

A GUIDE TO A HEALTHY MIND

The 9 Pillars of Mental Health



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In her debut book, *Freedom From Depression Coach*, Blogger and Public Speaker Emilie Marie Berge explains how anyone can take control of their mental health to live a happier life.

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Introduction

Having suffered from depression on and off over 20 years I have spent the last few years doing a lot of research on the topic. It got to a point when I had so much materials that I felt that I had to share my research, but I was scared of putting so much of my own story out there. And so after procrastinating for about a year I finally started my blog [Me My Health And I](#), where I write articles every time I discover a new angle in depression relief.

This guide will take you through the key findings of my research. It is not meant to be exclusive but it should give you an idea of where to start, should you wish to improve your mental wellbeing or help someone else.

I have split these points between Mind and Body. However you will soon realise that to get your mind to a healthy place you need to first get your body to a healthy place. Being physically healthy will not guarantee that you will never suffer from depression, but it will definitely give you a heads-start.

Before we dive in, I thought it would be worth giving you a brief introduction into the neurological mechanics of depression, as I will be referring to the main chemicals and how to re-balance their levels to take you from depressed to not depressed.

A brief introduction to the neurological mechanics of depression

A couple of years ago I came across a book that transformed my understanding of depression: [“The Upward Spiral”](#) from Alex Korb, neuroscientist specialised in mood disorders. This book has given me a real understanding of the neurological mechanics of depression and how to reverse it.

This is how Dr Alex Korb describes depression: “Essentially, your brain is full of intricate, interacting neural circuits. [...] There are circuits for sleep, memory, mood, planning, enjoyment, and more, and they all communicate with each other. [...] The disease of depression is a pattern of activity that arises from the interactions of these circuits.”

Dr Alex Korb then goes through the different chemicals coming into play when you suffer from depression:

- **Serotonin** – improves willpower, motivation and mood
- **Norepinephrine** – enhance thinking, focus and dealing with stress
- **Dopamine** – increases enjoyment and is necessary for changing bad habits
- **Oxytocin** – promotes feelings of trust, love, and connection, and reduces anxiety
- **GABA** – increases feelings of relaxation and reduces anxiety
- **Melatonin** – enhances the quality of sleep
- **Endorphins** – provide pain relief and feelings of elation
- **Endocannabinoids** – improve your appetite and increase feelings of peacefulness and wellbeing

So what happens in the brain when you starts feeling depressed? You get stuck in a downward spiral because things that happen to you and decisions you make change your brain activity. If your brain activity changes in the wrong way (as in a negative way), things will soon snowball.

There are things you could do to make yourself feel better, but you won't feel like doing them and so instead you will continue to feel worse. And this is the biggest problem with depression. Depression doesn't just get you down; it keeps you down.

Now that this is covered let's look at ways to get you back to a healthy place.

Part I – A healthy mind

Chapter I – Gratitude

In this day and age we are programmed to want more. It is all around us and social media is making things worse, constantly showing us things that we are supposed to want.

We want more money, more holidays, more freedom, more clothes, a new car, the latest product from Apple, a new partner, you name it. What we already have is never enough. And as a result we feel frustration, and unhappiness.

But what if we could retrain ourselves so that we could learn to appreciate more what we have instead of wanting new things all the time?

1.1 The concept of gratitude or how to learn to be happy with what you got to be happier

Gratitude is the latest personal development trend. This is all the rage. Most coaches are talking about it, but what is it?

The concept of gratitude is very simple. It is all about learning to be grateful for what you have. The idea is to force yourself to focus on what is good in your life right now, to truly appreciate what you have at this present moment, and you will naturally and gradually have a more positive outlook on life. Gratitude also helps to keep you grounded about what is really important in life.

1.2 The benefits of gratitude

Gratitude:

- Decreases the symptoms of depression, reducing anxiety and the likelihood of suicidal thoughts
- Improves physical health
- Increases social support, i.e. makes you feel more connected with others
- Improves activity in Dopamine circuits
- Boosts Serotonin
- Improves sleep

1.3 Let's get you started

The most recommended practice is holding a gratitude journal. You should spend a few minutes each day to write down 3 things that you are grateful for on that specific day.

They can be small things like a small favour someone did for you that day, or they can be big things like the fact that you were born in a first world country. And I don't know about you but I am personally rather grateful to have running water in my house.

There are other techniques. Visit "[The gratitude challenge \(or the recipe for happiness\)](#)" for a complete list of techniques.

Chapter 2 – Social Interactions

2.1 Social interactions and depression

Depression is an isolating disease. It makes you feel separate and alone, even when you are around others, and as a result it makes you want to be alone. I remember many occasions when I was in a social gathering, with my friends or my family, but my thoughts were so loud that I was unable to participate to the conversations around me. This made me feel like I might as well be on my own and I would leave.

It is important to recognise that this is another perverse symptom of depression and that the cure is in doing the opposite of what you feel like doing in that precise moment. In this case, it means being around people.

We are a social species: we evolve to survive with each other and our brains are healthiest when we interact with and feel connected to others. The good news is that research has showed that interacting with others, including strangers and pets, not just family and friends, can reverse the course of depression.

2.2 The benefits of social interactions for your brain

Research has shown that interacting with others can reverse the cycle of depression.

Talking, physical contact, or even just being near other people change the activity in the brain, mainly by boosting Oxytocin and Dopamine levels and this can do the following things for you:

- Reduce pain and discomfort
- Improve your mood
- Ease stress and anxiety
- Social support counteracts social rejection
- Decrease depressive symptoms
- Increase calmness and happiness

2.3 Let's get you started

- Be around people

Don't stay home alone. Go somewhere, anywhere, where there are people, like a coffee shop or a library. You don't have to interact with others if you don't feel like it. Just being in the same physical space as others can help.

- Do an activity with a friend

This allows you to engage with others without having to talk too much. This is a good place to start when you don't feel ready for full-on social interactions.

- Help yourself by helping others

Volunteering is a great way to increase positive emotions. Doing something for others will make you feel good about yourself and you will be around genuinely nice people who want to help others.

- Hugs and handshakes

Touching others is one of the primary ways to release oxytocin so go for it but please keep it appropriate!

- Spend more time with your friends

Make an effort to see your friends more often, organise meet-ups. This will also impact the decision-making circuit that we discussed in the [first part of this article](#). If your friends and close family members are far away, call them.

- Get a dog

Having a dog can help to reverse the cycle of depression in several ways:

- You will exercise more because you will be walking your dog several times a day
- You will look after the dog which will force you to do something that is not focusing on yourself
- You might interact more with strangers because of the dog – think about it, if you see someone walking a dog, do you smile and say hi more easily than with other strangers?
- You will increase your oxytocin every time you have a cuddle with your dog

Chapter 3 – Setting Goals And Making Decisions

3.1 Being unable to make decisions is a symptom of depression

When you are depressed you find it hard to make decisions. Even the smallest decision seems overwhelming.

I remember one day when I was in Denmark and at my lowest which is the perfect example. A friend called me and asked me if I wanted to go for a walk or grab a coffee (we had previously agreed to meet up but not what we would do). I simply couldn't answer the question. I couldn't even put a meaningful sentence together. I couldn't explain what I was feeling and thinking. My friend was there within 5 minutes telling me how scared he was and took me for a walk *and* a coffee afterwards.

If that sounds familiar, do not worry. This is not you, it is just your depression playing tricks on your brain and you can fight it.

3.2 The benefits of making decisions for your brain

Deciding:

- engages the prefrontal cortex
- focuses attention and enhances perception
- increases enjoyment
- increase dopamine (through goals setting)
- override and utilise habits
- creates perceived control
- reduces worry and anxiety
- helps make more decisions – and thus creates an upward spiral

3.3 Let's get you started

- Make a good decision, not the best decision

Do not let yourself become overwhelmed with the details and the pros and cons of each option. Just make a decision and you will slowly start getting better

- Take a step in the right direction

The decision-making process isn't complete until you start implementing the decision you have made. So once you have made the decision, take the first step towards it. If you have decided to go for a walk, just start by putting on your trainers.

- Figure out what is important to you

Studies have shown that focusing on your values reduces the brain's stress response. So focus on what is really important to you. What makes you feel happy? What achievements are you proud of? What qualities do you want others to see in you?

- Decide for something you want, not against something you do not want

The point here is to focus on something positive, not negative. Thinking about something in a positive way activates the right circuits in your brain and help reverse the depression cycle.

- Create specific long-term goals

If you start thinking about what is important to you and your values, your goals should come to you easily. I always have 3 main goals centred on health, relationships with others and wealth. I adjust them regularly. If you do not know where to start, I would suggest you start with your health and set as your goals to act on one of the action listed in this chapter.

Chapter 4 – Developing positive habits

4.1 Positive habits

Habits are the things you do when you're not thinking about what to do.

Habits are created by repetition, but not all habits are equal in that field. Some habits require less repetition than others, because some actions release more dopamine. The more dopamine the action releases, the less repetition it needs to become a habit.

And guess what? Bad habits usually release more dopamine than healthy habits! So it will take longer to create a good habit than a bad one.

This means that creating a good habit will require efforts, and even more effort when you are suffering from depression. But if you stick with it for long enough, the efforts will pay off as the action will be easier and easier to take each time.

4.2 The benefits of developing good habits

Developing good habits can be a powerful boost to an upward spiral because once you set those habits in motion, you can start to change your life without any additional effort.

Over the last three years I have changed many of my habits. I have consciously made these changes with the aim of improving my mental health and this has definitely paid off. Here are a few examples:

Old habits I got rid of	New habits I consciously created
Smoking	Meditation when I wake up
Excessive drinking	Meditation before I go to bed
Snoozing the alarm	Keeping drinking within recommended guideline
Falling asleep on the sofa	Regular detox
Working long hours	Exercising minimum 3 times a week
Drinking 6 cups of coffee a day	Getting up at 6am to have time to do something for myself before work
	Drinking maximum 2 cups of coffee a day
	Drinking at least 1.5 litre of water per day
	Setting achievable goals

I stress the fact that I have made these changes *over a period of 3 years*. Such a lifestyle change does not happen overnight. Developing good habits takes time and effort and you should focus on the one thing that will have the biggest impact at the start. When it comes to change baby steps are always the way forward.

4.3 Let's get you started

- How we create habits

Habits are created by repetition. Some habits require less repetition than others because some actions release more dopamine than others. When you first try to start a new habit it requires efforts, which is particularly difficult when you have depression. But powering through it will be worth it as the more you do the action the more dopamine will be released and the easier it will become.

- Self-affirmation can help you change your habits

Studies show that thinking about your positives qualities makes it easier to change your habits. That's because happy memories boost Serotonin and so does positive self-reflection. So here is how to use self-affirmation. Before thinking about which habit you'd like to change, answer the list of questions below with a yes or no. If you answer yes, elaborate.

- o Have you ever forgiven another person when he or she has hurt you?
- o Have you ever been considerate of another person's feelings?
- o Have you ever given money or items to someone less fortunate than you?
- o Have you ever tried to cheer someone up who had had a bad day?
- o Have you ever encouraged a friend to pursue a goal?

- Reduce your stress

Stress biases the brain toward old habits over intentional actions, which is why it is so hard to change habits that we have put in place to cope with stress (such as smoking). And those coping habits are feeding your stress and your depression. So the best way forward is to reduce your stress level first rather than attacking the coping habit with full force.

You can reduce your stress levels through:

- o Exercise
- o Decision making
- o Improving your sleep
- o Biofeedback
- o Gratitude
- o Social interactions

- Accept that you won't be perfect

Habits are created by repetition, i.e. by practice. And when you practice you make mistakes, it's the way it goes. So just accept it and beat yourself up about it. As always, just [remember to be kind to yourself](#).

- Increase your Serotonin level

The higher your levels of Serotonin, the more likely it is that you will stick to your good habits. The following actions help produce Serotonin so go for it:

- o Get some sun
- o Get a massage
- o Exercise

- o Remember happy memories
- Activate your prefrontal cortex

In depression the prefrontal cortex doesn't work as it should, which is why it is so hard to create good habits. You can help redress this by:

- o Keeping long-term goals in mind
- o Having some self-awareness, i.e. become more aware of your emotions, practice mindfulness. For more on this topic visit [How meditation can help relieve your depression](#)
- Change your environment

Once habits are stored in your brain, they are triggered by a thought, a feeling or something in your environment. So to change a habit, you should try to change your environment. Example: if you want to stop eating cookies, don't walk through the cookies aisle in the supermarket.

- Productive procrastination

If you are struggling to do what you need to do and it starts to increase your anxiety, do something. What I mean is do something that is on your to do list even if it isn't the most urgent task. It still needs to get done and it will keep you moving forward. Once you start being productive, dopamine is released and you will have more energy and motivation to do tackle the thing you really should be doing.

Chapter 5 – Therapy

Most doctors will recommend therapy and medication together. Now I agree and disagree on this. I agree that you should try therapy but I disagree on medication. For more on my opinion on this topic, read my article [Let's talk about antidepressants](#). And I also think that there are a number of types of therapy out there that are just as good as traditional therapy if not better. Let's explore this.

5.1 The benefits of therapy

Understanding what triggers depression for you is important and will help you in time see the warning signs before you feel low, enabling you to act on it and reverse the cycle.

If you don't do this work you could easily spend years feeling good because you follow a strong healthy routine and suddenly being hit by depression out of nowhere because something triggered you and you did not recognise it.

Therapy will help you understand your triggers so it is essential to do it if you have a history of depression. But there is one thing we need to be clear on: there are many different types of therapies and they were not born equal.

5.2 Traditional therapy and alternatives

Having tried psychotherapy, hypnotherapy and CBT I have a strong preference for the last two, hypnotherapy being the absolute winner for me.

5.2.1 Traditional therapy

You might already be familiar with traditional psychotherapy. You know, this is the one where you go and speak to someone who barely speaks. That person will not provide answers or advice but will make you think by asking probing questions, usually the ones you really do not want to answer.

Traditional psychotherapy is a very slow process. The therapist has to build rapport and trust before the work can really start. And when the real work starts the therapist is up against the tricks of your mind.

Your unconscious mind stores everything. It is like the most reliable hard drive ever. But in order to protect you from pain, your conscious mind doesn't let you access all of it. It kindly distorts, generalises or deletes information that you can access consciously. So the therapist has to push you to bring back the memories that you need to process. And that can take a very long time, in most cases a couple of years.

This is why most doctors will recommend you couple therapy with medication. Medication will numb you on some level, keeping your emotions flat so you don't have so many ups and downs, allowing you (in theory) to get to the difficult stuff.

5.2.2 Hypnotherapy

With hypnotherapy you can drastically reduce the time that you need to process old traumas if you let the therapist speak directly to your unconscious mind.

This has worked wonders for me. I have solved a childhood trauma that I had spent years working on with previous therapists and couldn't solve **in one hypnotherapy session**.

That speaks for itself.

5.2.3 CBT

Cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT) is a type of therapy which focuses on how your thoughts, beliefs and attitudes affect your feelings and behaviour, and teaches you coping skills for dealing with different problems.

It combines cognitive therapy (examining the things you think) and behaviour therapy (examining the things you do).

CBT is based on the idea that the way we think about situations can affect the way we feel and behave. For example, if you interpret a situation negatively then you might experience negative emotions as a result, and those bad feelings might then lead you to behave in a certain way.

In CBT you work with a therapist to identify and challenge any negative thinking patterns and behaviour which may be causing you difficulties. In turn this can change the way you feel about situations, and enable you to change your behaviour in future.

You and your therapist might focus on what is going on in your life right now, but you might also look at your past, and think about how your past experiences impact the way you see the world.

I personally had a few CBT sessions when I was in Denmark and they really helped. I found that CBT is good to help you set up immediate practical solutions. It won't be going to the root of the problems though so you should still explore therapy techniques that will help you understand your triggers.

Part II – In a healthy body

Chapter 1 – Exercising

I often talk about how important it is to exercise regularly when you are feeling low but it recently dawned on me that I never explained why.

My mentor Ed JC Smith repeatedly says that it is scientifically proven that you cannot be depressed while you run. That comment intrigued me so I went and did some research on the subject. And this is what I found.

But before we dived into the details of neuroscience, let's look at how exercise helps you relieve depression

1.1 How exercise helps you relieve depression

Almost everything that depression causes can be fought with exercise. Here are the details:

Physically

- Depression make you lethargic and tired, exercise gives you more energy and vitality
- Depression affect your sleep, exercise improves it
- Depression affect your eating habits, exercise will restore a healthy appetite

Mentally

- Depression makes it hard to concentrate, exercise makes you mentally sharper and better at planning and decision making
- Depression lower your mood, exercise improves it, reduces anxiety, decreases stress and boosts self-esteem.

Socially

- Depression keeps you isolated, exercise brings you out into the world.

1.2 The neurological mechanics of depression

Our brains are wonderful things. In his book "[The Upward Spiral](#)" Alex Korb, neuroscientist specialised in mood disorders, explains the neurological mechanics of depression.

"Essentially, your brain is full of intricate, interacting neural circuits. [...] There are circuits for sleep, memory, mood, planning, enjoyment, and more, and they all communicate with each other. [...] The disease of depression is a pattern of activity that arises from the interactions of these circuits."

So the good news is, to get better all we need to do is to target these circuits. Easy!

Dr Alex Korb then goes through the different chemicals coming into play when you suffer from depression:

- **Serotonin** – improves willpower, motivation and mood
- **Norepinephrine** – enhance thinking, focus and dealing with stress
- **Dopamine** – increases enjoyment and is necessary for changing bad habits
- **Oxytocin** – promotes feelings of trust, love, and connection, and reduces anxiety
- **GABA** – increases feelings of relaxation and reduces anxiety
- **Melatonin** – enhances the quality of sleep
- **Endorphins** – provide pain relief and feelings of elation
- **Endocannabinoids** – improve your appetite and increase feelings of peacefulness and wellbeing

In the second part of the book Dr Alex Korb very helpfully explains how to reverse the effects of depression naturally by taking a series of actions. By the way most of these actions are actions that I have previously recommended on this blog – just saying.

If you want to go deeper into this subject I highly recommend his book. I will also write a more detailed summary of the book soon as I have found it extremely helpful so watch this space.

1.2.1 What happens in your brain when you exercise

So now that you roughly get the mechanics of depression, let's go back to our original topic: what happens in your brain when you exercise. Well, according to Dr Alex Korb quite a lot.

Exercise strengthens your brain

Exercise increases nerve growth factors. These make your brain stronger, and so your brain become more resistant to all kind of problems, including depression. Exercise also causes growth of new neurons, which in turn increases grey matter.

Now guess what antidepressant medication does? It increases the growth of the nerve factors. So really exercising has the same effect on the brain that antidepressants. Now, let me think about that one:

- Option A: go for a run which will naturally target the right chemicals and give me zero side effect apart from a few sore muscles, or
- Option B: [take medication](#) that will affect my entire body chemistry and give a very long list of evil side effects

Humm... I think I know what I'll do. What about you?

Exercise boost your serotonin activity

Movement causes your brain to release more serotonin. And when more serotonin is released, more is produced to keep up with demand.

Also serotonin and the nerve factors we talked about above work together. Serotonin stimulates the production of the nerve factors, and the nerve factors strengthens serotonin neurons. So exercise set things in motion and the brain keeps it going. Clever, no?

And once again, just for the record, antidepressants also work to increase serotonin.

Exercise increases your norepinephrine

All exercises increase norepinephrine but the more intense the exercise, the more benefits you get. This is also a chemical targeted by antidepressants. Seeing the common theme yet?

Exercise increases your levels of dopamine

Dopamine is the brain's own version of amphetamines. The dopamine circuit in the brain controls aspects of pleasure, decision making and focus. Dysfunctional dopamine explains the lack of enjoyment that often goes with depression. This can be reversed by exercising which will increase your dopamine levels.

Exercise causes your brain to release endorphins

Endorphins send neural signals to reduce pain and provide anxiety relief and as a result they improve your mood. They act like opiates.

Endorphins act in the parts of the brain influencing:

- motivation and decision making
- planning and thinking
- pain perception
- focus

Endorphin signalling in all of these areas is improved by exercise. And same as with the norepinephrine, the more intense the exercise, the bigger the boost.

Exercise increases activation of the endocannabinoid system

Just like dopamine and endorphins, endocannabinoids is another "natural drug" activated during exercise. It reduces pain sensitivity and gives a sense of wellbeing. It was named after cannabis because it has similar effect.

Exercise reduces stress hormones

Studies have shown that stress hormones such as cortisol and adrenaline are dramatically reduced in people who exercise regularly.

1.2.2 *In a nutshell*

- Out of the 8 main chemicals that are involved in the mechanics of depression, 6 of them are positively impacted by exercising
- Exercising help activate 3 of the chemicals that are targeted by antidepressant medication
- Exercising activates 3 "natural drug" responsible for making you feel good
- The more intensive the exercise, the bigger the benefits

1.3 Let's get you started

You don't feel like exercising? Of course you don't. But it isn't you talking, it is the depression. So here are a few tips that might help you get started gently. Again, these are Dr Alex Korb's recommendations and I couldn't agree more.

- Have fun

When you don't think of exercise as "exercise" but rather as "being active" or "having fun" you are more likely to do it and it will have a bigger emotional effect. If you cycle to work a few times a week or go a salsa class with a friend, it won't feel like you're exercising, but you will feel the benefit.

- Take a friend with you

Social interaction is good to fight depression and social pressure will push you to exercise. If you have said to a friend that you will meet them at the HIT class, you will go even if you don't feel like it just because you wouldn't want to let your friend down.

- Commit to a brief trial period

Meaning for example:

- Sign up to a class and commit to go to the first three
- Join a gym and promise yourself that you will go every Monday, Wednesday and Friday for two weeks

- Enjoy the view

Studies have shown that the benefits of exercise are boosted when you are exercising either in a nice environment or while looking at pictures of a nice environment. So pick somewhere pretty to exercise!

- Think about what's important to you

When you connect your exercise to a long-term goal, it helps you push through the difficult part and it makes your exercise more satisfying.

For me it is of course about having a healthy mind (and getting back into my pretty size 10 dresses).

- Exercise before you reward yourself

Before you sit down to watch TV or any other relaxing activity, make sure you have earned it by doing something before. For example, 5 push-up. You'll enjoy the relaxation more knowing that you deserve it.

- Keep an exercise plan

Plan when you will exercise and check it off afterwards. Both actions impact on the good circuits so both have a positive effect on raising your mood.

Personally I highlight in yellow every day on a monthly planner that I exercise. It has the added benefit of helping me see how much I have achieved, which motivates me to keep going.

- Make it simple

Keep it simple, it will be easier to convince yourself to do it. For example, commit to do one push-up when you get up. If you feel like doing more, go for it but if not then you've done well already.

Keep it at your own level. The only comparison that matters is the comparison with yourself so choose something that will stretch you a little but is achievable. No need to follow your super fit friend to a kettle bell class if you have never lifted a weight in your whole life. It will be painful and you will never go again. Not talking from experience here of course.

- Make an anti-laziness rule

Agree with yourself that going forward you will (for example):

- always take the stairs rather than the lift
- walk instead of drive for short distances
- park a little further so that you have to walk a little more

Make it your own, you're more likely to follow through if it resonates with you.

Chapter 2 – Eating

2.1 Eating the right food

A couple of years ago I was wandering around Anthropologie in Guildford and came across this book called [“The Happy Kitchen” by Rachel Kelly](#). The recipes looked good and I liked the title so I bought it. It wasn't until I got home and started reading the introduction that I realised what a gem I had found.

Rachel Kelly has been suffering from anxiety for a long time and suffered two major depressive episodes. She gradually became interested in nutrition and started experimenting with good mood food. She then went on to do further research and chatted to doctors, therapists, cooks, psychologists, academics and dieticians. She then found Alice Mackintosh, a nutritional therapist.

The rest of the story is the book they co-wrote which gives you the golden rules for a happy kitchen and super tasty recipes to keep anxiety and depression at bay. Because the good news is, some foods are natural anti-depressants. Having the right diet can actually support your efforts to keep a healthy mind. This was good news for me because I am a foodie and cooking is one of my favourite hobbies.

The other thing I like about this book is how Rachel has organised it. Each chapter is meant to target a particular symptom. For example there is an entire chapter with recipes designed to help you get better sleep. This is crucial as we know the importance of a good night sleep when fighting depression.

In each chapter there is a ‘Feeling Fragile’ option which is a quick recipe for when you are not feeling like cooking. I love that she offers this and this shows that she knows what she is talking about as it is hard to get motivated to do anything when you feel low. I remember that back in Denmark I was feeding myself with whatever was the easiest option. I rarely had the energy to cook, which in itself was a clear sign that I was depressed. I could no longer care about food and I was barely eating. Knowing that I had to eat I would buy whatever was the easiest thing to warm up and involved the least possible preparation. And guess what? This type of food actually makes you feel worse...

And because she thought about pretty much everything, she also put together some meal plans.

Rachel, thank you.

2.2 Fasting

So having read in [“The Happy Kitchen”](#) all the benefits that Rachel got from meeting Alice, I decided to go and see a nutritional therapist myself. This was less about getting advice on what food to eat to stay clear from depression as I already had that advice thanks to Rachel, but it was about how to lose weight in a way that would be consistent with it.

I had stopped smoking over a year prior to that ([How I quit smoking and why it has helped me fight depression](#)) and like most people who quit smoking I had put on a little bit of weight. Nothing crazy, just a dress size, but enough to have to store away my beautiful and expensive wardrobe and buy a new one. And I really didn't like doing this because I love my beautiful and expensive wardrobe. Beautiful clothes make me feel good about myself. I am shallow like that and I'm fine with this too.

So, over the previous few months I had tried a number of tips that I found online and sadly nothing worked. I went from eating proteins only to becoming nearly vegan... and over 8 months I lost... 2kgs... Rather disappointing. So, feeling unhappy about it and frankly quite confused by the various advice online I thought it was time to go and speak to a professional. So I booked an appointment with a lovely and experienced nutritional therapist, Melanie Simcock.

We had a good chat and discussed at length my objectives, my habits, what I ate and Melanie created an action plan tailored to me. One of her suggestions was to try the famous 5:2 diet but to fast only 1 day per week instead of 2. The reason for that is that I do not have a lot of weight to loose.

So I went ahead and bought the book ready to get things started and I wanted to share with you what I found out while reading [“The Fast Diet”](#) by Dr Michael Mosley and Mimi Spencer.

I assumed this was just a book about the latest trendy diet. Well this is a good example of why you shouldn't make assumptions. Half of the book discusses the medical benefits of fasting. And there are quite a few. Apart from the obvious sustainable weight loss, my favourites are:

- Fasting increases your longevity
- Fasting switches on repair genes
- Fasting is good for your brain and increases abilities to learn and remember, fighting dementia and Alzheimer's disease
- Fasting help fight cancer, diabetes and chronic inflammations such as asthma, eczema and psoriasis
- Fasting is good for your mood

So how does fasting make you more cheerful?

Well. It is all about something called BDNF, which stands for Brain-derived neurotrophic factor. BDNF is an important protein that influences brain function and the nervous system. Dr Michael Mosley talks about studies in rodents that have shown that rising levels of BDNF have an anti-depressant effect.

Dr Michael Mosley has discussed the subject at length with Professor Mark Mattson of the National Institute on Aging in Baltimore who believes that within a few weeks of starting a two-day-a week fasting regime, BDNF levels will start to rise, suppressing anxiety and elevating mood.

I could not believe my luck when I read this section. Not only I was going to slim down, but this diet was also going to help me fight depression. I had never been this motivated and excited to start a diet!

2.3 The impact of detox on your mental wellbeing

I had got some great results with The Happy Kitchen and the Fast Diet. And then I discovered another level.

Last summer, on a beautiful Friday afternoon, in the garden of our local pub, a colleague of mine mentioned the benefits she got from trying the [Clean Programme of Dr Alejandro Junger](#). She talked about the weight loss and energy she got from it but what sold it to me was how she started feeling mental clarity halfway through the programme.

So we decided then and there to start the 5 weeks programme together on the coming Monday. Needless to say I had no time to really understand what I was getting into but I got myself into it anyway!

I bought the audiobook (so that I could listen to it on my way to work) and a copy of the book so that I would have the recipes and basic guidelines to start straight away. And I plunged into the detox! No caffeine, gluten, dairy, sugar, processed food or alcohol for the next 5 weeks. And 3 weeks of one solid meal per day at lunch and liquid breakfast and dinner with a 12 hours window between dinner and breakfast when you are only allowed water.

And the unexpected result happened: this did wonders for my mental health. There is in fact a short section in the book where Dr Junger talked about how this detox helped clients suffering from severe depression, but I only found it when I was already halfway through the detox and had already observed the positive effects on my wellbeing.

This makes total sense when you think about it. As people say your gut is your second brain. If you cleanse it, it will work better. When you are detoxing, you allow your digestive system to work at its best; it will extract the nutrients more efficiently and allow them to get to your organs faster. You will get more energy and your body, including your brain, will work more efficiently.

But more importantly when you start enjoying the results (weight loss, feeling lighter and brighter...) you will start feeling happier because you have done something good for yourself.

Chapter 3 – Sleeping

Getting 8 hours of sleep is number 1 advice on all sources relating to managing depression. But why?

3.1 What effect does lack of sleep have on our mental health?

I came across a really interesting article on the BBC website the other day which I thought gives some insight: “Just a few nights of bad sleep upsets your brain” by Dr Michael Mosley on BBC.

In the article they explain how the team of Trust Me I’m a Doctor teamed up with sleep scientists at the University of Oxford to run a small experiment.

They recruited four volunteers who normally sleep soundly. They fitted them with devices to monitor their sleep. They let them sleep for 8 hours for the first 3 nights but only 4 hours for the next 3 nights.

Each day the volunteers filled in a psychological questionnaire designed to reveal any changes in their mood or emotions and also kept video diaries.

The results were quite telling. The team recorded increases in anxiety, depression, stress, paranoia and feelings of mistrust about other people.

Interestingly one of the volunteers felt absolutely fine even though the test on him showed that his positive emotions fell sharply after two nights of disturbed sleep, while negative emotions began to rise. So even though he felt OK there were signs that he was, mentally, beginning to suffer.

3.2 ‘Stuck’ in negative thoughts

This small experiment reflects the results of a much bigger study on the impact of sleep deprivation on mental health.

Researchers recruited more than 3,700 university students from across the UK who had reported problems sleeping and randomised them into two groups.

One group received 6 sessions of online CBT (cognitive behavioural therapy) aimed at improving their sleep; the other group got standard advice.

Ten weeks into the study, the students who received CBT reported a halving in rates of insomnia, accompanied by significant improvements in scores for depression and anxiety, plus big reductions in paranoia and hallucinations.

This is thought to be the largest ever randomised controlled trial of a psychological treatment for mental health, and it strongly suggests that insomnia can cause mental health problems rather than simply be a consequence of them.

Daniel Freeman, professor of clinical psychology at Oxford University, who led that study thinks one of the reasons why sleep deprivation is so bad for our brains is because it encourages repetitive negative thinking. “We have more negative thoughts when we’re sleep-deprived and we get stuck in them,” he said.

Reassuringly he doesn't think a few nights of bad sleep mean you will become mentally ill. But he does think it increases the risk.

"It's certainly not inevitable," he said. "In any one night, one in three people is having difficulty sleeping, perhaps 5% to 10% of the general population has insomnia, and many people get on with their lives and they cope with it. But it does raise the risk of a whole range of mental health difficulties."

The positive side of this research is it implies that helping people get a good night's sleep will go a long way to helping improve our sense of well-being.

Summary: the benefits of good sleep for your brain

After exercise, sleep is the next best tool to fight depression as it impacts 5 out of the 8 chemicals involved in the depression circuits.

Good quality sleep will:

- Restore clear thinking and improve your attention
- Reduce prefrontal worrying
- Improve frontal-limbic communication
- Enhance learning and memory
- Prepare your Melatonin
- Improve your mood with Serotonin
- Reduce your stress with Norepinephrine
- Reward your Dopamine system
- Reduce pain with Endorphins
- Cleanse the brain

3.3 Let's get you started

- Write down your worries – Worrying prevents you from falling asleep or getting good quality sleep. So write everything that is on your mind before going to bed to clear your mind.
- Make your environment comfortable – Quality sleep requires calming the brain but being uncomfortable activates the brain's stress response. So make sure the condition of your bedroom is right for you before going to bed.
- Go outside in the middle of day for a few minutes – Getting sun exposure during the day will help Melatonin release (which improve your sleep), boost your Serotonin and reduce pain.
- Sleep for 8 hours straight
- Use your bedroom only for sleeping (and sex of course which also helps)
- Create a routine for preparing or sleep
- Avoid caffeine near bedtime
- Do not eat a large meal less than 3 hours before bedtime
- Do not use alcohol as a sleep aid
- Exercise

For more on sleep read my article: [How getting a good night's sleep can help fight depression](#)

Chapter 4 – Biofeedback

4.1 So what is biofeedback?

It's ok if you've never heard of it, I hadn't either until I read the "[The Upward Spiral](#)" from Dr Alex Korb. Biofeedback is the fact that the brain changes its activity depending on what the body is doing. So this part is all about understanding the relationship between the body and the brain.

Our brains control our bodies, especially when it comes to emotions. For example, if you feel scare, your heart beats faster. But like everything else in this article this is something that can be reversed: the brain changes its activity depending on what the body is doing.

Simple actions like changing your posture or slowing your breathing can impact your brain activity and as a result your stress level, your thoughts and even your mood. And so you can increase the effects of biofeedback by increasing your awareness of your body. This is something I have briefly mentioned before in How to raise your mood when you are feeling low.

4.2 Biofeedback in depression

Negative facial expression, withdrawn posture, increased muscle tension, and reduced heart-rate variability are all symptoms of begin depressed. But they are not just results of depression, they are also part of the cause.

4.3 Let's get you started

- Smile

Smiling is very powerful: it increases positive feelings. Also when you are smiling you are more likely to perceive positive emotions in other people, which can influence your mood.

People think we smile because we feel happy but the other way is true too: we can be happy because we smile.

All you have to do is smile.

- Stand up straight

Posture is a very important source of biofeedback. A confident posture may not automatically make you happier but it does modulate your brain's response to your thoughts. It also gives you more energy.

All you have to do is: keep your chin up, stand up straight and stick your chest out. You will feel more decisive, think positive thoughts and increase your energy level.

- Calm your face

When you frown your brain thinks that you are upset or worried. So when your eyebrow muscles are tensed, you feel more negative emotions and fewer positive ones.

All you have to do is relax your eyebrows (and wear sunglasses on sunny days so you don't frown) and relax your jaw.

- Change your breathing

Changing your breathing is a powerful tool for reversing the cycle of depression because it is one of the quickest ways to change your emotional state. Different types of breathing have different effects on the body and the brain.

Personally I am using a breathing app which gives me 4 options: training, balance, relaxation and energy.

- Relax your muscles

When you are feeling stressed or anxious your muscles tend to tense up. And unfortunately that won't go away on its own. This is how I regularly end up with trapped nerves! Here is what you can do:

- Stretching helps relax your muscles and goes a long way toward calming the nervous system. And it stimulates endorphins and endocannabinoids.
- Get a massage. Personally I get a massage at least once a month as maintenance.