women down stairs, but I kind of warm to Schopenhauer. I think he recognised the problem—will, or desire of ego or goal-orientated drive or whichever historical term you want to use—but in life he grappled around in the dark (often literally, given his messy love-life).

So, what's the way out? How do you stop the endless wanting and worrying? How do you get off the treadmill? How do you stop time? How do we stop exhausting ourselves worrying about the future? The best answers—the answers that have been written and recorded for thousands of years—always seem to resolve around acceptance.

A world full of people hating themselves is not a happy world.

Schopenhauer himself was greatly influenced by ancient Eastern philosophy. ‘The truth has been recognised by the sages of India,’ he said. Indeed, his belief that abstinence from worldly pleasures is the answer to life, is something he shares with a lot of Buddhist thinkers. But Buddhist thought is not as negative or miserable as Schopenhauer. With Schopenhauer all this asceticism is a bit self-punishing, a bit full of self-loathing, which is unhealthy and counter-productive.

A world full of people hating themselves is not a happy world. Buddhism does not seem to be about self-punishment. A key Buddhist symbol is that of the lotus flower. The lotus flower grows in mud at the bottom of a pool, but rises above the murky water and blooms in the clear air, pure and beautiful, before eventually dying. This metaphor for spiritual enlightenment also works as a metaphor for hope and change. The mud you could see as depression or anxiety. The flowers in the clear air, the self we know we can be, unclogged by despair. Indeed, a lot of the Dhammapada, chief among the Buddhist sacred texts (being a record of the Gautama Buddha’s teaching), reads like an early self-help book. ‘No one saves us but ourselves, no one can and no one may.’ In Buddhism, salvation is something that is not external. To be happy, and at peace, Buddhism says, we have to be vigilant, aware of ourselves. Mindful. ‘As rain breaks through an ill-thatched house, passion in the sense of

suffering will break through an unreflecting mind.’ In a world with far more shiny distractions than the world of Himalayan India way over two thousand years ago, our metaphorical mental houses may be harder to thatch than ever before. Our minds now are less like thatched houses and a bit like computers. Yes, I could in theory get on my computer, open a Word document and just write, but I would probably check Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, the Guardian website. I might—if I am going through a neurotic patch—do a quick ego search, or check out any new Goodreads or Amazon reviews of my books or go on Google and type in a list of real or imaginary ailments to see which terminal disease I am currently suffering from. Even Buddha himself would struggle these days, though the lack of Wi-Fi in the Himalayan foothills would be a blessing if you wanted to meditate for forty-nine days under a tree. One thing I do understand, though, is that more is not better. I am not a Buddhist. I find all strict and certain guidelines too scary. Life is beautiful in its ambiguity. But I like the idea of being alert to ourselves, of connecting to the universal rather than living life on a see-saw of hope and fear. For me personally, happiness isn’t about abandoning the world of stuff, but in appreciating it for what it is. We cannot save ourselves from suffering by buying an iPhone. That doesn’t mean we shouldn’t buy one, it just means we should know such things are not ends in themselves.

And compassion.

That’s another thing I like about Buddhism. **The idea that kindness makes us happier than selfishness. That kindness is a shredding of the self or, in Schopenhauer-speak, will that releases us from the suffering that is our desires and wants.** To be selfless, while being mindful, seems to be a good solution, when the self intensifies and causes us to suffer.

Being good feels good because it makes us remember that we are not the only person that matters in this world. We all matter because we are all alive. And so kindness is an active way in which we can see and feel the bigger picture. We are ultimately all the same thing. We are life. We are consciousness. And so by feeling part of humanity, rather than an isolated unit, we feel better. We might physically perish, like a cell in a body might perish, but the body of life continues. And so, in the sense that life is a shared experience, we continue.

Thoughts

On

It is because of *time* that we grow old, and because of time we die. These are worrying things. As Aristotle put it, 'time crumbles things'. And we are scared of our own crumbling, and the crumbling of others. We feel an urgency to get on because time is short. To 'just do it', as Nike said. But is doing the answer? Or does doing actually speed up time? Wouldn't it be better just to be, even if less sporty footwear ends up being sold? Time does go at different speeds. As I've said, the few months in 1999 and 2000 when I was deeply ill felt like years. Decades, even. Pain lengthens time. But that is only because pain forces us to be aware of it. Being aware of other things also helps lengthen time. This is all meditation is. Awareness of ourselves in the 'amber' of the moment, to use Kurt Vonnegut's term. It sounds easy, but how much of our lives are we actually living in the present? How much instead are we either excited or worrying about the future, or regretting or mourning the past? Our response to all this worry about time is to try and achieve things before it is too late. Gain money, improve our status, marry, have children, get a promotion, gain more money, on and on forever.

Or rather, not forever. If it were forever, we wouldn't be having this discussion. But we kind of know that turning life into a desperate race for more stuff is only going to shorten it. Not in years, not in terms of actual time, but in terms of how time feels. Imagine all the time we had was bottled up, like wine, and handed over to us. How would we make that bottle last? By sipping slowly, appreciating the taste, or by gulping?

Resources

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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