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# REASONS TO STAY

# ALIVE



# Matt Haig

'A small masterpiece that  
might even save lives'

**JOANNA LUMLEY**

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# REASONS TO STAY

ALIVE 

**Matt Haig** is the number one bestselling author of *Reasons to Stay Alive* and six highly acclaimed novels for adults, including *How to Stop Time*, *The Humans* and *The Radleys*. As a writer for children and young adults he has won the Blue Peter Book Award, the Smarties Book Prize and has been nominated three times for the Carnegie Medal. His work has been published in over forty languages.

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ALSO BY MATT HAIG

*The Last Family in England*

*The Dead Fathers Club*

*The Possession of Mr Cave*

*The Radleys*

*The Humans*

*Humans: An A-Z*

*How to Stop Time*

*Notes on a Nervous Planet*

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For Andrea

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# This book is impossible

THIRTEEN YEARS AGO I knew this couldn't happen.

I was going to die, you see. Or go mad.

There was no way I would still be here. Sometimes I doubted I would even make the next ten minutes. And the idea that I would be well enough and confident enough to write about it in this way would have been just far too much to believe.

One of the key symptoms of depression is to see no hope. No future. Far from the tunnel having light at the end of it, it seems like it is blocked at both ends, and you are inside it. So if I could have only known the future, that there would be one far brighter than anything I'd experienced, then one end of that tunnel would have been blown to pieces, and I could have faced the light. So the fact that this book exists is proof that depression lies. Depression makes you think things that are wrong.

But depression itself isn't a lie. It is the most real thing I've ever experienced. Of course, it is invisible.

To other people, it sometimes seems like nothing at all. You are walking around with your head on fire and no one can see the flames. And so – as depression is largely unseen and mysterious – it is easy for stigma to survive. Stigma is particularly cruel for depressives, because stigma affects thoughts and depression is a disease of thoughts.

When you are depressed you feel alone, and that no one is going through quite what you are going through. You are so scared of appearing in any way mad you internalise everything, and you are so scared that people will alienate you further you clam up and don't speak about it, which is a shame, as speaking about it helps. Words – spoken or written – are what connect us to the world, and so speaking about it to people, and writing about this stuff, helps connect us to each other, and to our true selves.

I know, I know, we are humans. We are a clandestine species. Unlike other animals we wear clothes and do our procreating behind closed doors. And we are ashamed when things go wrong with us. But we'll grow out of

this, and the way we'll do it is by speaking about it. And maybe even through reading and writing about it.

I believe that. Because it was, in part, through reading and writing that I found a kind of salvation from the dark. Ever since I realised that depression lied about the future I have wanted to write a book about my experience, to tackle depression and anxiety head-on. So this book seeks to do two things. To lessen that stigma, and – the possibly more quixotic ambition – to try and actually convince people that the bottom of the valley never provides the clearest view. I wrote this because the oldest clichés remain the truest. Time heals. The tunnel *does* have light at the end of it, even if we aren't able to see it. And there's a two-for-one offer on clouds and silver linings. Words, just sometimes, can set you free.

## A note, before we get fully under way

MINDS ARE UNIQUE. They go wrong in unique ways. My mind went wrong in a slightly different way to how other minds go wrong. Our experience overlaps with other people's, but it is never exactly the same experience. Umbrella labels like 'depression' (and 'anxiety' and 'panic disorder' and 'OCD') are useful, but only if we appreciate that people do not all have the same precise experience of such things.

Depression looks different to everyone. Pain is felt in different ways, to different degrees, and provokes different responses. That said, if books had to replicate our exact experience of the world to be useful, the only books worth reading would be written by ourselves.

There is no right or wrong way to have depression, or to have a panic attack, or to feel suicidal. These things just *are*. Misery, like yoga, is not a competitive sport. But I have found over the years that by reading about other people who have suffered, survived and overcome despair I have felt comforted. It has given me hope. I hope this book can do the same.

# 1 Falling

*‘But in the end one needs more courage to live than to kill himself.’*

—Albert Camus, *A Happy Death*

# The day I died

I CAN REMEMBER the day the old me died.

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 be 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 to return to London, and reality. After six years of student life and summer jobs. I had put off being an adult for as long as I could, and it had loomed 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 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 seemed 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 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 happens to people who have been living. There were infinitely more people who had never been alive. I wanted to be one of those people. That 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 remembered 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 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 world.

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 had 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.’

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

# Why depression is hard to understand

IT IS INVISIBLE.

It is not ‘feeling a bit sad’.

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 worst 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.

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

It doesn’t always have an obvious cause.

It can affect people – millionaires, people with good hair, happily married people, people who have just landed a promotion, people who can tap dance and do card tricks and strum a guitar, people who have no noticeable pores, people who exude happiness in their status updates – who seem, from the outside, to have no reason to be miserable.

It is mysterious even to those who suffer from it.

## A beautiful view

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 smoking a pipe or hallucinating a giant Mars bar. This was pain. I had been okay and now, suddenly, I wasn’t. I wasn’t well. So I was ill. It didn’t matter if it was society or science’s fault. I simply did not – *could not* – feel like this a second longer. I had to end myself.

I was going to do it as well. While my girlfriend was in the villa, oblivious, thinking that I had just needed some air.

I walked, counting my steps, then losing count, my mind all over the place.

‘Don’t chicken out,’ I told myself. Or I think I told myself. ‘Don’t chicken out.’

I made it to the edge of the cliff. I could stop feeling this way simply by taking another step. It was so preposterously easy – a single step – versus the pain 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 arson. To be *normal*. Or, as normal is impossible, to be *empty*. And the only way I could be empty was to stop living. One minus one is zero.

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 invisible. There is nothing we can do. So jump. Or give me a gun and I’ll shoot you. Euthanasia.’

But that was not how it worked. If you are depressed your pain is invisible.

Also, if I’m honest, 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.