

The Happiest Choice

activities to do, foods to eat,
thoughts to think, nutrients to
fortify, and other ways of
cultivating happiness

Sage Liskey

(CONDENSED EDITION)

*Illustrated by
Janine Hesse*

The Happiest Choice

Condensed Edition

Sage Liskey

Edited by Paul Bindel, Patrick Andrews, and
Edmond Stansberry

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If You Have a Depressive Episode

Read the list of triggers in Chapter 3 to help figure out what the trigger was. Focus on addressing that trigger if possible and constructively communicating with any necessary parties. Here are some other ways to respond to the episode depending on how you feel:

- Remove yourself from overstimulating environments.
- Create a safe environment by cleaning your room, putting on music, etc.
- Seek out help from someone such as a friend, therapist, or doctor. Everything is easier with reassurance and support from others.
- Write. Process the thoughts in your head, recall the best moments of your life, or outline where you want to be and how to get there.
- Meditate and practice mindfulness. Don't allow repetitive negative thoughts to take over. Find contentment and goodness in the present moment.
- Trust that the negative thoughts that your brain creates are untrue and disconnected from your rationality. Trust that feelings of anxiety, paranoia, distrust, and disconnection will pass if you take care of yourself.
- Go to sleep.
- Play a game, read a book, or watch something that will occupy your mental energy.
- Admit yourself into a psychiatric ward and put yourself into the full care of medical professionals until you get better.
- Call a support line like the National Suicide Hotline at 1-800-273-8255

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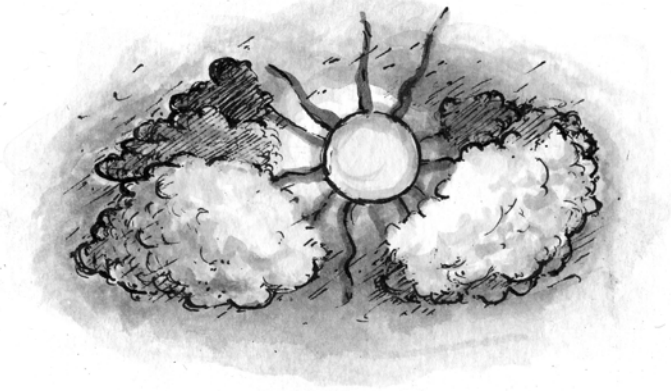
1

Medical Statement

While I strongly believe in the methods outlined in this guide, **I am not a medical professional and none of this is meant to be medical advice.** Furthermore, even though primarily peer-reviewed research was used to collect information, new discoveries are made every day within the scientific community. **I therefore do not guarantee the accuracy of the information contained herein and expressly disclaim liability for errors and omissions in the contents of this book.** Ask a doctor, naturopath, herbalist, nutritionist, or other health professional before trying these methods, or else use them at your own risk. **Again, this guide is not meant to be used to diagnose or treat depression or any other condition.** If you are having thoughts of harming yourself or others please call your doctor or the National Suicide Hotline at 1-800-273-8255. They can offer confidential guidance, support, and help connect you with local resources.

2

Introduction



Between times of joy and happiness there are always moments of sadness, anxiety, stress, and anger. These feelings are natural, but sometimes they don't go away and become embedded in us like long thorns. One general word for describing this state is depression. Depression, or an extended form of mental suffering, has many symptoms, many causes, and many cures and coping strategies. It is one of the body's way of saying "something is wrong" or "I need for you to redirect your energy into facing this challenge."

Everyone eventually experiences depression, but some people need a little more help than others coping with the feelings that it creates. In this booklet we explore the best methods of coping with and forming resilience against depression based on scientific research and the personal experiences of others. Please note that several conditions, such as bipolar and schizophrenia, intersect with depression or may appear to be depression; these topics are not covered in this booklet.

All information contained herein is derived from the first edition of my book, *The Happiest Choice: Essential Tools for Everyone's Brain Feelings*. It is available for purchase through <amazon.com>, <pioneerspress.com>, and various bookstores. This is an abbreviated version of that work, please consult it for more extensive coping mechanisms and research sources. The number at the end of each paragraph corresponds to where in the book the same content can be found.

This booklet focuses on alternative and non-herbal methods of coping with depression, but I do want to briefly cover antidepressants and western doctors. Medication is the answer to some forms of mental suffering, but unlike what many drug companies and doctors would have you believe, medication is not always the solution nor is it always safe to consume. This is especially true for people with minor depression. Antidepressants can worsen symptoms and in many people have a placebo drug effect. When doctors are prescribing antidepressants they rarely test for the specific chemical or genetic abnormality causing a person's depression or anxiety; instead they use a "guess and check" method for prescribing antidepressants. Doctors also tend to ignore the possibilities of nutrient deficiencies, trauma, diet, sleeplessness, lack of exercise, environment, chemical exposure, and so forth. Therapy is fortunately becoming commonly prescribed alongside of antidepressant medications. Many doctors are willing to explore alternatives with a patient, but it will often be up to that patient to bring these alternatives up in discussion. If you do use antidepressants, be sure to follow the doctor's directions in taking the medication as well as getting off of the medication; doing otherwise may cause unintended consequences (5).

3

The Road Map of Coping



1. Desiring change and a feeling of contentment.
2. Becoming aware of your “potentials” and “triggers.”
3. Creating a self-care schedule.
4. Reforming habits and other sources of suffering.

3.1 - Desiring Change and a More Content Life

A basic starting point to coping with mental forms of suffering is acknowledging that you are experiencing suffering and that it is impacting your ability to enjoy life. Perhaps you already know this, but making that connection and naming it is not always easy, especially with the myths and stigmas surrounding unhappiness and depression. If you feel apathetic toward desiring change, try putting yourself around other people, watch an emotionally stimulating movie that resonates with you, compete with yourself or others in an activity, maintain a schedule, or create a list of what you want most in life and how to get there. Don't try rationalizing how you'll feel in the future, or create self-fulfilling prophecies (13).

3.2 - Awareness of “Potentials” and “Triggers”

Mental suffering is simply a way that the body lets us know that there is something wrong. Sadness, anxiety, and depression are caused by a combination of **potentials** and **triggers**. Things that increase a person's overall potential of experiencing mental suffering include the following:

- Chemical abnormalities: hormones, genes, nutrient processing, chemical processing, medications.
- Life events: trauma, childhood events, growing up poor, discrimination, exposure to certain harmful chemicals, cultural upbringing.
- Lifestyle choices: food, exercise, nutrition, environment, thinking patterns, communication style.

- Unmet needs: sustenance, safety, love, empathy, recreation and play, community, creativity, autonomy, and purpose.

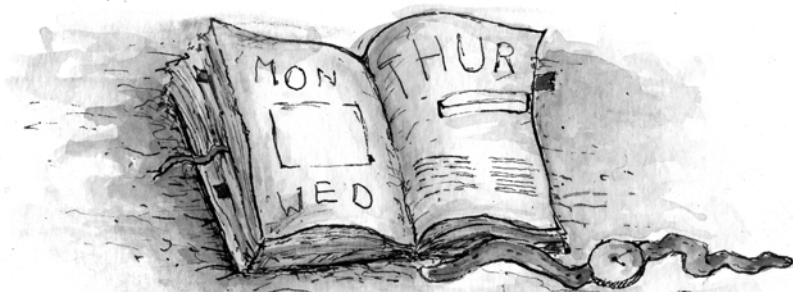
"Triggers" put a person into a state of suffering. They can include almost anything depending on the person, but some triggers are more common than others such as: stress or stressful events, lack of sleep, thoughts, under or over consuming food, consumption of certain substances, media, loneliness, staying inside, withdrawal symptoms, an inability to cope with societal pressures, or expectations that a culture places on members of that culture. A "potential" can act as a "trigger" with factors like sleeplessness and malnourishment. See the end of this booklet for a useful sheet to record triggers and things that can help (15).

3.3 - Forming and Deforming Habits

According to Charles Duhigg, a habit has three parts to it, the habit cue, the habit itself, and the habit reward. An example would be the smell of cookies (the habit cue) leading you to purchase and eat a cookie (the habit) which in turn lights up the pleasure center of your brain as you taste it (the reward). Habit cues include anything from sights and sounds to smells and feelings. Once the habit has initiated, the brain actually automates the task and is free to think about other thoughts and actions.

The best way to form good habits is with repetition, starting with one small habit at a time, doing activities with friends or pets, and making a schedule. You can undo bad habits by acknowledging what causes you to do certain habits, identifying the habit cue, distancing yourself from the habit, and forming a good habit in response to the habit cues that normally cause you to do the bad habit (16).

3.4 - Time for Self-Care and Scheduling



A schedule serves as a reminder for what you need to and want to do, and helps you find more time to enjoy life and practice self-care. It can be a single piece of paper, a day-to-day planner book, a calendar, a phone application with automated reminders, or all four. I prefer a weekly planner, but you do have to remember to check it every day. Make sure to cover activities for your personal health first, and then include time for other things like volunteering, media entertainment, and hosting events (20).

3.5 – The Next Steps

Knowing your potentials and triggers, forming and deforming habits, and creating a schedule are the basic tools for applying self-care to your life. The remainder of this guide documents various triggers as well as things that can help lower one's potential for experiencing depressed feelings and suffering. Not all these techniques will work for everyone. Sometimes cultural biases or rules are in the way, sometimes lack of money creates a barrier, and sometimes personal interests put up a roadblock. Limitations like these are okay because you have many options to choose from. What makes one person happy and content might do nothing for another—it may even trigger depression or depressed feelings in them—so your job is

to experiment and determine the best course for you. What activities, foods, medicines, environments, thoughts, and nutrients make you feel better? Which don't? Apply this knowledge to discovering the life you want to live (21).

4

Activities and Hobbies

Not only do things like running, art, writing, traveling, collecting, potlucks, and puzzles bring fulfillment and potentially connect you with new friends, activities and hobbies like these also help keep the brain from obsessing over negative thoughts. They create fresh memories and help force out bad times. Try out activities from the newspaper, classes, or online from websites like <www.craigslist.com> or <meetup.com>.

4.1 - Deep Breathing and Meditation

Breathe Deeply

Slow and deep breathing (breathing into the abdomen or diaphragm) can provide a quick reduction in blood pressure and anxiety. According to physician Esther Sternberg, this intentional action prevents the production of stress hormones and in turn allows the body to calm itself (23).

Meditate

Meditation allows people to withhold judgments, get out of their thoughts, and focus wholly what exists before them. As a result, sights become more beautiful, smells are more aromatic, feelings are more sensual, food is more tasteful, and music sounds more pleasant. Many types of meditation exist, but the most popular is mindfulness. The best way to learn how to meditate, whether in a spiritual or non-denominational form, is to join a group that practices meditation techniques together. If pure meditation exercises

aren't for you, activities such as yoga and tai chi integrate components of meditation.

There are a number of ways to meditate, but the most common is to follow the inhalation and exhalation of the breath. Your breath is always with you, and so it is a reliable focal point. The more you practice being aware of your breath, the easier being aware of other sensations and aspects of your life will be. As you breathe in and out, you can say “in” with the in breath and “out” with the out breath. Thoughts will arise, but allow them to pass and return to your breath. Initially mindfulness is not an easy thing to do, but practice daily for five to thirty minutes alone or with others and you will quickly develop your ability to focus on the present moment. Check online for guided meditations and meditation timers (23).



4.2 - Gratitude

Expressing gratitude is an uplifting act that gives us purpose and fulfillment. Gratitude for others can be expressed through acts such as gifts, letters, donations, volunteering, or even just a few kind words of appreciation for someone's existence. You can also express gratitude for yourself by writing down the good things that happened to you today, taking yourself out to dinner, or meditating on what you appreciate about yourself and life. The best part about gratitude is that it is completely free (28).



4.3 - Make and Experience Arts and Crafts



Art is a means of expressing what cannot be said with plain words. Over the course of human existence it has been a useful tool for personal discovery and relating stories to the masses. With art,

you can actively use your mind and body to stay present, or you can self-analyze in a meditative way. You might also feel a self-esteem boost and sense of accomplishment by creating a piece of work that is uniquely yours or by receiving positive feedback for completed artwork (if you are willing to share it).

Experiencing other people's art may have a similar effect. While listening to a concert, walking through an art museum, hiking through nature, or even browsing art websites, you may run into something so beautiful and real that it wakes your consciousness into greater awareness. Art deepens our understanding of the world we live in by highlighting various aspects of it in an entertaining or beautiful way. Just watch out for consuming too much art or media and disconnecting from reality. For more information see *Media Addiction and Staying in Tune with "Reality"* (Section 6.8) (33).

4.4 - Go on Adventures

Take a break from your day to day life and go on an adventure. This might be a celebration, a walk, an educational retreat, camping, hiking, or visiting another country. Doing so lets you clear your head, meet new people, collect stories to tell, and discover new insights. The adrenaline rush that new experiences create also gives the body and mind a nice feeling. To connect with hobbyist groups look online and in the newspaper (35).

4.5 - Exercise and Physical Activity

See Section 5.1 regarding the benefits of any activity that gets your body moving and heart pumping.

4.6 - Friendships

While depression and social withdrawal often go hand-in-

hand, challenge yourself to spend time with others. My experience is that even if I don't want to socialize, I feel better if I do. This may not be the case for everyone all the time, but humans are social creatures who thrive off of one another. Friends provide support for when you're feeling down, share happy moments, and motivate you to do activities.

Making friends is an art that anyone can become good at, but it takes practice and time. Learn what works and what doesn't when first communicating with a new person. Be sure you are consistent with social gatherings, or keep a ritual of contacting at least one person a day to make plans with, write a letter to, or call on the phone. Suggest activities to do rather than just lounging around, or ask an acquaintance to teach you something they are passionate about. Friendships are easiest to form if you commit to social activities or hobbies, live with roommates or within a communal house, have a job with coworkers, or use pen pal websites. If making friends is difficult, you might want to consider how you are expressing yourself or how you are relating to others. Pets such as cats and dogs also make great and forgiving friends (38)!

4.7 - Celebrate Changes

Suffering sometimes stems from disliking changes in life, for instance someone may lament the change of seasons, growing older, the loss of a loved one, moving, or a medical operation. Rather than allowing these changes to suddenly consume your life, meet them halfway and celebrate. Throw a party, go on a hike, hold a ritual, meditate, have a bonfire, shout and scream at the top of a mountain, or anything that provides a release for you. These rituals can be done alone but they are especially nice with a group of people who benefit from the celebration of change too (43).

5

Taking Care of Your Mind and Body



5.1 - Physical Activity

Thirty minutes to an hour of exercise a day has a myriad of health benefits, including alleviating depression and physical conditions that may perpetuate depression. Your exercises can be split up into chunks and be as simple as a walk. If you have trouble motivating yourself to exercise, get a friend to go with you. Another option is becoming a dog owner to create a sense of obligation to get them outside. Pets also make great friends! If you have trouble finding time to exercise, do stretches while cooking, or lift weights while watching television. Other energetic outbursts may be helpful as well such as singing, gardening, or making art (66).

5.2 - Food



Poor diet is linked to depression and anxiety. For me, eating a certain way affects my mood within a short period of time. If I eat a lot of something like bread or sugar, I will have no desire to be around people because I feel agitated and anxious. Poor diet is the result of both not consuming the right foods and consuming the

wrong foods. Depending on your body type, age, and ethnicity, you may need a slightly different diet than others, but there are general guidelines to healthy eating: always stay hydrated, eat breakfast and mid-morning snack, consume a variety of both raw and cooked foods, maintain healthy gut bacteria by eating fermented foods, avoid heavily processed foods that lack nutrients such as white flour and fast food, and consult a nutritionist to see what nutrients you are lacking (44).

Inflammatory and Anti-Inflammatory Foods

Some scientists associate depression with inflammation, so consuming anti-inflammatory foods such as berries, onions, garlic, broccoli, apples, almonds, olive oil, turmeric (when combined with black pepper or pepperine), anti-oxidant rich foods, and foods with omega-3 fatty like fish may improve your mood. Common inflammatory substances to avoid include certain medications, oils high in omega-6 fatty acids, trans fats, saturated fat from meat and dairy, sugar, anything you are sensitive or allergic to, refined grains such as white bread and pasta, alcohol, and gluten (46, 59).

Food Allergies and Exclusion Diets

Along with eating nutritious foods, you might also consult a nutritionist about going on an exclusion diet or having an allergen test to see how different foods and substances allergically affect you. Many physical and mental conditions may be caused by reactions to certain foods, even if you have eaten those foods for your whole life. There are also a number of drugs, medicines, and other substances such as caffeine and marijuana that can sometimes cause depression or anxiety (46).

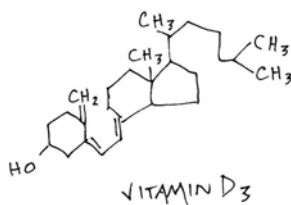
Eating Intentionally and Healthfully

Some people experience depressed feelings about overeating or undereating. Beyond consuming an adequate number of calories

for your body type and activity level, here are some ideas for bringing more intention to eating and changing habits surrounding food consumption: brush your teeth after each meal, eat at specific times each day, re-gift holiday foods such as sweets to someone else, wait at least half an hour before eating a second helping to see whether or not you are still hungry, count the number of calories you consume, eat slowly, only eat whole foods that have not been heavily processed, drink water, keep food out of sight, grow your own food, and stay away from places where food is being cooked (47).

5.3 - Nutrients

People with bipolar or depression often lack one or more of the following nutrients: fiber, α -linolenic (omega-3 fatty acid), the B vitamins including thiamin (vitamin B1), riboflavin (vitamin B2), niacin (vitamin B3), pantothenic acid (vitamin B5), vitamin B6 (pyridoxine), folate (vitamin B9), and vitamin



B12, vitamin C, calcium, magnesium, potassium, iron, phosphorus, vitamin D, selenium, and zinc. Nearly all of these vitamins and minerals are well established in maintaining healthy brain function.

Any nutrient deficiency can cause problems, so consider having a medical professional test your nutrient levels. Note that if you are nutrient deficient, taking a supplement may not be enough. Several genetic conditions and diseases cause malabsorption and prevent your body from processing a raw nutrient into its usable form. Therefore a genetic test may also be necessary to determine if these nutrients are being absorbed properly (49).

Nutrients to Fortify for Depression

Nutrient:	Sources:
Vitamin B1 (thiamine), vitamin B2 (riboflavin), vitamin B6 (pyridoxine)	Liver, fish, dairy, chicken, potatoes, beans, dark leafy greens.
Vitamin B9 (folate)	Romaine lettuce, spinach, asparagus, turnip greens, mustard greens, calf liver, parsley, collard greens, broccoli, cauliflower, beets.
Vitamin B12 (niacin)*	Liver, fish, beef, lamb, yogurt, eggs, nutritional yeast (vegan).
Vitamin C	Peppers, strawberries, broccoli, kale, brussels sprouts, kiwifruit, oranges.
Calcium*	Dairy products, tofu, sesame seeds, collard greens, spinach.
Vitamin D2* (from plant sources)	Sunflower seeds, leafy greens, avocados, carrots.
Vitamin D3* (from animal sources and sunlight)	Sunlight, mackerel, herring, salmon, liver.
Iron	Beans, spinach, liver, venison, sesame seeds, olives.

Magnesium	Spinach, chard, soybeans, sesame seeds, black beans, quinoa, sunflower seeds, cashews.
Phosphorus	Meat, eggs, dairy products, nuts, legumes, whole grains, potatoes, garlic.
Potassium	Swiss chard, bananas, potatoes, yams, spinach, beans.
Omega-3 Fatty Acid*	Flax seed, fish, walnuts, and soybeans.
Selenium	Meat, fish, eggs, Brazil nuts, mushrooms, and mustard seeds.
Zinc*	Meat, seeds, legumes, oats, yogurt.

*Includes extra notes following table (54).

Vitamin B12

Vitamin B12 only reliably comes from animal products, but some foods such as nutritional yeast are generally supplemented with it. Many people are B12 deficient even if they eat meat, because B12 degrades in light, oxygen, and acid or alkali containing environments, and is lost in water or meat juices during cooking due to its water solubility (52).

Calcium

Too much or too little calcium can cause depression. Too little calcium limits normal brain function and absorption of vitamin D, while too much disrupts magnesium absorption, another mineral which helps prevent depression. The balance involves consuming roughly equal or more amounts of magnesium than the RDA of calcium (53).

Vitamin D

A low level of vitamin D causes a common form of depression known as seasonal affective disorder (SAD). Skin exposure to direct sunlight during certain times of the day and year synthesizes vitamin D in our bodies. People are especially susceptible to SAD during the winter time not only because they stay indoors and cover up more, but also because no vitamin D can be synthesized above the 37th latitude during this time. If you constantly wear sunblock, cover all your skin in clothing, have dark colored skin, or do not get outside much, more than likely you will have to supplement with vitamin D or consume vitamin D rich foods (50).

Omega-3 and Omega-6 Fatty Acids

Maintaining a one-to-one ratio of omega-3 fatty acids to omega-6 fatty acids can greatly improve one's health by reducing the risk of several diseases, including depression. Many people in the United States get far too much omega-6 fatty acids which come from things like corn oil, safflower oil, sunflower oil, and canola oil. Sources of omega-3 fatty acids include flax seed, fish, walnuts, and soybeans. It is heat sensitive, so you must eat foods containing omega-3 fatty acids raw and use oils containing them that are cold-pressed. It is also better absorbed in whole foods rather than in a supplemental form (52).

Zinc

Preliminary studies have shown an increased antidepressant effect by combining zinc supplementation with pharmaceutical antidepressants. Zinc has also been used alone to treat depression and mania (53).

5.4 - Sleeping and Awakening



There is no exact amount of sleep any individual needs, although too much or too little sleep is associated with several health problems. A healthy amount of sleep for adults is 7 to 9 hours per day, for teenagers 8 to 9 hours per day, and for 5 to 10 year-olds 10 to 11 hours per day. Keep in mind that tiredness from not sleeping enough, sleeping too much, eating certain foods, or by performing physically and mentally strenuous activities can act as a trigger for negative feelings. Negative feelings in the evening may also be caused by low levels of certain hormones which are restored with sleep. Listen to your body and allow it the amount of rest it really needs (61).

Sleep Aids

Take a natural sleep aid such as melatonin or valerian, avoid viewing electronic media or eating within a few hours of going to bed, go to bed at the same time each night, only use your bed for sleeping in, make your room as dark as possible before going to sleep, meditate with your eyes closed, play recorded background sounds, or turn on a fan (62).

Waking Aids

Eat more protein and fat and less carbohydrates and sugar, set your alarm clock away from your bed, exercise and stretch for 5 to 10 minutes after waking up, take a shower in the morning instead of at night, get a consistent amount of sleep each night, expose yourself to lots of natural light, get outside within an hour of waking up, drink coffee or tea, or eat a more nutritious diet (64).

6

Thoughts for Change



6.1 - Unmet Needs

Connecting your feelings to unmet needs will help put into perspective what causes you suffering and what actions to take in order to feel better in a given situation. An economist by the name of Manfred Max-Neef believes that all humans have the same nine basic needs. Reworded into simpler terms by the psychologist Marshall Rosenberg, these needs are sustenance, safety, love, empathy, rest (recreation and play), community, creativity, autonomy (freedom), and meaning (purpose). Ask yourself if you are sufficiently receiving all these needs. If you are not, then figuring out how you can better meet these needs may help your situation (77).

6.2 - Acceptance of Who You Are

Depression is often caused by health problems or feelings of inadequacy. It is important to realize that you are not alone feeling

judged or not good enough. Within the United States and many other countries, almost everyone grows up with self-doubt over their perceived imperfections. This is because media or culture frequently portrays images of perfection to strive for that are actually impossible to achieve or unhealthy in nature.

Sometimes feeling self-doubt or being judged make sense, and it is a healthy response to improve your life in such a way that you no longer are judged or have a need to feel self-doubt. Most of the time though, ignoring those stigmas makes more sense, especially when you have no control over the part of yourself in question, or when it is an unhealthy part to change. In order to better accept who you are, consider: practicing mindfulness meditation, befriending people who do not judge you, boosting your ego by making small accomplishments towards big goals, and remembering that you are only who are in this present moment and that every new moment you have an opportunity to change (88).

6.3 - Creating Your Reality

Think before you think. Is it positive? It is destructive? Saying a negative thing reinforces the truthfulness of it in your mind. The human brain is an amazingly powerful organ. We can create new neural pathways, or overshadow pathways we no longer want to react. While some of our perceptions of reality are extensively wrapped up in our upbringing, trauma, and the body and environment we were born into, most can be rewritten or altered. In other words, whenever you want to, you can make yourself believe and feel almost anything.

How do you want to perceive the world? Do you want better self-esteem, to laugh more, to feel respected, to feel strong, to be empowered with the sight of something? Start by defining what those things mean to you. You can:

1. Work toward fulfilling the criteria for that definition. Example: If you want to be physically strong and define that as being able to lift 100 pounds, then exercise until you can lift 100 pounds.
2. Change the definition to better apply to who you already are. Example: If you want to be beautiful, and believe that beauty is defined as what you see in fashion magazines, change your definition of physical beauty to be something other than what you see in fashion magazines, or change your definition to involve something other than physical appearance, such as your personality.
3. Change how you define the criteria for a definition. Example: If you want to be physically beautiful, and believe that beauty is defined as what you see in fashion magazines (skinny, muscular, etc.), change your definition of skinny, muscular, etc. to better apply to yourself.

6.4 - Find Purpose and Meaning in Life

In *Man's Search For Meaning*, Holocaust survivor Viktor Frankl writes “...it is a characteristic of the American culture that, again and again, one is commanded and ordered to 'be happy.' But happiness cannot be pursued; it must ensue. One must have a reason to 'be happy.'” In other words, happiness is nothing without first having a sense of meaning or purpose in one's existence. Happiness will come when you focus on living your life fully without avoiding negative emotions and circumstances.

Deciding on a specific purpose or passion can be a helpful grounding point to live life by, especially when you have a million options to choose from. Many pursue a purpose involving religion, spirituality, happiness, love, a hobby, friendship, family, or providing services. Nothing is wrong with living without an overall purpose or taking time to figure one or several out, so don't get discouraged. It is just helpful for some people (95).

6.5 - Maintain a Positive Environment and Remove Negative Environments



Humans require environments that are nourishing because our spaces greatly influence thoughts and feelings. Remove yourself from perpetually stressful or negative situations that you cannot confront or change. These might include a work environment or living situation. Removing yourself is not the same as avoiding your emotions, but is rather a deep awareness of your feelings and needs. Creating huge changes can be difficult, but giving yourself the chance to be happy and comfortable is an essential baseline. You need not see this as "running away" or "giving up," but rather as a healthy life decision. A negative space can be debilitating and make change nearly impossible (78).

6.6 - Forgiveness

We carry around many experiences, some good and some bad. When we associate a person with a bad experience, we can

choose to forgive or not forgive that person. Depending on the other person's action or lack of action you must decide if forgiving or not forgiving a person is the better option. You may or may not announce that you are formally forgiving a person, but forgiveness is always a personal mental action. If you want to forgive someone, you must do two things:

1. Desire to both forgive and continue creating new memories with the person in question.
2. Stop thinking about what that person did or did not do.

You can also forgive yourself by doing these three things:

1. Desire to forgive yourself.
2. Stop thinking about what you did or did not do.
3. Understand why what you did in the specific instance caused yourself or others suffering, and be willing to avoid recreating that series of events again.

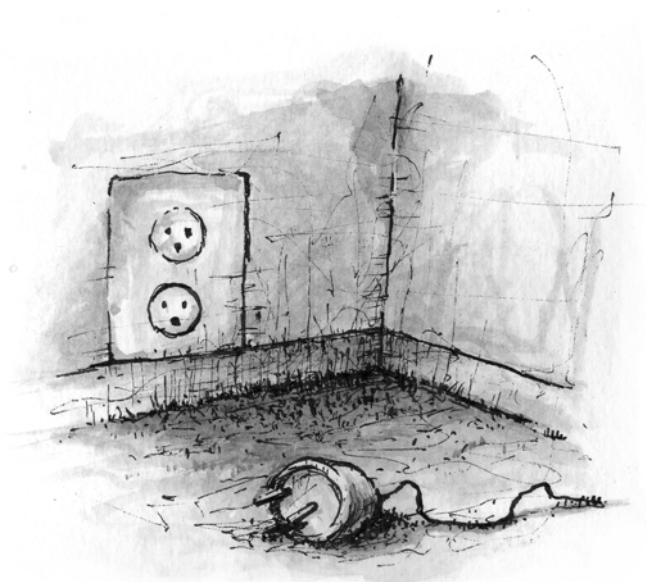
6.7 - Abundance Mentality and Fighting Regret

Much of mental suffering stems from ingrained thinking patterns. While it is difficult to alter learned behaviors, you have the most power over how you feel, as well as the ability to deflect or reduce what you don't want to feel. An abundance mentality gives you a tool to help do this. Think about the positive things as well as the possibilities of positive things in your life instead of what you do not or cannot have. For instance, if you are anxious about going to visit someone, say aloud, "I am excited to know this person better" or "I'm joyful to have these new experiences today." If a friendship or romance doesn't work out, you could say "I am glad for this new-found time to develop myself and cultivate more relationships" or "I

learned so much while being with that person.” A good exercise for developing an abundance mentality is writing down events throughout your life that you remember as negative and next to those write what you learned or how it changed you for the better.

Do not confuse an abundance mentality with avoiding feelings. When regrets or tragedies arise, you fully experience the pain they cause, but then move forward and use them as an opportunity to learn and grow. By embracing an abundance mentality you simply become much more tolerant to changes, whether people cancel plans on you or a difficult event happens in your life. Every moment is full of positive possibilities. See the end of this booklet for a useful sheet to help you form an abundance mentality (89).

6.8 - Media Addiction and Staying in Tune with “Reality”



Consider the media and entertainment you voluntarily and involuntarily experience. Are you utilizing media such as news,

books, music, cartoons, video games, or movies in a destructive manner to make your mood worse? Or is media consuming your time to the point where you cannot live a fulfilling life? While media can be an amazing way to learn and be inspired, I have found that it often becomes an addiction that perpetuates an avoidance of emotions, thoughts, creativity, and healthy habits. While sometimes avoiding thoughts and feelings is healthy, it can also prevent us from getting better or resolving bad situations.

In general, transform your media hobbies into methods of self-care and pro-social behavior. Be conscious and selective of what you experience, because it all shapes who you are and what you think about. This may be difficult at first, but as you replace fiction with reality, life becomes its own exciting adventure story. Some methods of breaking media addiction include: unplugging the TV, turning off the WI-FI, blocking websites with a blocking application, ending all media consumption for one to several months, having a media-free day, and reflecting on the quality of media by becoming aware of sensationalism and propaganda and how that material relates to you (86).

6.9 - Deal with the Negative Emotions You Have about Yourself and Others as Soon as Possible

Suffering is an important aspect of life. Growth and knowledge are found in these difficulties, and so it is generally good to work through it. In fact, avoiding negative emotions directed toward yourself or another person can quickly pull the whole mind into a state of depressed feelings or depression. Often the longer you wait to deal with these feelings, the harder the situation is to remediate and the worse the suffering becomes (granted that some time is necessary to process thoughts and react constructively to a situation). What do I mean by avoiding dealing with negative emotions? It is the lack of making a decision. Communicating with a friend,

accepting certain qualities of a person, quitting a job, practicing mindfulness, or ending a relationship would all be potentially beneficial decisions, whereas complaining, venting, doing nothing, or obsessing over the negative qualities of a situation would constitute avoidance (100).

6.10 - Therapy



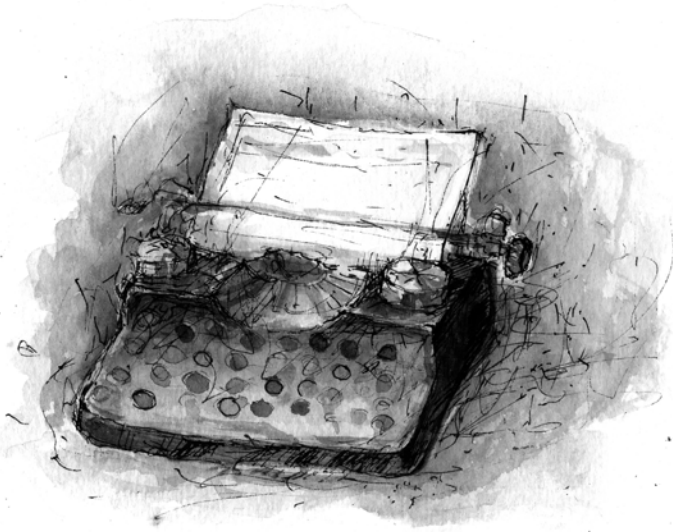
Everyone and everything you ever meet is a teacher, whether they guide you toward or away from the possible thoughts, activities, and experiences in the world. All interactions have knowledge embedded in them, including from friendships, family, spiritual and religious teachers, support groups, physical touch, dreams, horoscopes, pets, and professional therapists.

Professional therapists are trained to help you get to the

root of your psychological difficulties, analyze why you are depressed, and confront those causes whether past or present. The paperwork you sign does revoke some of your confidentiality in certain situations, but speaking to a neutral party within a safe space will allow you to explore your mind without burdening your relationships. Although often expensive, some therapists have sliding scale fees for those with low income. Many health insurance plans also provide free mental health coverage. Every therapist is different, so if one doesn't work for you, another might. Find someone who you feel comfortable speaking with who can relate to your experiences. Don't be afraid of switching therapists! Unless you are having a crisis, it may be several weeks between beginning the process of searching for a therapist and working on your life with them. It is therefore beneficial to seek out a therapist while in a stable mood so you can immediately access help when in need. Many types of therapy can treat depression, but the most common is cognitive behavioral therapy. I've also enjoyed Jungian therapy, but ask your doctor or research the many types online (83).

7

Communication



7.1 - Communication Styles

How we communicate greatly impacts the way people treat us, and in turn plays a role in our relationships and moods. Communication is more than words and tone of voice, we also communicate through our clothing, activities, hair style, and body language. Part of a personality is displayed through these various factors, but it might be hard to realize how you are portraying yourself or what impact you are having on another person when you have communicated the way you do for so long. This is especially prevalent when interacting with different cultures. One culture may

talk louder, and could be perceived as aggressive by others. Another culture may see themselves as polite, but be seen as passive or passive aggressive by others. City to city, state to state, and country to country there are a vast diversity of communication styles. Even within the same area, people grow up being better hands-on, auditory, or visual communicators. When people talk to us with a different style of communication, it may be difficult to know if that communication is emotionally charged or not. Take time to consider cultural factors, not make assumptions, and have empathy when communicating. Asking questions is the key to understanding.

Sometimes our style of communication is not in line with how we want to be perceived nor used in a way that attracts the people we want in our lives. It takes a level of awareness to determine why people treat you the way they do. You may have become complacent with this treatment and how new interactions don't always go so well, but perhaps you want to change that. There are many resources available online and in books about becoming a better communicator. A great place to start is learning about nonviolent communication (103).

7.2 - Nonviolent Communication

Our style of communication impacts our ability to have needs met and deal with serious or argumentative conversations. According to Marshall B. Rosenberg, “violent” communication can be reworded into our unmet needs (see section 6.1) instead of attacks on a person. Nonviolent communication, or NVC for short, works by avoiding language that psychologically creates defensiveness and instead promotes language that creates an open dialogue. In his book, *Nonviolent Communication: A Language of Compassion*, Marshall B. Rosenberg explains how to use observations, feelings, needs, and requests to navigate unmet needs

you or others around you have. It is a powerful and life changing tool that can assist you in many situations. Learn more in Rosenberg's book, through online videos, and local workshops (106).

8

Depression Related to Life Experiences



The story of our mental health begins before birth, starting from the actions of our parents and their parents. It continues with our biological sex, upbringing, socioeconomic status, culture, and the discrimination we experience as a result of our culture and other cultures.

8.1 - Pregnancy and Postpartum Depression

If pregnant, check with your doctor before taking any medications or herbal supplements. Some medication usage just requires closer monitoring by a medical professional, but others, like most antidepressants, should not be taken at all. In the latter case, you'll have to seek alternatives to deal with your depression.

The various changes in lifestyle, relationship, and hormones during pregnancy and after giving birth causes many mothers and fathers to experience postpartum depression. Some actions that may prevent or help parents navigate postpartum depression include going to relationship counseling, mentally preparing for parenting by reading books and talking with experienced parents, using coping mechanisms outlined through this guide, and mothers performing placentophagy (112).

8.2 - Depression in Children

A child's mental health begins before birth, with the lived experiences of the child's parents. Children of parents who experienced traumatic events or post traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) have an altered level of chemicals related to stress, depression, and PTSD at birth. In addition to stress chemicals, parents may pass on genes which prevent the proper processing of nutrients, provide improper levels of hormones, or give improper levels of other chemicals to their children.

A child's mental health further develops in the womb. Mothers who eat a proper diet are much more likely to give birth on time and to a baby with a healthy weight—two factors linked to youth happiness and better cognitive ability later in life. Children raised on breast milk receive an important balance of essential fatty acids linked to proper brain development. Keep in mind that anything consumed, including medicines, will be present in breast milk, and some of these things are not healthy for babies.

Once born, a healthy diet for your child is essential in maintaining their mood and behavior. Children and pregnant persons do have different nutritional requirements than others, so if possible, you should do your research before caring for a child or becoming pregnant! See a prenatal fact sheet online for more information.

Babies should also receive lots of touch and attention. Children who sleep in the same bed as their parents and receive positive touch, especially when crying, grow up happier and better able to cope with the world. Some parents fear that too much touch will make their child dependent on emotional assistance growing up, but not giving them that reassurance is actually traumatizing.

Most importantly, a mentally healthy child comes from mentally healthy parents and a stable community. Ensure that you are taking care of yourself, that your child's emotional and social needs are being met, and that you have a supportive community to help you through the process (114).

8.3 - Depression in Teenagers

As a teenager, you may have little control over the causes feeding your depression. This is because of forces that cannot easily be changed. Examples include family, age, where you live, and discrimination. You are also experiencing huge neurological and hormonal changes that can be very confusing in a culture that does not often talk about them. Having been through rough years as a teenager myself, I want to apologize for the awful support teenagers receive to escape unhealthy and traumatizing environments, and want to assure you that it will get better. Outlets exist, they just aren't always taught to teenagers. These include getting a GED to finish high school early, dual enrolling in a community college, transferring schools or transferring to an "alternative school," seeking legal emancipation from your family, talking to parents about

seeing a therapist or having family therapy, talking to a school counselor, attending summer camps, or applying for travel or exchange programs. Making art and music or experiencing it is a great outlet as well. You might also consider sharing your difficulties with friends at school or online (115).

8.4 - Depression in Older Adults

Old age is a time to celebrate and live fully—there are places to go, stories to tell, and people to keep in touch with. That said, growing older also comes with many trials. These include hormonal changes, physical changes, weakening of the body, a greater risk of life-threatening diseases, seeing loved ones pass away, and being confronted with death. Much of the material already covered in this book will help with these transitions, especially maintaining a healthy lifestyle with exercise, wholesome food, and a strong community of friends and family. The writings of Thich Nhat Hanh, Alan Watts, and other Buddhist teachers offer meditations and discourses on finding acceptance with death as well. It takes time to make these transitions, but you can find great joy and fulfillment in your later years (116).

8.5 - Poverty, Riches, and Jobs

Growing up poor increases the potential of experiencing depression, while a higher income increases emotional well-being. Money can bring a lot of comfort to life, but so can a fulfilling job and healthy work environment. Many people lose themselves in money to the point of disliking their work and having no life outside of increasing their earnings. Find work that you can balance with an active and social life. If you don't earn as much as you'd like to, consider going back to school. Journeyman positions and two year technical degrees are a good place to look if paying for college

is daunting. Internships and volunteer positions provide new job experiences and help open new job horizons too. Whatever you do, just be more than those dollar bills (116).

8.6 - Cultural Upbringing

Factors such as where you were born and raised, what culture your parents come from, and where you have been living influence the political climate, gender norms, medical systems, labels, holidays, traditions, history, ideas of what constitutes depression, communication styles, sleeping patterns, birthing practices, marriage rituals, words, religions, and food. Each of these factors determines how you relate to your surroundings and impacts your potential to experience depression. When everyone around you does something, and you have been raised to do that thing yourself, seeing how it impacts your emotions can be difficult. Be culturally literate by studying other cultures and understanding how your culture relates to others. Also critically ask yourself what learned behaviors influence your social and emotional world. By doing so you can begin seeing what is mentally healthy or unhealthy as a whole culture and seek solutions. If you are unhappy with the existing culture consider participating in volunteer, activist, and advocacy groups to help change your culture into a more mentally healthy one. Just know that these groups can carry their own mentally unhealthy baggage and good self-care is still needed (117).

8.7 - If You Experience Depression Associated with Discrimination

Depression arises from experiencing oppression related to gender, race, body image, culture, income level, age, and ability discrimination. Discrimination is deeply rooted in the United States of America and elsewhere, and while conditions might be

improving for some groups, much work still needs to be done before everyone feels safe and respected. People who experience oppression may also have a harder time accessing the techniques outlined throughout this guide because of time, money, or community restraints. However, the following actions may help you navigate a discriminatory society: form a peer group of people you identify with, relocate to a place with more people you identify with or away from oppressive people, do your best to focus on the positive and live in the present moment, fight for change either in the world or in yourself, or seek out help from a therapist knowledgeable about the type of discrimination that you experience (118).

9

Resources



I strongly suggest exploring other resources, especially for a more thorough explanation of the techniques outlined throughout this guide. Each perspective has its own strengths for giving you a better image of mental health and how to handle your own or help others with theirs. Note however that these resources may not be helpful until you are in a time of need and open to the ideas and suggestions of others (144).

9.1 – Books

Nonviolent Communication: A Language of Compassion

In this book Marshall B. Rosenberg describes nonviolent communication (NVC), a very effective style of communication which relates all feelings and judgments to unmet needs. It covers much more than that though, including tools for practicing empathy, an analysis of hostile language commonly used in the United States, how to communicate with ourselves internally, how to express anger effectively, what it means not to judge others, and how to diffuse arguments. This book changed my life and I think it is essential in a world where very few have been taught how to communicate. It is well paired with video examples and local workshops.

<www.cnvc.org>

Pronoia Is The Antidote for Paranoia

Rob Breznsky presents an inspiring case for how amazing each and every one of our lives are. Normally found in weekly newspapers with his horoscope column, Free Will Astrology, Breznsky's book pieces together why we are lucky and should be overflowing with joy every moment, even in the midst of difficult circumstances. This book is not for everyone, but in combination with *Nonviolent Communication: A Language of Compassion*, it finally helped me get and stay out of a three year depression. It is especially suggested for people who are tired of really serious self-help books and want something off-the-wall yet whimsical at the same time.

<www.freewillastrology.com>

The Heart of the Buddha's Teaching

In this book, Thich Nhat Hanh presents the fundamental teachings of Buddhist practice. These teachings are not so much religious or spiritual ones as they are a step-by-step guide to control-

ling emotions, learning mindfulness, navigating through suffering, and finding happiness and love in life.

Quiet

Susan Cain presents a thorough analysis of introverts and extroverts, detailing important factors that keep the different mind-sets content and happy.

Man's Search for Meaning

Viktor Frankl writes about the importance of purpose and what creates true meaning in one's life.

The Power of Habit

Charles Duhigg explores how habits are formed and deformed.

How to Train a Wild Elephant & Other Adventures in Mindfulness

A book by Jan Chozen Bays about practicing mindfulness. It includes many exercises and practices.

9.2 – Online and Local Resources

The Five and Fourteen Mindfulness Trainings

The Fourteen Mindfulness Trainings are a shorthand version of core Buddhist concepts westernized for easier understanding by Thich Nhat Hanh. He has also compiled them into an even shorter series known as the *Five Mindfulness Trainings*. They are not dogma, but rather good reminders for sources of suffering in life. Both the *Five* and the *Fourteen Mindfulness Trainings* can be formally taken as vows in Thich Nhat Hanh's tradition, though even then, they are not dogma, but rather ideologies to strive for. This type of commitment is a very powerful method of habit reforma-

tion, and many people use it to help work through their suffering. Find the *Five* and the *Fourteen Mindfulness Trainings* at <www.plumvillage.org>.

The Icarus Project

The Icarus Project website includes many free booklets covering various aspects of mental health. The collective describes itself as “a network of people living with and/or affected by experiences that are commonly diagnosed and labeled as psychiatric conditions. We believe these experiences are mad gifts needing cultivation and care, rather than diseases or disorders. By joining together as individuals and as a community, the intertwined threads of madness, creativity, and collaboration can inspire hope and transformation in an oppressive and damaged world. Participation in The Icarus Project helps us overcome alienation and tap into the true potential that lies between brilliance and madness.”

<<http://theicarusproject.net>>

Mind Freedom International

“In a spirit of mutual cooperation, MindFreedom leads a nonviolent revolution of freedom, equality, truth and human rights that unites people affected by the mental health system with movements for justice everywhere.”

<www.mindfreedom.org>

Ted Talks

Ted Talks provides hundreds of informational seminar videos on different subjects. Ten to twenty minutes in length, they are often uplifting or provide insights into the amazing mental and physical abilities humans have inherent access to.

<www.tedtalks.com>

10

Conclusion



I hope you have found inspiration and hope in the many options provided in this guide. Each and every day there is a new challenge to face, but with the right tools, with the right communities, and with the right thinking, it is possible to feel happily fulfilled. I wish you good luck in your endeavors toward finding the place you want to be!

If you enjoyed this booklet, please consider purchasing a copy of the book version, *The Happiest Choice: Essential Tools for Everyone's Brain Feelings*. Many more topics are covered, and those found within this guide are covered more thoroughly. Thank you for your support.

My Mind

Adapted from the Icarus Project 'Mad Map.'

My Triggers

Things That Make Me Feel Better

People Who Can Support Me
During an Unhappy Time

Positivity Journal

Use this as a template for a daily or weekly journal of positive happenings. Keeping this journal will help you write a positive story for yourself and clear away habitually negative thoughts.

Date:

I am grateful for:

I nourished myself with:

I smiled at:

I learned about:

About the Author

Sage Liskey is an author, public speaker, peer counselor, community organizer, farmer, and artist based in the Pacific Northwest. Born and raised in Oregon, he now writes and leads workshops about community, sustainability and mental health. Visit <www.sageliskey.com> for upcoming events, informational booklets, and articles on personal growth and creating a better future.

There are many reasons for the way you feel, and there are many options for creating the contentment and happiness you want in your life. The Condensed Edition of *The Happiest Choice* is a short and straight-to-the-point overview of traditional and alternative techniques for coping with forms of mental suffering such as anxiety, stress, sadness, and depression. Backed by scientific research and the author's personal experiences, it is an inclusive guide that has information pertinent to understanding the challenges that everyone eventually faces in life.

Included are habit reformation techniques, activities to do, thoughts to think, general body care tips, nutrients to fortify, guidelines for effective communication, and many more tools for living life fully.



Mental Wellness Checklist



Deal with any situation causing your mental suffering. Constructively communicate anything that needs to be said. If that is not possible, or more time is needed:

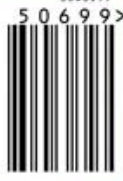
1. *Avoid triggering foods and substances, especially inflammatory ones.*
2. *Get outside to nature or someplace you haven't been for awhile.*
3. *Breathe deeply, meditate, and live in the present moment.*
4. *Take some time for yourself and enjoy one of your hobbies.*
5. *No direct sun exposure? Take vitamin D daily.*
6. *Eat a nutritious meal with anti-inflammatory foods.*
7. *Go socialize or put yourself in a social environment.*
8. *Schedule for the day and week ahead.*
9. *Get enough sleep or take a break from work.*
10. *Seek out a calming environment.*
11. *See a therapist.*



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