

The Comfort Book

"I can't describe how much his work means to me...
The king of empathy." —Jameela Jamil

Matt Haig

New York Times bestselling author of
The Midnight Library



PENGUIN LIFE

THE COMFORT BOOK

Matt Haig is the author of the internationally bestselling memoir *Reasons to Stay Alive* and the follow-up *Notes on a Nervous Planet*, along with six novels, including *The Midnight Library*, and several award-winning children's books. His work has been translated into more than thirty languages.

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

Reasons to Stay Alive

How to Stop Time

Notes on a Nervous Planet

The Midnight Library

For Children

The Runaway Troll

Shadow Forest

To Be a Cat

Echo Boy

A Boy Called Christmas

The Girl Who Saved Christmas

Father Christmas and Me

The Truth Pixie

Evie and the Animals

The Truth Pixie Goes to School

Evie in the Jungle

The Comfort Book

Matt Haig



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A Penguin Life Book

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Love/despair

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The messy miracle of being here

Acceptance

Basic oneness

How to be an ocean

More

End

Acknowledgments

Permission credits

Do not think that the person who is trying to console you lives
effortlessly among the simple, quiet words that sometimes make
you feel better. . . . But if it were any different he could never have
found the words that he did.

Rainer Maria Rilke, *Letters to a Young Poet*

Introduction

I sometimes write things down to comfort myself. Stuff learned in the bad times. Thoughts. Meditations. Lists. Examples. Things I want to remind myself of. Or things I have learned from other people or other lives.

It is a strange paradox, that many of the clearest, most comforting life lessons are learned while we are at our lowest. But then we never think about food more than when we are hungry and we never think about life rafts more than when we are thrown overboard.

So, these are some of my life rafts. The thoughts that have kept me afloat. I hope some of them might carry you to dry land too.

A note on structure

This book is as messy as life.

It has a lot of short chapters and some longer ones. It contains lists and aphorisms and quotes and case studies and more lists and even the occasional recipe. It is influenced by experience but has moments of inspiration taken from anything ranging from quantum physics to philosophy, from movies I like to ancient religions to Instagram.

You can read it how you want. You can start at the beginning and end at the end, or you can start at the end and end at the beginning, or you can just dip into it.

You can crease the pages. You can tear out the pages. You can lend it to a friend (though maybe not if you've torn out the pages). You can place it beside your bed or keep it next to the toilet. You can throw it out of the window. There are no rules.

There is a kind of accidental theme, though. The theme is connection. We are all things. And we connect to all things. Human to human. Moment to moment. Pain to pleasure. Despair to hope.

When times are hard, we need a deep kind of comfort. Something elemental. A solid support. A rock to hold on to.

The kind we already have inside us. But which we sometimes need a bit of help to see.

PART ONE

Perhaps home is not a place but simply an irrevocable condition.

James Baldwin, *Giovanni's Room*

Baby

Imagine yourself as a baby. You would look at that baby and think they lacked nothing. That baby came complete. Their value was innate from their first breath. Their value did not depend on external things like wealth or appearance or politics or popularity. It was the infinite value of a human life. And that value stays with us, even as it becomes easier to forget it. We stay precisely as alive and precisely as human as we were the day we were born. The only thing we need is to exist. And to hope.

You are the goal

You don't have to continually improve yourself to love yourself. Love is not something you deserve only if you reach a goal. The world is one of pressure but don't let it squeeze your self-compassion. You were born worthy of love and you remain worthy of love. Be kind to yourself.

Nothing is stronger than a small hope that doesn't give up.

A thing my dad said once when we were lost in a forest

Once upon a time, my father and I got lost in a forest in France. I must have been about twelve or thirteen. Anyway, it was before the era when most people owned a mobile phone. We were on vacation the rural, landlocked, basic kind of middle-class vacation I didn't really understand. It was in the Loire Valley, and we had gone for a run. About half an hour in, my dad realized the truth. "Oh, it seems that we're lost." We walked around and around in circles, trying to find the path, but with no luck. My dad asked two men—poachers—for directions and they sent us the wrong way. I could tell my dad was starting to panic, even as he was trying to hide it from me. We had been in the forest for hours now and both knew my mom would be in a state of absolute terror. At school, I had just been told the Bible story of the Israelites who had died in the wilderness and I found it easy to imagine that would be our fate too. "If we keep going in a straight line we'll get out of here," my dad said.

And he was right. Eventually we heard the sound of cars and reached a main road. We were eleven miles from the village where we had started off, but at least we had signposts now. We were clear of the trees. And I often think of that strategy, when I am totally lost—literally or metaphorically. I thought of it when I was in the middle of a breakdown. When I was living in a panic attack punctuated only by depression, when my heart pounded rapidly with fear, when I hardly knew who I was and didn't know how I could carry on living. *If we keep going in a straight line we'll get out of here.* Walking one foot in front of the other, in the same direction, will always get you further than running around in circles. It's about the determination to keep walking forward.

It's okay

It's okay to be broken.

It's okay to wear the scars of experience.

It's okay to be a mess.

It's okay to be the teacup with a chip in it. That's the one with a story.

It's okay to be sentimental and whimsical and cry bittersweet tears at songs and movies you aren't supposed to love.

It's okay to like what you like.

It's okay to like things for literally no other reason than because you like them and not because they are cool or clever or popular.

It's okay to let people find you. You don't have to spread yourself so thin you become invisible. You don't have to always be the person reaching out. You can sometimes allow yourself to be reached. As the great writer Anne Lamott puts it: "Lighthouses don't go running all over an island for boats to save; they just stand there shining."

It's okay not to make the most of every chunk of time.

It's okay to be who you are.

It's okay.