Reasons to Stay Alive

An optimistic memoir about depression and anxiety

By Matt Haig

15-minute read

Synopsis

Reasons to Stay Alive (2015) tells the story of Matt Haig's struggle with depression and anxiety, which was so severe that he had constant panic attacks and feared leaving the house. It reveals how Haig learned to channel his natural intensity into the creation of art and developed some unusual techniques for easing his distressed mind.

Who is it for?

- Memoir lovers who want to read a heartfelt story of personal growth
- Social workers and psychologists who want a glimpse of what's going on in their clients' heads
- People struggling with depression and anxiety who want to borrow some faith and optimism

About the author

Matt Haig is the author of the widely acclaimed memoirs *Reasons to Stay Alive* and *Notes on a Nervous Planet*. He's also the author of six best-selling novels for adults, including *How to Stop Time, The Humans* and *The Radleys*. He's sold over a million books in the United Kingdom, and his work has been translated into over 40 languages.

What's in it for me? Become inspired to befriend your demons.

What would you do if, without warning, you were no longer able to make sense of the world around you? If the very fabric of your mind seemed to unravel, and you were suddenly unable to think?

In his early twenties, after experiencing a panic attack so severe that he was unable to leave the house, Matt Haig had to grapple with precisely these questions. The answers he arrived at are both inspired and inspiring. Rather than avoiding his discomfort, or numbing it with drugs and alcohol, he allowed himself to feel fully for the first time in his life.

In these blinks, you'll learn how Haig developed a method of fighting fear with fear, and refused to allow himself to hide in his comfort zone. You'll also learn how books became a lifeline for him, providing company when he was at his loneliest and giving him a language to understand his experiences.

In these blinks, you'll discover

- why being depressed made Abraham Lincoln a great leader;
- how running and meditation can make us feel better; and
- why men are more at risk of dying by suicide.

Matt Haig suddenly began to experience intense anxiety, and it affected every aspect of his life.

On a warm sunny day in Ibiza, Spain, Matt Haig experienced a rush of panic so intense that he couldn't get out of bed. He was 24 years old, and had been living in a beautiful villa with his girlfriend, working at a nightclub over the summer.

He'd been drinking a lot and was sometimes worried about what to do with his life, but up until then he hadn't felt particularly depressed. Then the panic began.

For three days, Haig could neither sleep nor get out of bed. The panic was constant, unrelenting. His heart pounded so hard he felt sure he would die.

The key message here is: Matt Haig suddenly began to experience intense anxiety, and it affected every aspect of his life.

At one stage, the feeling of panic became unbearable, and Haig seriously thought about taking his own life. He even went and stood at the edge of a cliff near the villa, willing himself to jump off. But the thought of the pain his death would cause his loved ones held him back.

His girlfriend, Andrea, was, understandably, very worried. She insisted they visit a doctor, who prescribed some tranquilizers. They didn't help much, but at least they dulled Haig's senses long enough to allow him to return home to the United Kingdom, where his parents were anxiously waiting.

To an outsider, their lives in the United Kingdom might have seemed very peaceful. Haig lounged around the house, read the paper, did some cooking. But his thoughts were anything but peaceful. He was in the grip of a toxic combination of depression and anxiety. While the depression filled him with dark thoughts, making him feel worthless and futureless, the anxiety flooded him with constant panic.

Even a trip to the corner store became a major ordeal. Haig would set off to buy something simple like a bottle of milk, and start hyperventilating as soon as he left the house. He'd start hallucinating that demons were taunting him, or imagine that something terrible was about to happen.

Inside the shop, his anxiety would become even worse. He'd become so overwhelmed by all the products with their bright labels that he could barely find the milk. When he finally found it, he still had to suffer through a social interaction with the cashier, trying desperately to appear normal.

There were warning signs that could have alerted Haig to the coming breakdown.

Can intense anxiety and depression really strike like a bolt from the blue? Such a bolt seemed to have struck Haig. The abrupt onset of what he describes as his "breakdown" was terrifying. It felt as though a switch had been flipped in his brain, triggering a sudden malfunction. However, in retrospect, he can see that he started feeling anxious long before the panic attacks he experienced in Ibiza.

The key message in this blink is: There were warning signs that could have alerted Haig to the coming breakdown.

Haig remembers first feeling anxious at the age of ten. He always hated when his parents went out at night, and he can vividly remember sitting at home as a child, waiting for them to return, fearing the worst. Had they been in an accident? Or mauled by wild dogs?

This separation anxiety only increased during his teenage years. When he was 13, for instance, he went on a school camping trip and had to sleep in a barn with the boys in his class. This made him so anxious that, while fully asleep, he began shouting and then sleepwalked to a window and punched his arm through the glass.

Haig's anxiety didn't disappear when he went to college, either, though he dulled it with alcohol. But even a few stiff drinks couldn't stifle the panic he felt when he had to do a 20-minute presentation on cubism for an art history course. The thought of speaking in public made him want to hyperventilate, but there was no way to get

out of it. He hid in the toilet until just before the class began, and then forced himself to stumble through the notes he'd prepared. The intense pressure took a toll. It made him *derealize* for the first time: he started to feel completely detached from his body, like he was on the outside, looking in.

Of course, it's easy to see warning signs in retrospect. At the time, these incidents felt *normal* to Haig. And, in a sense, they are normal. We all have experiences of feeling anxious from time to time. But when does an anxious feeling turn into a full-blown breakdown? Haig believes that his anxiety got so bad because he tried so hard to repress it. He desperately wanted to fit in with the people around him, so he tried to tone down his anxious intensity, or drown it out with booze.

We don't know exactly what causes anxiety and depression, and there is no one-size-fits-all way to fix it.

Modern medicine has come up with cures for ailments that, just a few decades ago, seemed incurable. HIV is now no longer a death sentence, and childbirth is not an experience that women have to fear. We've become used to finding scientific answers to all our problems.

Unfortunately, the scientific research is much less conclusive when it comes to depression. What causes it? How can we fix it? There is no definitive answer. And there are many conflicting theories.

The key message here is: We don't know exactly what causes anxiety and depression, and there is no one-size-fits-all way to fix it.

For a long time, researchers have believed that depression is caused by a chemical imbalance in the brain. Specifically, that people with depression have low levels of serotonin, which is a neurotransmitter that scientists believe helps regulate your mood. That hypothesis has spawned a six-billion-dollar pharmaceutical industry.

But it's not that simple. While pharmaceutical drugs do help millions of people, there are many others who experience no benefit from taking them. Or who have better results from drugs that target completely different brain chemicals.

Some scientists even believe that chemical levels have nothing to do with depression. They claim that depression is the result of a malfunctioning *nucleus accumbens* – the tiny area in the center of your brain that is thought to be responsible for pleasure and addiction.

All of these theories have been criticized for seeming to treat brains as though they exist separately from people's bodies. But we only have to look at some of the symptoms of depression and anxiety to know that no such separation exists. Many of Haig's symptoms were intensely physical. Anxiety manifested as tingling sensations all over his body and as hyperventilation. Depression felt like a physical pain lodged heavily in his chest.

There's also the fact that human bodies don't exist in a vacuum. According to Jonathan Rottenberg, an evolutionary psychologist, our social environments have as much of an effect on our mental well-being as our brain chemistry.

All of this is to say that understanding what causes depression is very complex. There is no one-size-fits-all solution to fixing it. And, sadly, there's not always a magic pill. But, like the author, you can find your way out. But first you'll have to accept the inherent complexity of the condition, and find tools that work for you.

People with depression, and especially men, suffer from social isolation.

If you break your leg, you get a cast and crutches. People can immediately see that something has happened to you and will often try to help. Strangers will give up their seat on the bus. Friends will drop off groceries. It's not easy. But at least people know to treat you with care.

Depression and anxiety aren't only hard to handle; they're invisible. Haig could be in the grip of a terrible panic attack, but from the outside he would just seem a bit slow or distracted. A very observant person might notice that his pupils were dilated, but they'd have no idea what he was really going through.

The key message here is: People with depression, and especially men, suffer from social isolation.

On one of his lowest days following the breakdown, Haig began sobbing in his parent's bedroom. His father walked in, and wrapped him in a tight hug. For a moment, Haig felt comforted. Then his father whispered, "Pull yourself together."

His father was just trying to help. He desperately wanted his son to get well. But asking Haig to pull himself together was asking the impossible. Haig felt like his mind had disintegrated. He didn't have enough control to banish that feeling. He needed people to allow him to show how terrible he was feeling and support him in that, rather than telling him to get it together.

The fact that men aren't given space to talk about their feelings can have deadly consequences. Though twice as many women suffer depression as men, men are much more likely to take their own lives. In the United Kingdom, men die by suicide at three times the rate that women do. In Greece, the rate is twice that, with six male suicides for every female suicide.

These statistics are alarming. It seems that many men believe that suicide is the only way out. Haig thinks that

this won't change until we learn to talk about depression. It took him ten years to talk openly about what happened to him. But he was always able to talk honestly to Andrea, which he believes saved his life.

Discussing depression and anxiety should carry no more stigma than discussing a broken leg. We should regard it as something normal, not something shameful. As something that can happen to anyone, and doesn't say anything about who they are. And as something that requires care and support.

Books became a lifeline for Haig because they gave him language to understand his experience.

Imagine you're trying to explain something to a good friend. You open your mouth; you form the words; but your friend doesn't understand you. You try and you try, but it's as though you're speaking gibberish, and your friend only stares at you uncomprehendingly.

That was how the author felt after his breakdown. He felt utterly unable to explain to family and friends how he was feeling. Their worldview was so different from his that it was like – to use the author's words – "trying to describe earth to aliens." What made it worse was that he could barely explain his experience *himself*. He was so buried in the depression and anxiety that he lost all perspective on his own situation.

Here's the key message: Books became a lifeline for Haig because they gave him language to understand his experience.

In the midst of this anguish he found an unlikely lifeline: books. Reading books is often seen as a form of escapism, but for the author it was the opposite. It was a way to find himself again.

Reading about Holden Caulfield's wry cynicism in *The Catcher in the Rye*, or about Albert Camus's alienated protagonist in *The Outsider*, made him feel less alone for the first time. He could tell that the authors understood what it was like to be isolated from society, and to experience suffering.

Literary language can be bizarre. Writers use poetic license to describe the world in heightened terms. But it was precisely such language that helped Haig make sense of his experiences. After all, the way he saw the world was now nothing like the way "normal" people saw it. Poetic language offered a means of describing his experience to himself.

Books also allowed him to borrow a sense of purpose. While his own life, to put it bluntly, had "lost the plot," the protagonists he read about lived exciting, action-filled lives. They traveled to distant countries; they fought in wars. In his deep depression Haig felt like he had no future, but it was comforting to read about other people who did.

Fourteen years after his breakdown, Haig has finally found the words to describe his experiences of anxiety and depression. His book is now a guide that other people can hold onto, proof that there is a future waiting, even if you can't see it at the time.

Haig started to recover by running toward what he most feared.

A few months after his breakdown, Haig woke up and thought idly about the day ahead. Then he realized with a shock that the thought hadn't been laced with any anxiety. It was just neutral. It was the first time he'd felt calm for months. A few days later, he enjoyed the feeling of sun on his face. This, too, was a novel experience: he hadn't registered feelings of pleasure for a long time. These interludes of calm gave him hope. They seemed like small but promising signs that he could get better.

The key message here is: Haig started to recover by running toward what he most feared.

But those interludes of calm were few and far between, and Haig's hope soon gave way to darker thoughts. He worried constantly that his depression and anxiety meant that he was losing his mind. This is called *meta anxiety*, which can be defined simply as worrying about worrying. Meta anxiety can keep people stuck in a frantic cycle – anxiety begetting anxiety begetting anxiety. It was the same for Haig, until he found a way to use it to aid his recovery.

Haig was terrified of being alone, leaving the house, or interacting with other people. Gradually, his world had become smaller and smaller. About four years after his breakdown, Andrea, his girlfriend, surprised him with a spontaneous trip to Paris for his birthday. The idea filled him with horror. He could hardly walk down the street without having a panic attack, let alone travel to another country.

But then he started thinking about what it would mean if he *couldn't* go. A scared voice in his head told him that if he didn't go he really would be – the word felt unavoidable – "crazy." So, combatting his fear of public spaces with his fear of mental collapse, he decided to take the trip. While he felt very anxious throughout his stay in Paris, he didn't have a panic attack. He got through it better than he thought he would. And being in a new place gave him perspective on his life. It literally made his world bigger, and allowed him to take his own thought processes a little less seriously.

By running toward his fears, Haig was able to slowly discover that what he believed wasn't necessarily true. He could behave strangely in a shop and the world wouldn't end. He could have a panic attack on the train and live to tell the tale. He was much more resilient than his depressed and anxious thoughts had led him to believe.

Having anxiety and depression can make you more perceptive and empathetic.

It may surprise you to hear that Abraham Lincoln struggled with depression. So did Winston Churchill. Both of these men were formidably ambitious and had impressive careers. They also spent large parts of their lives feeling anxious and depressed.

While it's sometimes said that they achieved so much *in spite* of their depression, you could also formulate it differently. Perhaps they were able to achieve what they did *because* they had experienced anxiety and depression.

The key message in this blink is: Having anxiety and depression can make you more perceptive and empathetic.

That might seem counterintuitive. We've just spent a long time talking about how depression can immobilize you and colonize your mind with terrifying thoughts. How could that be conducive to leading a country?

Well, depression makes you intensely aware of how painful life can be. Perhaps the deep empathy that allowed Lincoln to be able to see how inhumane slavery was came from his experience of depressive breakdowns. Winston Churchill was one of the first European leaders to intuit how dangerous the Nazi party would become. It's very likely that his intimate knowledge of the darker sides of life gave him the sensitive perception that other leaders lacked.

Experiences of depression and anxiety create a *thin skin* that allows you to be intensely present to the world around you. This isn't only useful for politicians. Many esteemed writers have turned their perceptive understandings of the world into art. And Edvard Munch's famous painting *The Scream* wouldn't exist if Munch hadn't had a panic attack when he was on a walk at sunset.

Haig had always resisted his own intensity. He hated the fact that he was so sensitive, that he cried easily. But after his breakdown, he slowly came to embrace being thin-skinned. It was overwhelming, but it was also what enabled him to become a writer. And even apart from his professional life, it's what has allowed him to enjoy his life so fully in the present.

Being thin-skinned means that he stays close to his feelings. During the breakdown those feelings were largely negative, but they can also be extremely positive. They make him feel deep joy at spending time with his children. Or weep in appreciation when reading a good book.

Having experienced depression and anxiety means that he doesn't take any part of his life for granted – neither the good nor the bad, the dark nor the light.

Recovery from depression isn't linear.

People often think of recovery moving in a straight line. That you'll move slowly upward from mental distress to health, and be "cured."

The reality is much messier. Fourteen years after having the breakdown in Ibiza, Haig has stopped waiting to completely recover. He's realized that his moods will go up and down, and that he won't always feel good. What he knows now is that anxious states will pass. And that life can be richer and more enjoyable than he ever would have imagined while in the grip of the breakdown.

The key message here is: Recovery from depression isn't linear.

Instead of looking for a magic cure, Haig has developed a set of daily tools to make himself feel better. Some of the tools are very simple, like eating well and getting enough sleep, and wearing clean clothes.

He knows that when he takes care of his body, his mind feels good, too. So he goes running, tearing along the pavement every day. After a long run he'll be breathless and sweaty and much more relaxed than when he started.

To slow down his anxious brain, he started practicing yoga and doing meditation. Unsurprisingly, slowing down his movements and breath also calms his racing thoughts.

He also limits his time on social media like Facebook and Twitter. Instead, he tries to spend more time with the people he loves, hanging out with Andrea, who he's now married to, and their two children.

He also still indulges in his greatest addiction of all: reading. Reading and travel allow him to get out of his own head and into someone else's, which is a skill that he channels into his writing.

Perhaps most importantly of all, he's very patient with himself. When he had a panic attack at a party full of important writers and ran away, he didn't spend a lot of time beating himself up about it. Instead, he celebrated the fact that he'd even dared to go to the party, a feat which would have been unthinkable in his recent past.

While there is no one-size-fits-all solution for curing his depression, Haig has found solutions that make it easier to live with, and very many reasons to stay alive.

Final summary

The key message in these blinks:

When you're in the grip of anxiety and depression, you view the world through a distorted filter. It feels like life will never be enjoyable again, like you have nothing to look forward to. But that's not true. With time you'll be able to regain your sense of perspective, and

develop tools to start feeling better. Having experienced anxiety and depression will give you an enhanced sensitivity to the world. This can be overwhelming, but it can also fill you with delight.

Actionable advice:

Pinpoint what improves your mood.

The things that make you feel good or bad are as unique as your fingerprints. For one person, peace comes from dancing in the center of a mosh pit. For another, from a bout of silent meditation. Make your own list of things that are sure to put you in a good headspace, and practice doing at least one every day.

Got feedback?

We'd love to hear what you think about our content! Just drop an email to remember@blinkist.com with the title of this book as the subject line and share your thoughts!

What to read next: *Notes on a Nervous Planet*, by Matt Haig

By now your eyes have been opened to what it's like to experience a sudden descent into crippling anxiety and depression, and how to develop tools to start making yourself feel better. If hearing about Matt Haig's journey has inspired you to learn more about the resilience of the human spirit in the face of mental distress, then we highly recommend our blinks to Haig's second memoir, *Notes on a Nervous Planet*.

You'll learn more about how your environment impacts your mental well-being, and delve into ways to limit the anxiety-inducing effects of social media, information overload, and nonstop work. You'll also get a chance to dig deeper into the connection between the mind and the body, and discover practical daily ways to change your life – and calm your thoughts. If you're ready to further your exploration into mental health in the modern age, then head on over to the blinks to *Notes On a Nervous Planet*.