

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

Falling

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In the end  
one needs  
more courage  
to live than to  
kill himself.

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In the end  
one needs  
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kill himself.

Albert Camus  
*A Happy Death*

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Whisper

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there but no one else can see them. The world shrugs. Your pupils might dilate. You may sound incoherent. Your skin might shine with sweat. But there was no way anyone seeing me in that villa could have known what I was feeling, no way they could have appreciated the strange hell I was living through, or why death seems such a phenomenally good idea. I stayed in bed for three days. But I didn't sleep. My girlfriend Andrea came in with water at regular intervals, or fruit, which I could hardly eat. The window was open to let fresh

It started with a thought. Something was going wrong. That was the start. Before I realised what it was. And then, a second or so later, there was a strange sensation inside my head. Some biological activity in the rear of my skull, not far above my neck. The cerebellum. A pulsing or intense flickering, as though a butterfly was trapped inside, combined with a tingling sensation. I did not yet know of the strange physical effects depression and anxiety would create. I just thought I was about to die. And then my heart started to go. And then I started to go. I sank, fast, falling into a new claustrophobic and suffocating reality. And it would way over a year before I would feel anything like even half-normal again. Up until that point I'd had no real understanding or awareness of depression, except that I knew my mum had suffered from it for a little while after I was born, and that my great-grandmother on my father's side had ended up committing suicide. So I suppose there had been a family history, but it hadn't been a history I'd thought about much. Anyway, I was twenty-four years old. I was living in Spain—in one of the more sedate and beautiful corners of the island of Ibiza. It was September. Within a fortnight, I would have returned to London, and reality. After six years of student life and summer jobs. I had put off being an adult for so long. I could, almost had, boomed like a cloud. A cloud that was now breaking and raining down on me. The weirdest thing about a mind is that you can have the most intense things going on in

air in, but the room was still and hot. I can remember being stunned that I was still alive. I know that sounds melodramatic, but depression and panic only give you melodramatic thoughts to play with. Anyway, there was no relief. I wanted to be dead. No. That's not quite right. I didn't want to be dead. I just didn't want to be alive. Death was something that scared me. And death only happened to people who had never been living. There were infinitely more people who had never been alive. I wanted to be one of those people. The old classic wish. To never have been born. To have been one of the three hundred million sperm that hadn't made it. (What a gift it was to be normal! We're all walking on these unseen tightropes when really we could slip at any second and come face to face with all the existential horrors that only lie dormant in our minds.) There was nothing much in this room. There was a bed with a white patternless duvet, and there were white walls. There might have been a picture on the wall but I don't think so. I certainly can't remember one.

There was a book by the bed. I picked it up once and put it back down. I couldn't focus for as much as a second.

*There was no way I could express fully this experience in words, because it was beyond words. Literally, I couldn't speak about it properly. Words seemed trivial next to this pain.*

I remember worrying about my younger sister, Phoebe. She was in Australia. I worried that she, my closest genetic match, would feel like this. I wanted to speak to her but I knew I couldn't. When we were little, at home in Nottinghamshire, we had developed a bed-time communication system of knocking on the wall between our rooms. I now knocked on the mattress, imagining she could hear me all the way through the worlds.

knock

knock

knock

knock

I didn't have terms like 'depression' or 'panic disorder' in my head. In my laughable naivety I did not really think that what I was experiencing was something that other people have ever felt. Because it was so alien to me I thought it had to be alien to the species.

**'Andrea, I'm scared.'**

*'It's okay. It's going to be okay. It's going to be okay.'*

**'What's happening to me?'**

*'I don't know. But it's going to be okay.'*

**'I don't understand how this can be happening.'**

knock

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On the third day, I left the room and I left the villa,  
and I went outside to kill myself.

*and I went outside to kill myself*  
*and I went outside to kill myself*  
*and I went outside to kill myself*

and I went outside to kill myself

*and I went outside to kill myself*

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# beautiful

a

The sun was beating hard. The air smelt of pine and the sea. The sea was right there, just below the cliff. And the cliff edge was only a few steps away. No more than twenty, I would say. The only plan I had was to take twenty-one steps in that direction.

'I want to die.'

There was a lizard near my feet. A real lizard. I felt a kind of judgement. The thing with lizards is that they don't kill themselves. Lizards are survivors. You take off their tail and another grows back. They aren't mopers. They don't get depressed. They just get on with it, however harsh and inhospitable the landscape. I wanted, more than anything, to be that lizard. The villa was behind me. The nicest place I

had ever lived. In front of me, the most glorious view I had ever seen. A sparkling Mediterranean, looking like a turquoise tablecloth scattered with tiny diamonds, fringed by a dramatic coastline of limestone cliffs and small, near-white forbidden beaches. It fit almost everyone's definition of beautiful. And yet, the most beautiful view in the world could not stop me from wanting to kill myself. A little over a year before I had read a lot of Michel Foucault for my

MA. Much of Madness and Civilization. The idea that madness should be allowed to be madness. That a fearful, repressive society brands anyone different as ill. But this was illness. This wasn't having a crazy thought. This wasn't being a bit wacky. This wasn't reading Borges or listening to Captain Beefheart or

of being alive. Now, listen. If you have ever believed a depressive wants to be happy, you are wrong. They could not care less about the luxury of happiness. They just want to feel an absence of pain. To escape a mind on fire, where thoughts blaze and smoke like old possessions lost to time, where normal is impossible, the only way I could be empty was to stop living. One minus one is zero.

new

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But actually, it wasn't easy. The weird thing about depression is that, even though you might have more suicidal thoughts, the fear of death remains the same. The only difference is that the pain of life has rapidly increased. **So when you hear about someone killing themselves it's important to know that death wasn't any less scary for them.** It wasn't a 'choice' in the moral sense. To be moralistic about it is to misunderstand.

I stood there for a while. Summoning the courage to die, and then summoning the courage to live. To be. Not to be. Right there, death was so close. An ounce more terror, and the scales would have tipped. There may be a universe in which I took that step, but it isn't this one. I had a mother and a father and a sister and a girlfriend. That was four people right there who loved me. I wished like mad, in that moment, that I had no one at all. Not a single soul. Love was trapping me here. And they didn't know what it was like, what my head was like. Maybe if they were in my head for ten minutes they'd be like, 'Oh, okay, yes, actually. You should jump. There is no way you should feel this amount of pain. Run and jump and close your eyes and just do it. I mean, if you were on fire I could put a blanket around you, but the flames are intense. There is nothing you can do. So jump. Or give me a gun and I'll shoot you euthanasia.' But that was not how it worked. I expressed your pain is inevitable, but honestly, I was scared.

What if I didn't die? What if I was just paralysed, and I was trapped, motionless, in that state, for ever? I think life always provides reasons to not die, if we listen hard enough. Those reasons can stem from the past—the people who raised us, maybe, or friends or lovers—or from the future—the possibilities we would be switching off.

*And so I kept living. I turned back towards the villa and ended up throwing up from the stress of it all.*



# A Conversation Across Time pt.I

I know. But you are going to have to. And it will be worth it.

Why? Is everything perfect in the future?

No. Of course not. Life is never perfect. And I still get depressed from time to time. But I'm at a better place. The pain is never as bad. I've found out who I am. I'm happy. Right now, I am happy. The storm ends. Believe me.

I just can't cope with the pain.

No. It is wonderful. Trust me.

That is terrible.

I can't believe you.

Well, you aren't going to.

Why?

I want to die.

You are from the future, and I have no future.

I just told you...

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'Have you heard of AIDA?' she asked me.

selling.

called me to teach me the fundamentals of

And she was right. After a series of disastrous interviews, I got a job selling advertising space for journalist trade paper the Press Gazette in Croydon. I was placed under the supervision of an Australian

'To be honest, your CV presents something of a foggy image. But it's April. Not graduate season. So we should be able to find you something.'

pretty sure it didn't involve being a sales person.

'Maybe,' I lied. I was mildly hungover. (We were living next to a pub. Three pints of lager and a Black Russian or two was my nightly routine.) I had very little idea of what I wanted to do with my life but I was

'Do you see yourself as a sales person?'

'I don't know.'

'So what do you want to do with your life?' the recruitment agent asked. She had a long solemn face like a sculpture on Easter Island.

Seven months before I first swallowed a diazepam tablet I had been in the office of a recruitment agency in central London.

'So, I should talk about my penis?'

'See? I've got your attention.'

'What?'

'mous penis?'

'Then he told me, from nowhere. 'I've got an enormous penis.'

'Right.'

'before they want to commit to an action, then their interest, then their desire to do something,

'The four stages of a sales call. You get their attention,

'What? No. AIDA. Attention. Interest. Desire. Action.'

'The opera?'

'Got it,' I said, staring out of the window at a bleak grey Croydon sky.

'No. It was an example.'

I didn't really get on with Iain. True, he asked me to 'join the boys' at lunch, and have a pint and a game of pool. It was all dirty jokes and football and slagging off their girlfriends. I hated it. I hadn't felt this out of place since I was thirteen. The plan—mine and Andrea's—had been to sort our lives out so we didn't have to go back to Ibiza that summer. But one lunch break I felt this intense bleakness inside me as if a cloud had passed over my soul. I literally couldn't stomach another hour phoning people who didn't want to be phoned. So I left the job. Just walked out. I was a failure. A quitter. I had nothing at all on the horizon. I was sliding down, becoming vulnerable to an illness that was waiting in the wings. But I didn't realise it. Or didn't care. I was just thinking of escape.

Had gone days without proper food. I hadn't noticed the hunger because of all the other crazy stuff that was happening to my body and brain. Andrea told me I needed to eat. She went to the fridge and got out a carton of Don Simon gazpacho (in Spain they sell it like fruit juice).

**'Drink this,' she said, unscrewing the cap and handing it over.**

I took a sip. The moment I tasted it was the moment I realised how hungry I was so I swallowed some more. I'd probably had half the carton before I had to go outside and throw up again. Admittedly, throwing up from drinking Don Simon gazpacho might not be the surest sign of illness in the world, but Andrea wasn't taking her chances.

'Oh God,' she said.  
'We're going now.'

'Where?' I said.

'To the medical centre.'

I don't think I added to it, though.

Weird nowhere near covered it.

And then I got pills.

I added a question mark in there, but I don't really remember it as a question. I don't know what I answered, but I do know that we went to the medical centre.

'They'll make me take pills,' I said. 'I can't take pills.'

'Matt. You need pills. You are beyond the point at which not taking pills is an option. We're going, okay?'

'It is adrenaline. That is all. How is your breathing. Have you hyperventilated?'

'It hasn't really stopped. My heart is beating too fast still. I feel weird.'

'So how long did the panic last?'

'No. It is just my heart. I mean, my breathing feels... weird... but everything feels weird.'

'Are you on drugs?'

'No!'

'Have you taken any?'

'In my life, yes. But not this week. I'd been drinking a lot, though.'

'Vale, vale, vale,' he said.

'You need diazepam. Maximum. The most I am able to give for you.'

'This will fix you. I promise.'

For a doctor in a country where you could get diazepam freely over the counter, like it was paracetamol or ibuprofen, this was quite a significant thing to say.

He felt my heart.

He felt it with his hand.

Two fingers pressed into my chest.

He stopped smiling.

I lay there, and imagined the tablets were working. For a moment panic simmered down to a level of heavy anxiety. But that feeling of momentary relaxation actually triggered more panic. And this was a flood. I felt everything pull away from me, like when Brody is sitting on the beach in Jaws and thinks he sees the shark. I was lying there on a sofa but I felt a literal pulling away. As if something was sliding me towards a further distance from reality.

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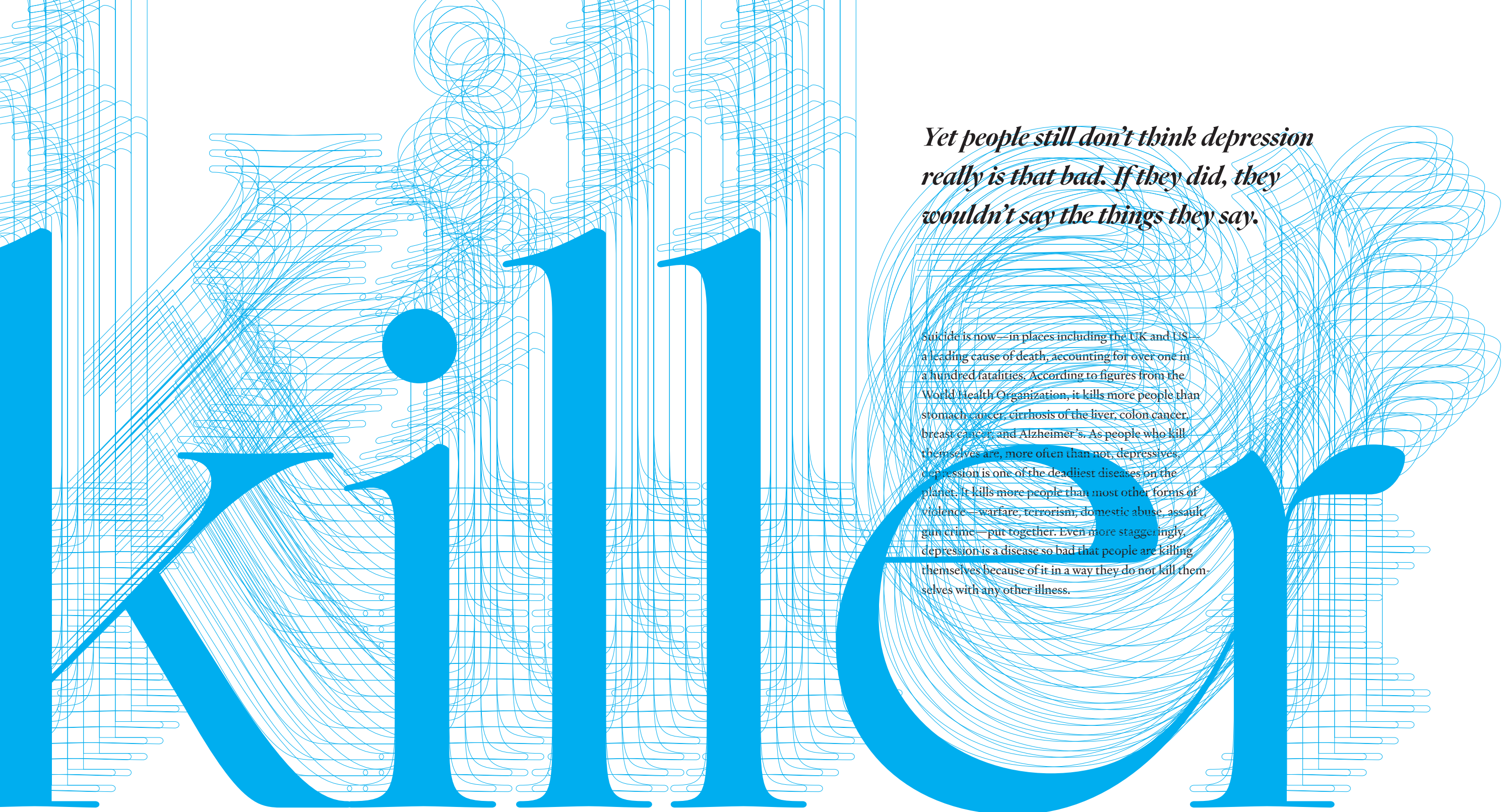
Does mental illness just happen, or is it there all along? According to the World Health Organization nearly half of all mental disorders are present in some form before the age of fourteen. When I became ill at twenty-four it felt like something terribly new and sudden. I had a pretty normal, ordinary childhood. But I never really felt very normal. (Does anyone?) I usually felt anxious. A typical memory would be me as a ten-year-old, standing on the stairs and asking the babysitter if I could stay with her until my parents came back. I was crying. She was kind. She let me sit with her. I liked her a lot. She smelt of vanilla and wore baggy t-shirts. She was called Jenny. Jenny the Babysitter Who Lived Up the Street. A decade or so later she would have transformed into Jenny Saville, the Britart star famed for her large-scale painted depictions of naked women. *Do you think they'll be home soon?* 'Yes,' said Jenny, patiently. *Of course they will. They're only a mile away. That's not very far, you know?* I knew. But I also knew they could have got mugged or killed or eaten by dogs. They weren't, of course. Very few Newark-on-Trent residents ended their Saturday night being eaten by dogs. They came home. But all my childhood, over and over again, I carried on this way. Always inadvertently teaching myself how to be anxious. In a world where possibility is endless, the possibilities for pain and loss and permanent separation are also endless. So fear breeds imagination, and vice versa, on and on and on, until there is nothing left to do except go mad. Then something else. A bit less ordinary, but still in the ballpark. I was thirteen. Me and a friend went over to some girls in our year on the school field. Sat down. One of the girls—one I fancied more than anything—looked at me and then made a disgusted face to her friends. Then she spoke words that I would remember twenty-six years later when I came to write them down in a book. She said: *'Ugh. I don't want that sitting next to me. With his spider legs on his face.'* She went on to explain, as the ground kept refusing to swallow me up, what she meant. The hair growing out of his moles. It looks like spiders. At about five that afternoon I went into the bathroom at home and used my dad's razor to shave the hairs off my moles. I looked at my face and hated it. I looked at the two most prominent moles on my face. I picked up my toothbrush and pressed it into my left cheek, right over my largest mole. I clenched my eyes shut and rubbed hard. I brushed and brushed, until there was blood dripping into the sink, until my face was throbbing with heat and pain from the friction. My mum came in that day and saw me bleeding. 'Matthew, what on earth has happened to your face?' I held a tissue over the fresh, bleeding scar and mumbled the truth. That night I couldn't sleep. My left cheek throbbed beneath a giant plaster, but that wasn't the reason. I was thinking of school, of explaining away the plaster. I was thinking of that other universe where I was dead. And where the girl would hear I was dead and the guilt would make her cry. A suicidal thought, I suppose. But a comforting one. My childhood went by. I remained anxious. I felt like an outsider, with my left-wing, middle-class parents in a right-wing, working-class town. At sixteen, I got arrested for shoplifting (hair gel, Crunchie bar) and spent an afternoon in a police cell, but that was a symptom of teen idiocy and wanting to fit in, not depression. I skateboarded badly, got eclectic grades, cultivated asymmetric hair, carried my virginity around like a medieval curse. Normal stuff. I didn't totally fit in. I kind of disintegrated around people, and became what they wanted me to be. But paradoxically, I felt a intensity inside me all the time. I know what I was, but it kept building, like water behind a dam. Later, when I was properly depressed and saw the illness as a summation of everything I'd had, intensity. A kind of breaking through. As you find it hard enough to get yourself free, your self breaks in, flooding your mind. An attempt to drown all those failed half-versions of you.

***Boys don't cry. But they do. We do. I do. I weep all the time.***

I want to talk about being a man. A staggeringly higher number of men than women kill themselves. In the UK the ratio is 3:1, in Greece 6:1, in the USA 4:1. This is pretty average. According to the World Health Organization, the only countries in the world where more women than men kill themselves are China and Hong Kong. Everywhere else, many more men than women end their own lives. This is especially strange when you think that, according to every official study, about twice as many women experience depression. So, clearly, in most places there is something about being a man that makes you more likely to kill yourself. And there is also a paradox. If suicide is a symptom of depression (it is), then why do more women suffer depression than men? Why, in other words, is depression more fatal if you are a man rather than a woman? The fact that suicide rates vary between eras and countries and genders shows that suicide is not set in stone for anyone. Consider the UK. In 1981, 2,466 women in the UK took their own lives. Thirty years later that number had almost halved to 1,391. The corresponding figures for men are 4,129 and then 4,590. So back in 1981, when the Office of National Statistics records began, men were still more likely to kill themselves than women, but only 1.9 times more likely. Now they are 3.5 times more likely. Why do so many men still kill themselves? **What is going wrong?** The common answer is that men, traditionally, see mental illness as a sign of weakness and are reluctant to seek help. **Boys don't cry. But they do. We do. I do. I weep all the time.** (I wept this afternoon, watching *Boyhood*.) And boys—and men—do commit suicide. In *White Noise*, Don DeLillo's anxiety-ridden narrator Jack Gladney is tormented by the concept of masculinity and how he measures up: 'What could be more useless than a man who couldn't fix a dripping faucet—fundamentally useless, dead to history, to the messages in his genes?' And what if, instead of a broken faucet it is a broken mind? Then maybe a man who was worried

about his manliness would feel he should be able to fix that on his own, too, with nothing but silence amid the 'white noise' of modern life, and maybe a few litres of alcohol. If you are a man or a woman with mental health problems, you are part of a very large and growing group. Many of the greatest and, well, toughest people of all time have suffered from depression. Politicians, astronauts, poets, painters, philosophers, scientists, mathematicians (a hell of a lot of mathematicians), actors, boxers, peace activists, war leaders, and a billion other people fighting their own battles. You are no less or more of a man or a woman or a human for having depression than you would be for having cancer or cardiovascular disease or a car accident. So what should we do? Talk. Listen. Encourage talking. Encourage listening. Keep adding to the conversation. Stay on the lookout for those wanting to join in the conversation. Keep reiterating, again and again, that depression is not something you 'admit to', it is not something you have to blush about, it is a human experience. A boy-girl-man-woman-young-old-black-white-gay-straight-rich-poor experience. It is not you. It is simply something that happens to you. And something that can often be eased by talking. Words. Comfort. Support. It took me more than a decade to be able to talk openly, properly, to everyone, about my experience. I soon discovered the act of talking is in itself a therapy. Where talk exists, so does hope. Medication didn't work for me. I think I was partly to blame. In *Bad Science* Ben Goldacre points out that 'You are a placebo responder. Your body plays tricks on your mind. You cannot be trusted.' This is true, and it can surely work both ways. During that very worst time, when depression co-existed with full-on panic disorder, I was scared of everything. I was, quite literally, scared of my shadow. If I looked at an object—shoes, a cushion, a cloud—for long enough then I would see some malevolence inside it, some negative force that, in an earlier and more superstitious century, I might have interpreted as the Devil. But the thing I was most scared of was drugs or anything (alcohol, lack of sleep, sudden news, even a massage) that would change my state of mind. Later, during lesser bouts of anxiety, I would often find myself enjoying alcohol too much. That soft warm cushioning of existence that is so comforting you end up forgetting the hangover that will ensue. After important meetings I would find myself in bars alone, drinking through the afternoon and nearly missing the last train home. But in 1999 I was years away from being back to this relatively normal level of dysfunction. It is a strange irony that it was during the period when I most needed my mind to feel better, that I didn't want to actively interfere with my mind. Not because I didn't want to be well again, but because I didn't really believe feeling well again was possible, or far less possible than feeling worse. And worse was terrifying. So I think part of the problem was that a reverse placebo effect was going on. I would take the diazepam and instantly panic, and the panic increased the

moment I felt the drug have any effect at all. Even if it was a good effect. Months later a similar thing would happen when I started taking St John's Wort. It would even happen to a degree with ibuprofen. So clearly the diazepam wasn't entirely to blame. And diazepam is far from being the strongest medication out there. Yet the feeling and level of disconnection I felt on diazepam is something others claim to feel on it too, and so I think that the drug itself (for me) was at least part of the problem. A human body is bigger than it looks. Advances in science and technology have shown that, really, a physical body is a universe in itself. Each of us is made up of roughly a hundred trillion cells. In each of those cells is roughly that same number again of atoms. That is a lot of separate components. Our brains alone have a hundred billion brain cells, give or take a few billion. Yet most of the time we do not feel the near-infinite nature of our physical selves. We simplify by thinking about ourselves in terms of our larger pieces. Arms, legs, feet, hands, torso, head. Flesh, bones. A similar thing happens with our minds. In order to cope with living they simplify themselves. They concentrate on one thing at a time. But depression is a kind of quantum physics of thought and emotion. It reveals what is normally hidden. It unravels you, and everything you have known. It turns out that we are not only made of the universe, of 'star-stuff' to borrow Carl Sagan's phrase, but we are as vast and complicated as it too. The evolutionary psychologists might be right. We humans might have evolved too far. The price for being intelligent enough to be the first species to be fully aware of the cosmos might just be a capacity to feel a whole universe's worth of darkness.



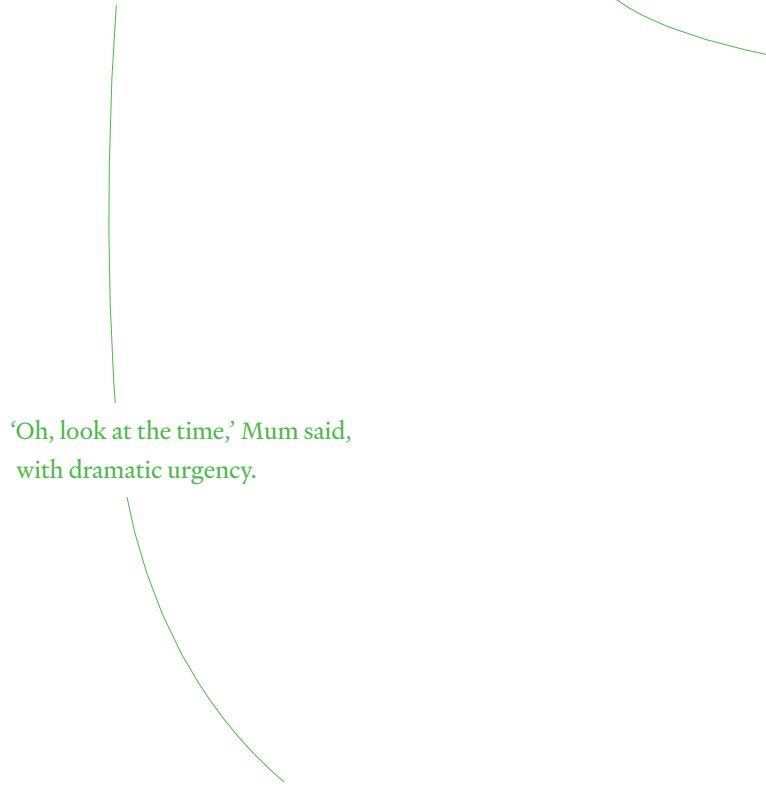
*Yet people still don't think depression really is that bad. If they did, they wouldn't say the things they say.*

Suicide is now—in places including the UK and US—a leading cause of death, accounting for over one in a hundred fatalities. According to figures from the World Health Organization, it kills more people than stomach cancer, cirrhosis of the liver, colon cancer, breast cancer, and Alzheimer's. As people who kill themselves are, more often than not, depressives, depression is one of the deadliest diseases on the planet. It kills more people than most other forms of violence—warfare, terrorism, domestic abuse, assault, gun crime—put together. Even more staggeringly, depression is a disease so bad that people are killing themselves because of it in a way they do not kill themselves with any other illness.

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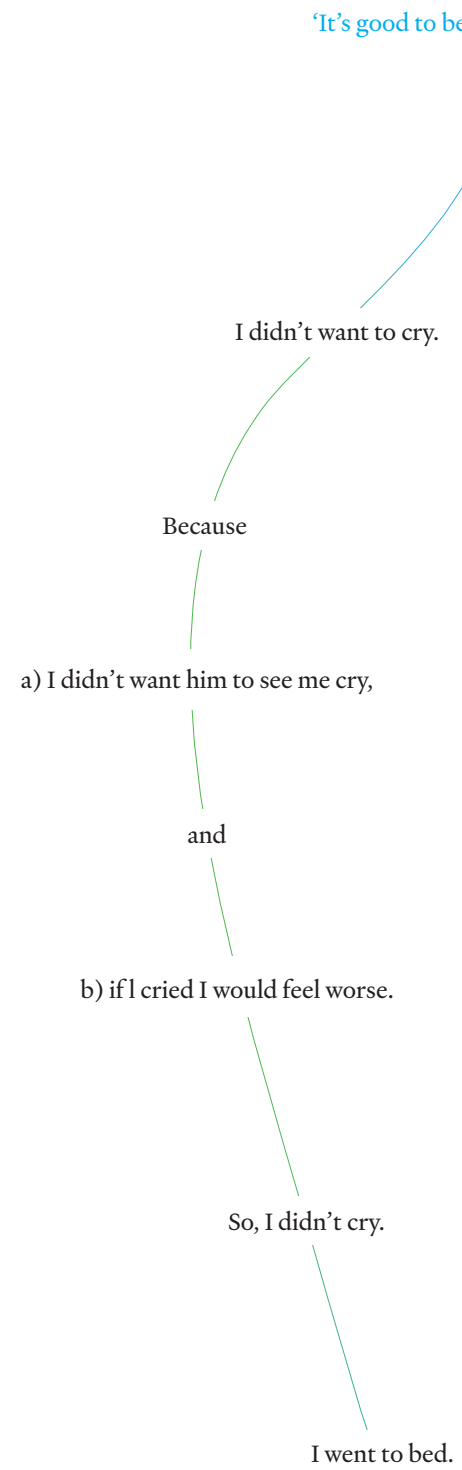
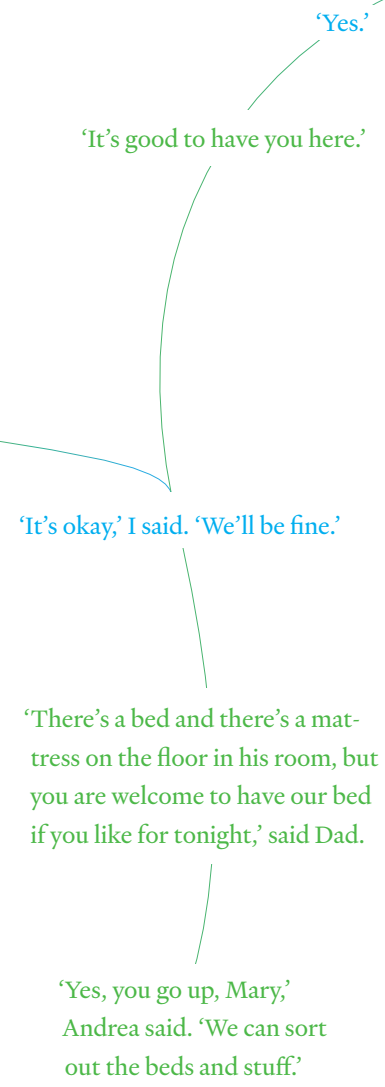
**-111**

Doubts are like swallows. They follow each other and swarm together. I stared at myself in the mirror. I stared at my face until it was not my face. I went back to the table and sat down and I did not say how I was feeling to anyone. To say how I was feeling would lead to feeling more of what I was feeling. To act normal would be to feel a bit more normal. I acted normal.



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(She was a head teacher at an infant school.)



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And the next day I woke up, and it was there. The depression and anxiety, both together. People describe depression as a weight, and it can be. It can be a real physical weight, as well as a metaphorical, emotional one. But I don't think weight is the best way to describe what I felt.

As I lay there, on the mattress on the floor—I had insisted Andrea sleep on the bed, not out of straightforward chivalry but because that is what I would have done if I was normal—I felt like I was trapped in a cyclone. Outwardly, to others, I would over the next few months look a bit slower than normal, a bit more lethargic, but the experience going on in my mind was always relentlessly and oppressively fast.

HOW WILL WE BETTER. CONTAIN DEPRESSION? EXPECT NO MAGIC  
PILL. ONE LESSON LEARNED FROM TREATING CHRONIC PAIN IS THAT IT  
IS TOUGH TO OVERRIDE RESPONSES THAT ARE HARDWIRED INTO THE  
BODY AND MIND. INSTEAD, WE MUST FOLLOW THE ECONOMY OF MOOD  
WHERE IT LEADS, ATTENDING TO THE SOURCES THAT BRING SO MANY  
INTO LOW MOOD STATES—THINK, ROUTINES THAT FEATURE TOO MUCH  
WORK AND TOO LITTLE SLEEP. WE NEED BROADER MOOD LITERACY  
AND AN AWARENESS OF TOOLS THAT INTERRUPT LOW MOOD STATES  
BEFORE THEY MORPH INTO LONGER, AND MORE SEVERE ONES. THESE  
TOOLS INCLUDE ALTERING HOW WE THINK, THE EVENTS AROUND US, OUR  
RELATIONSHIPS, AND CONDITIONS IN OUR BODIES (BY EXERCISE, MEDICA-  
TION, OR DET.

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Here is Professor  
Jonathan Rottenberg:

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Now take a break  
Breathe in. Breathe out.

# Important lists.

Stolen, curated, and  
compiled advice.

# Things die— pires— sion— says to you on a daily basis

Hey, sad-sack! **Yes, you!** What are you doing? **Why are you trying to get out of bed?** Stay in bed. **Why are you trying to apply for a job?** Who do you think you are? **Mark Zuckerberg?** You are going to go mad. **Like Van Gogh.** You might cut off your ear. **Why are you crying?** Because you need to put the washing on? **Hey.** Remember your dog, Murdoch? **He's dead.** Like your grandparents. **Everyone you have ever met will be dead this time next century.** Yep. **Everyone you know is just a collection of slowly deteriorating cells.** Look at the people walking outside. **Look at them.** There. **Outside the window.** Why can't you be like them? **There's a cushion.** Let's just stay here and look at it and contemplate the infinite sadness of cushions.

*PS. I've just seen tomorrow.  
It's even worse.*

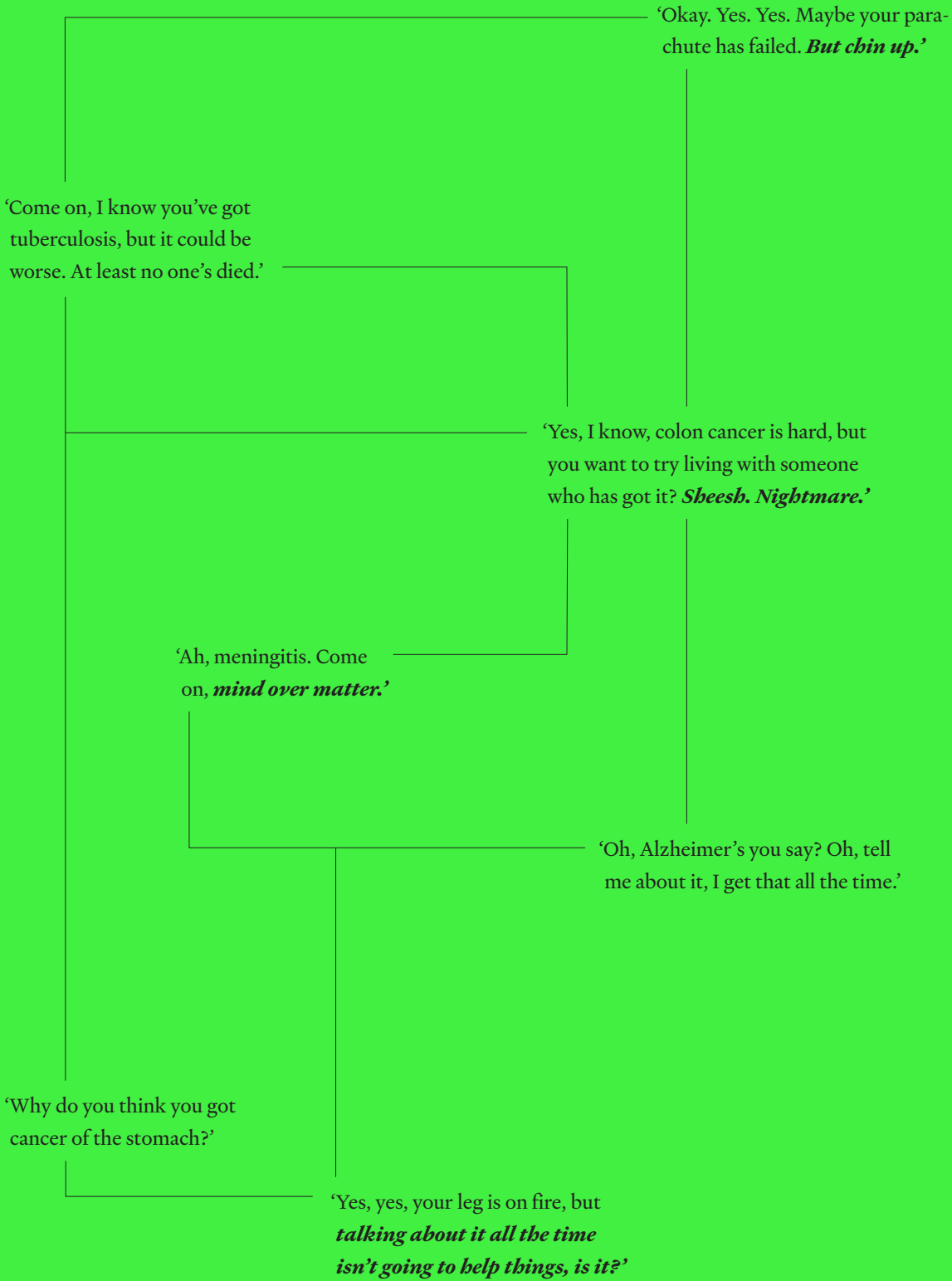
# BANK.

When you are very depressed or anxious—unable to leave the house, or the sofa, or to think of anything but the depression—it can be unbearably hard. Bad days come in degrees. They are not all equally bad. And the really bad ones, though horrible to live through, are useful for later. You store them up. A bank of bad days. The day you had to run out of the supermarket. The day you were so depressed your tongue wouldn't move. The day you made your parents cry.

# OFFERBAD

# DAYS

The day you nearly threw yourself off a cliff. So if you are having another bad day you can say, well, this feels bad, but there have been worse. And even when you can think of no worse day—when the one you are living is the very worst there has ever been—you at least know the bank exists and that you have made a deposit.



Things people say  
to aggressive  
that, they  
don't say  
in other  
life-threatening  
— gaming  
— situations

The only thing people  
should say to depressives.

*I am here to listen.*

My

# SADNESS

AGORAPHOBIA

SEPARATION ANXIETY

LIKE I WAS USELESS.

HYPOCHONDRIA.

MENTAL AND PHYSICAL EXHAUSTION.

THE OCCASIONAL INABILITY TO SPEAK.

AN INABILITY TO EVEN CONTEMPLATE THE FUTURE.

A SENSE OF BEING CUT FROM REALITY.

A CONTINUAL SENSE OF HEAVY DREAD.

AN INFINE SADNESS.

LIKE MY REFLECTION SHOWED ANOTHER PERSON.

INSOMNIA  
LIKE I WAS FALLING EVEN WHILE I WAS STANDING STILL.

The desire to be dead was there for a while. A day, an hour, a second. At the time, I didn't experience it as such. I thought I was the only person in the world to have ever had this feeling (this is the media age), though of course there were others going through an equivalent experience at one time. I'd often involuntarily think of the world as a kind of vast and dark machine, a kind of steampunk graphic novel, a kind of mess of pipes and pedals and levers and hydraulics, emitting sparks and steam and noise. Adding anxiety to depression is a bit like adding cocaine to alcohol. It presses fast-forward on the whole experience. If you have depression on its own your mind sinks into a swamp and loses momentum, but with anxiety in the cocktail, the swamp is still a swamp but the swamp now has whirlpools in it. The monsters that are there, in the muddy water, continually move like modified alligators at their highest speed. You are continually on guard. You are on guard to the point of collapse

at any single moment, while desperately trying to float, to breathe the air that the people around you are breathing as easily as you. You don't have a second. You don't have a second out of the fear. The fear is a constant. You create a moment, a moment of being terrified, but the moment is gone. It's a moment that you have isn't the moment of a single moment. You can think outside of it. If you have a moment that you can say 'my back is killing me', and there will be a kind of separation between the pain and the self. The pain is something other. It attacks and annoys and even eats away at the self but it is still not the self. But with depression and anxiety the pain isn't something you think about because it is thought. You are not your back but you are your thoughts. If your back hurts it might hurt more by sitting down.

*It can affect people who seem, from the outside, to have no reason to be miserable.*

*It is my system. It is not.*

*People who have just landed a promotion.*

*People who exude happiness in the status updates.*

## Why depression is hard to understand

It is the wrong word. The word depression makes me think of a flat tyre, something punctured and unmoving. Maybe depression minus anxiety feels like that, but depression laced with terror is not something flat or still. (The poet Melissa Broder once tweeted: ‘what idiot called it “depression” and not “there are bats living in my chest and they take up a lot of room, ps. I see a shadow”?’) At its worse you find yourself wishing, desperately, for any other affliction, any physical pain, because the mind is infinite, and its torments—when they happen—can be equally infinite.

*It is a bit sad.*

*People who can tap dance and do card tricks and strum a guitar.*

*It doesn't always have an obvious cause.*

*You can be depressive and be happy, just as you can be sober and alcoholic.*

*Millionaires.*

*People with good hair.*

*People who have noticeable pores.*

*Happily married people.*

*It is unsuitable.*

# FACTS

When you are trapped inside something that feels so unreal, you look for anything that can give you a sense of your bearings. I craved knowledge. I craved facts. 'I searched for them like lifebuoys in the sea. But statistics are tricky things. Things that occur in the mind can often be hidden. Indeed, when I first became ill I spent a lot of energy on looking normal. People often only know someone is suffering if they tell them, and with depression that doesn't always happen, especially if you are male (more on that later). Also, over time, facts have changed. Indeed, whole concepts and words change. Depression didn't used to be depression. It used to be melancholia, and far fewer people suffered from that than they do from current depression. But did they really? Or are people more open about such things? But anyway, here are some of the facts we have right now.

## ***Suicide Facts***

- Suicide is the leading cause of death among men under the age of thirty-five.
- Suicide rates vary widely depending on where you are in the world. For instance, if you live in Greenland you are twenty-seven times more likely to kill yourself than if you live in Greece.
- A million people a year kill themselves. Between ten and twenty million people a year try to. Worldwide, men are over three times more likely to kill themselves than women.

## ***Depression Facts***

- One in five people get depression at some point in their lives. (Though obviously more than that will suffer from mental illness.)
- Anti-depressants are on the rise almost everywhere. Iceland has the highest consumption, followed by Australia, Canada, Denmark, Sweden, Portugal and the UK.
- Twice as many women as men will suffer a serious bout of depression in their lives.
- Combined anxiety and depression is most common in the UK, followed by anxiety, post-traumatic stress disorder, 'pure' depression, phobias, eating disorders, OCD, and panic disorder.
- Women are more likely to seek and receive treatment for mental health problems than men.
- The risk of developing depression is about 40 per cent if a biological parent has been diagnosed with the illness.



End of im-  
portant lists.  
(for now).

Stolen, curated, and  
compiled advice.

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

# The hope that hadn't happened

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I was better. I was better. But it only takes a doubt. A drop of ink falls into a clear glass of water and clouds the whole thing. So the moment after I realised I wasn't perfectly well was the moment I realised I was still very ill indeed.

clouding, a shifting of psychological light. notice my mind was changing. There was a kind of a kind of dark pink. I flushed, and I began to light on with a string. The downstairs bathroom was ten. I went to the downstairs toilet, and pulled the ting around the table eating fish pie. It was half past there looking tired and happy and worried all at once. My mum and dad were at the airport. They stood We hugged. We drove back. I was better. I was sitting. Comfort food. It made me feel good. I was sitting. I think it was a fish pie. I think they had made it especially for me. I had left my demons behind in the Mediterranean and now I was fine. I was still on sleeping pills and diazepam but I didn't need them. I just needed home. *not crazy or depressed.* I just needed Mum and Dad. Yes. I was better. I was okay and not crazy or depressed. *I was okay. I was* still a little bit edgy, but I was better. I was better. and I didn't say much, but just enough to prove I was remember we had a meal around the kitchen table. 'We were so worried,' Mum said, and eighty-seven would happen. All that was missing was my name. I other variations of that theme. Mum turned around a statement from fate. Newark 24. We knew this in the passenger seat and looked at me and smiled 24. I was twenty-four. The road sign seemed to be and the smile had a slightly crumpled quality, her eyes glazed with tears. I felt it. The weight of Mum. my childhood. I thought of happy and unappreciated. The weight of being a son that had gone wrong. The weight of being loved. The weight of being a disappointment. The weight of being a hope that hadn't happened the way it should have.

## But. I was better.

A little bit frayed. But that was understandable. I was better, essentially. I could still be the hope. I might end up living until I am ninety-seven. I could be a lawyer or a brain surgeon or a mountaineer or a theatre director yet. It was early days. Early days. Early days. It was night outside the window. Newark 24. Newark was where I had grown up and where I was going back to. A market town of 40,000 people. It was a place I had only ever wanted to escape, but now I was going back. But that was fine. I thought of

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No one did.

From the outside a person sees your physical form, sees that you are a unified mass of atoms and cells.

You feel lost, disintegrated, spread across the universe amid infinite dark space.

To pull myself together.

Yet inside you feel like a Big Bang has happened.

*I cried. I had never been one of those males who were scared of tears.*

He was right, of course, and I wouldn't have wanted him to say much else, but he had no idea as to how hard that sounded.

They were the words he wanted to hear so I gave him them.

'You can do this. Come on. You can pull yourself together, Mattie. You're going to have to.'

'I'll try, Dad, I'll try.'

My dad wasn't a tough dad. He was a gentle, caring, intelligent dad, but he still didn't have the magical ability to see inside my head.

'Come on,' he said, softly.

And I returned to staring out at those ghosts of my childhood.

I was in my parents' bedroom. On my own. Andrea was downstairs, I think. Anyway, she wasn't with me. I was standing by the window with my head against the glass. It was one of those times when the depression was there on its own, uncoloured by anxiety. It was October. The saddest of months. My parents' street was a popular route into town, so there were a few people walking along the pavement. Some of these people I knew or recognised from my childhood, which had only officially ended six years before.

Though maybe it hadn't ended at all. The tears burnt to nothing before they began. But now, at the lowest ebb, you imagine—wrongly—that no one else in the world has felt so bad. I prayed to be deep. They seemed to come from my gut, my stomach was trembling so much. The dam had burst. And I craved to exist in their minds. I could not cope with the relentless self-torment any more than I could cope with my hand on a hot stove when I could see buckets of ice all around me. Just the sheer exhaustion of never

being able to find mental comfort. Of every positive thought reaching a cul-de-sac before it starts. I cried. I had never been one of those males who were scared of tears. I'd been a Cure fan, for God's sake. I'd been emo before it was a term. Yet weirdly, depression didn't make me cry that often, considering how bad it was. I think it was the surreal nature of what I was feeling. Tears were a language and I felt all language was far away from me. I was beneath tears. Tears were what I was living. By the time you're in it, it's too late.

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I cried! I had n  
been one of those  
moments who were  
sudden! of fears.

The more you research the science of depression, the more you realise it is still more characterised by what we don't know than what we do. It is 90% mystery.

A side effect of depression is sometimes to become obsessed with the functioning of your brain. During my breakdown, living back with my parents, I used to imagine reaching into my own skull and taking out the parts of it that were making me feel bad. From having spoken to other people with depression, and having even come across it in other books, this seems to be a common fantasy. But which parts would I have taken out? Would I take out a whole solid chunk, or something small and fluid? Once, during a dip, I sat on a bench in Park Square in Leeds. It was the sedate part of the city centre. Victorian town-houses now turned into legal offices. I stared at a cherry tree and felt flat. Depression, without anxiety. Just a total, desperate flatness. I could hardly move. Of course, Andrea was with me. I didn't tell her how bad I was feeling, just sitting there, looking at the pink blossom and the branches. Wishing my thoughts could float away from me as easily as the blossom floated from the tree. In public.

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# UNKNOWN UNKNOWN

As Dr. David Adam says in his brilliant account of obsessive compulsive disorder, *The Man Who Couldn't Stop*: 'Only a fool or a liar will tell you how the brain works.' A brain is not a toaster. It is complex. It may only weigh a little over a kilo, but it is a kilo that contains a whole lifetime of memories. It is worryingly magical, in that it does so much with us still not understanding how or why. It is—like all else—made out of atoms which themselves came into being in stars millions of years ago.

**Yet more is known about those faraway stars than the processes of our brain.** The one item in the whole universe that can think about, well, the whole universe. A lot of people still believe that depression is about chemical imbalance. 'Incipient insanity was mainly a matter of chemicals,' wrote Kurt Vonnegut, in *Breakfast of Champions*. 'Dwayne Hoover's body was manufacturing certain chemicals which unbalanced his mind.' It is an attractive idea. And one that has, over the years, been supported by numerous scientific studies. A lot of the research into the scientific causes of depression has focused on chemicals such as dopamine and, more often, serotonin. Serotonin is a neurotransmitter. That is a type of chemical that sends signals from one area of the brain to the other. The theory is that an imbalance in serotonin levels—caused by the brain's ill production of serotonin—equates to depression. It is no surprise that some of the most common anti-depressants, from Prozac

down, are SSRIs—selective serotonin reuptake inhibitors—which raise the serotonin levels in your brain. However, the serotonin theory of depression looks a bit wobbly. The problem has been highlighted by the emergence of anti-depressants that have no effect on serotonin, and some that do the exact opposite of an SSRI (namely, selective serotonin reuptake enhancers, such as tianeptine) which have been shown to be as effective at treating depression. Add to this the fact that serotonin in an active living human brain is a hard thing to measure and you have a very inconclusive picture indeed. Back in 2008, Ben Goldacre in the *Guardian* was already questioning the serotonin model. 'Quacks from the \$600 billion pharmaceutical industry sell the idea that depression is caused by low serotonin levels in the brain, and so you need drugs which raise the serotonin levels in your brain... That's the serotonin hypothesis. It was always shaky, and the evidence is now hugely contradictory.' So, annoyingly, scientists aren't all singing from the same hymn sheet. Some don't even believe the last hymn sheet. Others have burnt the hymn sheet and written their own songs. For instance, a professor of behavioural science at Stanford University called Robert Malenka believes that research needs to be carried out in other areas. Like on the bit of the brain right in the centre, the tiny, nucleus accumbens. As this is already known to be responsible for pleasure and addiction, it makes a kind of sense that it isn't working properly. We'll feel the opposite of pleasure—anhedonia. That is the complete inability to feel pleasure, a chief symptom of depression.

looking at how we live, and how our minds weren't made for the lives we lead. Human brains—in terms of cognition and emotion and consciousness—are essentially the same as they were at the time of Shakespeare or Jesus or Cleopatra or the Stone Age. They are not evolving with the pace of change. Neolithic humans never had to face emails or breaking news or pop-up ads or Iggy Azalea videos or a self-service checkout at a strip-lit Tesco Metro on a busy Saturday night. Maybe instead of worrying about upgrading technology and slowly allowing ourselves to be cyborgs we should have a little peek at how we could upgrade our ability to cope with all this change.

One thing can be said for sure: we are nowhere near the end of science—especially a baby science like neuroscience. So most of what we know now will be disproved or reassessed in the future. That is how science works, not through blind faith, but continual doubt. All we can do, for the moment, is really all we

need to do—listen to ourselves. When we are trying to get better, the only truth that matters is what works for us. If something works we don't necessarily care why. Diazepam didn't work for me. Sleeping pills and St John's Wort and homeopathy didn't fix me either. I have never tried Prozac, because even the idea intensified my panic, so I don't know about that. But then I have never tried cognitive behavioural therapy either. If pills work for you it doesn't really matter if this is to do with serotonin or another process or anything else—keep taking them. Hell, if licking wallpaper does it for you, do that. I am not anti pill. I am pro anything that works and I know pills do work for a lot of people. There may well come a time in the future where I take pills again. For now, I do what I know keeps me just about level. Exercise definitely helps me, as does yoga and absorbing myself in something or someone I love, so I keep doing these things. I suppose, in the absence of universal certainties, we are our own best laboratory.

Warning signs are very hard with depression. It's especially hard for people with no direct experience of depression to know them when they see them. Partly this is because some people are confused about what depression actually is. We use 'depressed' as a synonym for 'sad', which is fine, as we use 'starving' as a synonym for 'hungry', though the difference between depression and sadness is the difference between genuine starvation and feeling a bit peckish. Depression is an illness. Yet it doesn't come with a rash or a cough. It is hard to see, as it is generally invisible. Even though it is a serious illness it is also surprisingly hard for many sufferers to recognise it at first. Not because it doesn't feel bad—it does—but because that bad feeling seems unrecognisable, or can be confused with other things. For instance, if you feel worthless you might think 'I feel worthless because I am worthless'. It might be hard to see it as a symptom of an illness. Or even if it is seen as that, it's possible that low self-worth, combined with fatigue, might mean there is little will or ability to vocalise it.

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# Warning

But in any case, these are some of the most frequently cited signs that someone is depressed. **Fatigue**—if someone is tired all the time, for no real reason. **Low self-esteem**—a hard one for others to spot, especially in those people who aren't that comfortable talking about their feelings. And low self-esteem isn't exactly conducive with getting out there in the world. **'Psychomotor retardation'**—in certain cases of depression, slow movements and slow speech may happen. **Loss of appetite** (though massive increase in appetite can sometimes be a symptom too). **Irritability** (though, to be fair, that can be a sign of anything). **Frequent crying episodes. Anhedonia**—I first knew of this word as Woody Allen's original title for the film Annie Hall. It means, as I've said, the inability to experience pleasure in anything. Even the pleasurable things, like sunsets and nice food, and watching dubious Chevy Chase comedies from the eighties. That sort of stuff. **Sudden introversion**—if someone seems quieter, or more introverted than normal, it could mean they are depressed. (I can remember there were times when I couldn't speak. It felt like I couldn't move my tongue, and talking seemed so utterly pointless. Just as the things other people talked about seemed to belong to another world.)

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The demon sat next to me in the back of the car. He was real and false all at once. Not a hallucination exactly, and not transparent like a theme park ghost, but there and not there. **There when I closed my eyes. There even when I opened them again, a kind of flickering mind-print transferred over reality, but something imagined rather than seen.**

He was short. About three foot. Impish and grey, like a gargoyle on a cathedral, and he was looking up at me, smiling. And then he got up on the seat and started licking my face. He had a long, dry tongue. And he kept on. Lick, lick, lick. He didn't really scare me. I mean, fear was there, obviously. I was living continually inside fear. But the demon didn't send me deeper into terror. If anything, he was a comfort. The licks were caring licks, as if I was one big wound and he was trying to make me better.

The car was heading to the Nottingham Theatre Royal. We were off to see Swan Lake. It was the production where all the swans were male. My mother was talking. Andrea was in the front passenger seat, listening with polite patience to my mother. I can't remember what she was saying but I can remember what she was talking about. And if you are mad, then seeing things that aren't there is probably a symptom. If you are scared when there is nothing to be scared of, eventually your brain has to give you things. And so that classic expression—'the only thing to fear is fear itself'—becomes a kind of meaningless taunt. Because fear is enough. It is worse.

**Lick, lick, lick, lick.** I couldn't really feel the tongue on my skin, but the idea of the demon licking my face

was real enough for my brain to tingle, as if I was being tickled. **The demon laughed.** We went into the theatre. Swans danced. My heart sped up. The dark, the confinement, the pressure of my hand, it was all too much. **This was it. Very long was over. Except, of course, it wasn't. I stayed in my seat.**

The house was silent so we tried to be too. 'I love you,' she whispered.

'I love you,' I whispered back.

We kissed.

I felt demons watching us, gathering around us, as we kissed and held each other. **And slowly, in my mind, the demons retreated for a while.**

I suppose the first time I really felt my brain was a little bit alien, a bit other, was when I was thirteen. It was a few months after the time I had tried to remove my mole with a toothbrush. I was in the Peak District, in Derbyshire. School trip. The girls were staying in the hostel. The boys were meant to be staying there too but there had been a double-booking, so eight of us boys stayed in the stables outside, a good distance from the warm hotel. I hated being away from home. This was another of my big anxieties. I wanted to be back in my own bed looking at my poster of Beatrice Daile, or reading Stephen King's *Christine*. I lay on a top bunk looking out of the window at the black boggy landscape under a starless sky. I didn't really have any friends among these boys. They talked only about football, which wasn't my specialist subject, and wanking, which was slightly more a specialist subject but not one I felt comfortable discussing in public. So I pretended to be asleep. There was no teacher with us, here in the stables, and there was a kind of Lord of the Flies feeling I didn't like very much. I was tired. We had walked about ten miles that day, a lot of it through peat bogs. Sleep weighed on me, as thick and dark as the land all around. **I woke, to laughing.** Mad, crazed laughing, as if the funniest thing in the world had just happened. I had talked in my sleep. Nothing is more hilarious to a thirteen-year-old boy than witnessing an unguarded and embarrassing moment of another thirteen-year-old boy.

I had said something incoherent about cows. And Newark. Newark was my hometown, so that was understandable. The cows thing, well, that was weird. There were no cows in the Peak District. I was told I had said, over and over, 'Kelham is in Newark.' (Kelham was a village just outside Newark, where the town council was. My dad worked as an architect there, in the town planning department.) I tried my best to ride the joke. But I was tired, nervous. A school trip was just school, condensed. I had not enjoyed school since I was eleven, when I had been at a village school with a total pupil population of twenty-eight. The school I was at now, Magdalene High School, was a place where I was not very happy. I had spent a lot of the first year faking stomach aches that were rarely believed. Then I fell asleep again. And when I woke up I was shaking. I was standing up, and I could feel cold air, and there was a considerable amount of blood dripping from my hand. My hand was red and shining with it. There was a shard of glass sticking out of my palm. The window to the stables was smashed in front of me. I felt frightened. The other boys were all awake, but not laughing now. A teacher was there too. Or was about to be there. My hand had to be bandaged. I had got out of bed in my sleep. I had shouted out—rather comically—about cows again. ('The cows are coming! The cows are coming!') Then I had gone for a piss next to someone's bed. And then smashed the window. Shortly after, one of the boys shook my arm and I woke up.

It wasn't the first time I had sleepwalked. Over the previous year I had gone into my sister's bedroom and taken books off her shelves, thinking I was in a library. But my sleepwalking had never gone public. Until now. I gained a new nickname. **Psycho.** I felt like a freak. But it could have been worse. I had loving parents and a few friends and a sister I could chat to for hours. My life was pretty comfortable and ordinary, but sometimes a sense of loneliness would creep over me. I felt lonely. Not depression. Just a version of that wallowy, teenage, no-one-understands-me feeling. Of course, I didn't understand me either. I worried about things. Nuclear war. Ethiopia. The prospect of going on a ferry. I worried all the time. The only thing that didn't worry me was the thing that probably should have: worry itself. It would be eleven years before I had to address that one.

**Life is hard.** It may be beautiful and wonderful but it is also hard. The way people seem to cope is by not thinking about it too much. But some people are not going to be able to do that. And besides, it is the human condition. We think therefore we are. We know we are going to grow old, get ill and die. We know that is going to happen to everyone we know, everyone we love. But also, we have to remember, the only reason we have love in the first place is because of this. Humans might well be the only species to feel depression as we do, but that is simply because we are a remarkable species, one that has created remarkable things—civilisation, language, stories, love songs. *Chiaroscuro* means a contrast of light and shade. In Renaissance paintings of Jesus, for instance, dark shadow was used to accentuate the light bathing Christ. It is a hard thing to accept, that death and decay and everything bad leads to everything good, but I for one believe it. As Emily Dickinson, eternally great poet and occasionally anxious agoraphobe, said: 'That it will never come again is what makes life so sweet.'



# 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