

## Introduction

Hello, I'm Dan. I might like to think of myself as tall, dark and mysterious – the truth is that whilst I am long, I'm definitely a nerd, an introvert and one of those people that spends too much time on the internet. I do only wear black though. I'm still trying to work out the psychological significance of my light-absorbing choice of clothing, but there's other stuff for me to work on first.

As an annoying child who screamed 'look at me' before doing an underwhelming backflip into a pool, naturally I wanted to become 'an entertainer'. A professional storyteller, whatever that is. Someone that can make other people laugh and maybe make a change – or at the very least have an excuse to go on a rant about something, inspired by righteous fury. I'm one of those quite sarcastic, cynical ones with a tough shell, which I always chalked up to being British, with that small and stiff upper-lip. When I was eighteen, I started posting comedy videos online to amuse myself, then people started watching them. As this accidental freight train picked up speed, with more viewers and followers coming with every rotation, I found myself (often with my friend and partner-in-crime Phil Lester) hosting a show on BBC radio, writing books, performing in theatres and standing in front of seas of people at festivals. Always self-deprecating, shamelessly sharing my worst moments for others' entertainment, (definitely to a fault and extent that sometimes elicits a laugh followed by a concerned look) – you can obviously learn a lot about my mental health from my sense of humour, but really I just want to make people happy. Other people.

I'd always been seen on a stage or a screen with a smile on my face. To everyone in my life I may have appeared fine and thriving, but under the surface I was struggling. It was easy to forget, as I tumbled forward through life, to pay attention to how I felt. I try not to think of all the time I've spent indulging in the bleakest impulses of my brain and accepting my most negative thoughts without question. I found myself wading aimlessly through a dense fog of stress, panic and low energy, which eventually sent me sliding down into a black hole that I couldn't climb out of.

I came to learn that I wasn't looking after my mental health, and in reality I was stressed, anxious and severely depressed. I went on a journey to find help, to learn about myself and my mind, and I discovered that life didn't have to be this way.

There were times in my life that seemed so dark and inescapable that I thought I had no choice but to give up entirely to escape them. The truth is that there was so much I could have done to lift myself up and out. I just didn't understand mental health, or know how to help myself. Now, I feel like I do.

### THE ORIGIN STORY

From a young age, I experienced a lot of conflict, both in and outside the home. It's easy to look at two large humans shouting at each other with flailing limbs and think 'ah yes, I, the tiny child who only understands basic shapes and how to scatter Lego on the floor for people to stand on must have caused this.' The emotions I witnessed were volatile and inconsistent. I didn't understand it, or why it was happening, so I assumed it was my fault. This led to me concluding, quite early, that this is simply how life is. So when I encountered hostility amongst the other hyperactive and impressionable children in a class, I simply accepted it and didn't push back. I had no reason to question it or that I should feel otherwise. I never really learned the concept of 'asking for help', or 'sharing feelings', so I unknowingly suffered in silence. And so, years of my life went by, unquestioning, feeling perpetually scared and hypervigilant, with a deep sinking feeling that I was ultimately unliked and a burden. This deep feeling became familiar to me. It became my normal.

As life started to get more complicated – and hormonal – the whirlwind of conflict escalated both internally and externally. Basically, I'm gay. Teen-Dan didn't have a great time with that. It was an unsurprisingly grey and generic world growing up in Winnersh – a glamorous series of housing estates built next to a motorway in the south of England. 'Gay' at that time was a synonym for bad. I realised I must be 'bad'. I felt bad. This general g-word that existed throughout the world: TV, music, the school yard – meant anything from 'boring' to 'awful', and I internalised that definition of who I was under the surface. Trying to survive the Battle Royale post-apocalypse

hellscape of an all-boys school, in a society that was broadly homophobic, drilled into me that I was essentially defective. I felt guilty for being ‘bad’, so could not turn to anyone to talk about how I felt about this shameful part of myself. Without getting into too much traumatic detail, it was pretty terrible. Constantly outcast, tired of the constant physical and verbal abuse I suffered everywhere I turned, every day, feeling like I was fundamentally flawed and there was no escape in sight – I attempted to take my own life. Thankfully, it failed.

It turns out life can be slow, but it’s long, and change is inevitable. I did not stay trapped in that environment, I did meet new people and, thankfully, the world did change, if only a little bit. To think that my story could have ended because I thought I had seen everything that was left for me in life? I was wrong. I am grateful to be alive.

At the time, no one knew of what almost happened, other than me. I carried the burden alone as another shameful secret – but now I had a mission. I told myself a story that if I could just escape, ‘get a proper job’ and build a life for myself, on my own terms, everything would be okay. This became a target that would define the next decade of my life. I knew my skeleton was in its own figurative closet, but there was way too much to deal with in all areas of my life to come to terms with that, so I buried it – instead choosing to just focus relentlessly on my escape plan.

It was at this time in my life, purely out of chronic boredom, that I decided to post those homemade comedy videos on the internet (absolutely horrifying please don’t search), joking about things like procrastination and annoying people who walk too slowly. I found this fun, but it wasn’t going to go anywhere. Surely? Despite having passionate interests in a dozen different directions, I was so convinced that I shouldn’t question how I feel or the way the world works, that I decided the only plan was to play it totally traditionally and aspire to one of those jobs a grandparent would be proud of. I went to university to study Law. That sounded like a ‘real job’ a ‘normal functional human’ would get! No offence to successful lawyers who are happy with their careers, it really just was not my personal passion at any level. It was just another lie I was telling myself.

Aside from my default mindset of feeling invisible and afraid, and the bones rattling in the metaphorical wardrobe on wheels following close behind me, a new, slower and more creeping feeling started to develop within me. It was telling me that instead of the usual high-energy panic, I should just slow down and give up. Don't get out of bed. Don't eat. Don't look forward to anything, what's the point? It was the first twinges of inauthenticity starting to erode me from the inside like the acid frothing from a battery.

I decided to take a 'year out' from university to consider what to do with my life. It was during this year of staring at blank walls questioning my choices that the BBC called out of the blue, to offer Phil and me the chance to create our own show on the radio. It was happening. The thing I wanted to do! I was lost in life on so many levels, but I at least understood the importance of doing something that makes you happy, so would I finally get to experience this 'happiness' thing now? It turns out nothing slaps you down to earth quite like paying rent in London – and thusly living off Supermarket Value ramen noodles for several years. It was an exciting and incredibly stressful time. Suddenly my homemade content was opening doors and getting kinds of attention I could never imagine. In my desperation to chase the ephemeral concept of 'a career', however, I was not living a lifestyle conducive to good mental health. I didn't eat, I didn't sleep, I had no friends, I never went outside, my work was my life, my home was my work and my priorities were whack. Any down-time I had was spent face down on the carpet having an existential crisis.

This is when my life got thrown into the pit of the very new psychological phenomenon of social media. Sure, technology brings all kinds of joy and connectedness to our lives, but it can reveal the dark side of humanity along with it, and I experienced a lot of both sides. I enjoyed the middle – suddenly all these followers of my work were sending me messages, recognising me on the street, and sending me slightly creepy but well-intentioned mail. This actually made me feel accepted, appreciated and for the first time grateful that it appears there's some nice people in the world. I was thankful, it was fun! Even if someone told me, 'I went to your show and I respectfully decided I dislike you and your face,' at least it was cordial and I loved and cherished the interaction. However, as I'm sure we all now know from daily adventures on the net, it's hard to ignore the extremes. Having an

encouraging cult contingency that says ‘you are perfect and I will gladly kill for you’ can blow up your head so big your brain is a blimp. Thankfully, my cripplingly low self-esteem never quite let me believe it. On the other hand, there were the people who decided on that particular day that I would be the sole focus of their seething rage and resentment, as all the frustration of their bad day at work was taken out on me in the DMs. Thankfully, my cripplingly low self-esteem never quite let that sink in either; I’d told myself a lot worse.

As my following grew, so did the pressures and peering gazes that were put on me. What I wasn’t braced for were the invasions of privacy. I hadn’t accounted for the rainbow-elephant in the room that I’d have to address one day, and that if I stumbled into a ‘public career’, suddenly other people would say ‘hi, what’s with that giant elephant you’re clearly ignoring?’ I was suddenly dealing with speculations on my relationship status, people trying to find evidence that I was ‘lying’ about who I was, the constant fear of my identity and loved ones being used as objects for entertainment or fuel for headlines.

I started to feel those same urges to escape that I’d felt as a teenager. It was too much. This clown career I’d chosen telling jokes on the internet just wasn’t paying the extortionate bills. The pressure that it put on my personal life was too big to handle. I chose to take jobs that I didn’t want, and do things on my own platforms that I felt were what people ‘wanted to see’ rather than what I was passionate about. If I wasn’t doing what I wanted on my own terms now, surely I was just as much of a fraud as when I convinced myself I could be a lawyer?

I was completely caught up in the storm. Any worries that entered my mind would overwhelm me. I ceased to exist in the physical world as I was captivated by the chaotic thoughts in my head, summoning my worst memories, prophesying my own doom, imagining the enemies that I thought were waiting for me out in the world, with the worst intentions. My physical health started to deteriorate: I was tense, short of breath, tired but wired with anxious energy. Even as positive opportunities in my career started to present themselves, the pressure and attention that came with them started to boil over.

I just became a machine. Push it all under. Bury it. Head down, hide the

evidence, march forward, deal with it later. ‘One day’ my mission will be successful: I’ll reach the surface of financial freedom to secure my independence and I can take that first breath of air. After spending most of my twenties in this state of relentless chase / escape, there came a time after my first book was published, having just done a comedy world tour performing from Stockholm to LA, where surely I had finally ‘made it’? I took stock of what I had – and the shelves were empty. Life was grey, much like my entire sock drawer. Even after ‘achieving’ what I had, I didn’t have the emotional capacity to enjoy it. This initial moment, however, of really just admitting that I was not okay, gave me a spark of hope – it made me feel for the first time that I was allowed to think about my life and try to make it better.

#### **DANIEL AND DEPRESSION**

I went to a doctor, she said I might be depressed. I didn’t really understand what that meant. I saw a therapist, she pointed out I clearly had several issues I probably had to deal with. I was prescribed a course of antidepressants so I could get through a day without tripping into an emotional pit, and for the first time I looked around at my world and questioned the balance. I started to try and separate work and life, actually get a hobby, find some friends – and all of this helped. It gave me a stronger foundation. Therapy helped me understand my emotional reactions and reframe my thoughts. Eventually, I found I didn’t need the meds anymore. I had gone through all of this in secret, trying to keep up appearances and be professional, but eventually I felt like I had to be honest about it. The people in my life and my supporters deserved to know what I was dealing with. I felt they had a right to know why I wasn’t appearing as my supposedly sunnier past-self. So I decided to open up about my mental health for the first time in a video titled ‘Daniel and Depression’.

The day I shared that I was suffering from depression was terrifying. Sure, I did it in my own way that poked fun at the more ridiculous sides of the struggle, carefully treading that line between letting people feel they have permission to laugh and making them wince (sorry), but the fact I was talking about this at all scared me. I didn’t know whether people would understand, if they’d accept it, or if I was making a mistake admitting this vulnerability that would inevitably result in judgement. At the time ‘mental health’ was

still a mystery to most and total taboo, so I feared I was making a mistake. I shared how I felt, explained the misconceptions of depression and how I've tried to make myself better, and braced for impact. Then people surprised me – this time, in a good way.

Sitting back looking at my screen, I saw laughter, understanding and encouragement. Old friends reached out in support. Strangers told me that they felt represented by my story and could now explain their situation to their loved ones. Some said they finally understood others in their lives that were in my position, and I realised the power of talking about these taboos and how it can help so many people.

This was the first step, but I knew there was more waiting for me on the road ahead. I'd go out on tour and people would open up to me about their struggles, emotionally sharing how I 'inspired them' by sharing 'my story' about depression, and I felt like a fraud. After all, I was still in denial about that thing I've known since I was a child. Despite my hard work to make my life better for my mental health, there was a final hurdle dragging it all down. I knew I wasn't being honest with myself and until I was living a truly authentic life, I would never be happy. I couldn't keep going any longer. I couldn't create, I couldn't perform, my body was pushing against the current of my mind, forcing me to finally confront it. It was time to go on a journey – an internal one to Narnia and back. If I wasn't living my truth, feeling happy being myself and doing things I felt passionate about, I would never be free. The time had come, to come out.

#### DAN 1.0

I knew that as long as I was so busy working that I had no energy left at the end of the day, I could never step back to get the perspective on my life that I needed to grow, so I took some time out. To the outside world, it probably looked like I was abducted by aliens. There were definitely a few good conspiracy theories that I must have flown over a triangle or got invited into the illuminati. The truth was that I just stopped running for the first time, and when I turned around, there was a lot waiting for me. Trying to untangle my past, like that box of miscellaneous wires that we all have at the bottom of some box, took time, but it would take as much time as I needed. After everything I'd been through, it was literally life or death.

Safe to say there was a lot going on, wading through decades of trauma while under the spotlight, but lurking at the back was the skeleton. The fundamental fact I'd been afraid to look at my whole life. I'd never been homophobic, or any kind of hateful towards others in life, but society's 'gay is bad' brainwashing that I was subjected to directed all of it inwards – in what I understand now is 'internalised homophobia'. I thought I was broken. I hated myself. I believed this bullshit to be self-evident. Recognising that this self-hatred was, in fact, not 'true', and something I could let go of, was like the first beam of light piercing straight through the clouds that had been descending on me all my life. The lightbulb moment for me was stepping back and saying 'it's okay to be the way you are.' I gave myself permission to exist. The moment I felt comfortable actually acknowledging and accepting my sexuality, and that I was ready to be honest with the world, felt like the beginning of my life.

If I was going to finally confront this, there was a lot of busy work to do just sharing the news. I learned from being open about my mental health that part of the hard work (of someone struggling with a stigma) is managing other people's emotional reactions and preparing for the bad ones, so a whole heap of fun awaited me for dropping this bombshell. I struggled so much to 'come out' to my family, that after months of procrastination, I literally just emailed them saying 'Basically I'm Gay' – which while being an unconscionably ridiculous subject line, and way too on the nose for someone as socially awkward as me, actually did the job perfectly. I then spent months in a deep hibernation cave, writing an epic and dramatic coming out comedy piece called 'Basically I'm Gay' in that email's honour. You can search for that one if you want.

The moment I shared this with the world, it actually felt like a weight lifted. I never truly understood that saying until now – it felt like my whole life had been held down by this chainmail that I instantly shed. Finally, for the first time, on a personal level, I felt free to just exist in peace moment-to-moment.

Here I am, finally living. Now what?

I've seen in the world and experienced for myself how much there is to learn about mental health. Understanding how our minds work can totally change,



even save, our lives. It has personally blown my mind to learn all of the everyday behaviours I didn't appreciate were harmful, all the unhelpful attitudes I held towards myself for no reason, and what I can do to support my mental health going forward. This has helped me. I hope this book helps you, I hope it can then help others.

This is not a memoir. It's not spiritual self-help. It is a practical guide, founded on science, that can help you understand and manage your mental health. I'm just the guy who's here to make it fun along the way and say that I know working on yourself can feel like work, so if laughing at my pain can make it easier for you, I'm happy to. I'm used to it.

## Understanding Mental Health

Mental health is the state of your emotional and psychological wellbeing. Just as real as your physical health, but unseen, in your mind. ‘Having mental health’ isn’t a problem, it’s just how we feel at any time. Is your mental health good, or are you struggling?

Too many of us only look at the outside when we think about how healthy we are. As long as we aren’t in pain, and don’t seem to be shooting blood out of some orifice, we may consider ourselves fine – but if how we feel is holding us back from doing the things we need to do or enjoying life, then we should be just as concerned with our minds.

The big difference with mental health is that we’re not very good at noticing problems. We can live with a lot of stress, a lot of anxiety. Many people can function with depression. It is possible to cruise through life suffering, if we don’t understand that it isn’t necessary to feel this way. The first step is to understand that you feel things for a reason. Our thoughts and feelings are not a mysterious fog of frustration, they are our brain’s responses to what happens in the world around us. If you understand why you feel different things, you can change how you feel. If you can change how you feel, you can feel good.

### MENTAL HEALTH PROBLEMS ARE NORMAL

It’s said that right now a quarter of all people experience some kind of mental health problem each year. That’s a lot of people. It’s not just you. People have problems. It also shows that mental health doesn’t discriminate: no matter how ‘successful’ someone may appear in all aspects of their life, they are still as likely to experience things like depression or anxiety, as there are so many reasons mental health problems can develop.

However, even though they are so common, people don’t like to talk about them. It’s easy to share that you have a physical problem like a headache, less

so that you are feeling stressed. Even if the physical problem is embarrassing (let's go with scandalously sexual), a shocking number of people would probably rather admit they had chlamydia or chronic constipation than depression. I mean, I would personally consider that oversharing, but the point is: mental health has a stigma around it.

Why is that? Mainly, because mental health isn't well understood by many people. Stigmas surface when people don't understand something and fear it. There's nothing to be ashamed of about feeling anxious, but for too many people bringing up the word 'anxiety' is confusing and scary. Too often we feel silently judged for sharing these vulnerabilities, as if they make us weak and are something strange and shameful, but in reality almost all of us feel these things, and there are ways we can manage and recover from them. If more people were open about how they feel, and more people understood the different mental health problems we all have and why, there wouldn't be so much stereotype and stigma. This is why we all need to understand and feel comfortable openly discussing our mental health.

Conversely, mental health problems aren't some sort of badge of honour and suffering isn't aspirational. Sure, the right kind of humour about shared experiences can help people to feel they aren't alone in what they are going through, and take the seriousness out of some struggles. I love an inappropriate depression joke. Laughing at how I used to literally struggle to get out of bed is probably problematic, but it actually puts me at ease and helps me make light of (and sense of) a really hard time in my life. This doesn't mean I stopped trying to get better. Don't settle on mental health problems being a part of who you are – they are challenges that you can overcome.

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Mental health problems don't just pop up suddenly out of nowhere, like a giant rolling boulder could suddenly pop up and be a real problem for your physical health. You don't fall out of bed one morning with crippling depression, having never felt like you had a problem in your life. This is why prevention is better than a cure – just like taking vitamins or avoiding flimsy

rope bridges prevents physical illness or injury, we should be able to tell when our mental health is going downhill and do something about it before hitting a crisis.

It's not something we should only notice when we are struggling: it's something we should be aware of and looking after all the time.

The good news is, your mental health is absolutely not fixed in stone. If you feel bad now, it does not mean you will stay like this forever. For every person on the planet, mental health fluctuates. No one is fine all the time. Think of it as a spectrum going from barely surviving at one end to totally thriving at the other. When we're thriving we feel happy, we're growing, we're engaging with the world around us, feeling full of purpose and effortlessly dealing with challenges that come along the way. On the surviving end we barely function, feeling detached from the world and the people around us, struggling to maintain our physical health and keep ourselves afloat. I've had times in my life where I felt at the top of the mountain, times right at the bottom where I thought I'd never see the light again, and a whole lot of time on an average emotional rollercoaster in the middle. I want a refund from this theme park.

The reality is most of us are in the middle of this spectrum most of the time. Life isn't without its challenges, but we can usually rise to them and, depending on all the factors in and out of our control, stay balanced as we ride the waves. However, many factors in life are totally within our control, and with the help of this book, you can take charge of them and make a real difference to how you feel. If you're struggling, you need to know how to pick yourself up. If you're thriving, you need to understand why and know how to keep yourself there going forward.

### **GET YOUR PRIORITIES STRAIGHT**

There's no point trying to reach enlightenment if you're being actively chased by a tiger. In Psychology there are many theories describing the 'needs' we have in life and their order of importance. Basically, you can't try to tackle new aspirational goals if you're still being nibbled by the aforementioned tigers – sorry, problems in your life. Our first (and very basic) priorities to survive as humans are food, water, sleep and safety. If we

are fundamentally safe, our problems will be mental. Are we coping and feeling content? Or, are our minds now preventing us from basic functioning, and enjoying our day-to-day lives? I guess if you've completely mastered both physical health and mental health, at some point you magically transcend consciousness and float between states across space and time as an eleventh-dimensional brain, shooting lasers of peace and wisdom from your temporal lobe – but, personally, my brain is more occupied randomly resurfacing the cringe-inducing memory of when I tripped into a teacher's boob when I was 13, so write to me if you ever get there.

## **Being a human**

If you understand the things that shape who you are, it can explain a lot and be reassuring to know that we're all in the same mess. We can broadly box our relationship with mental health into being shaped by the following things:

### **SOCIAL ENVIRONMENT**

Both the environment you grew up in and the one you're in now. As a child, how you were treated, if you were praised or criticised, smothered or neglected. Your circumstances in life, such as where you were born, struggling for money, suffering adversity for who you are, and any traumatic experiences. And now, things like your home life, how well supported you feel by the people around you, how safe you feel, and wider things like culture and the state of politics – all adding up to form the experience you've learned from in life. If an aspect of your identity or upbringing makes life in this world harder, it can understandably impact your mental health.

### **BIOLOGY**

From the outset we are given advantages or disadvantages. We inherit genetic blueprints from our parents, they shape the unique way our bodies respond to stress, the amount of sleep we personally need to function, and the chemical reactions inside of us that affect everything from nutrition to medication. It's different for everyone. At various points in our lives, from puberty to menopause and beyond, we are at the mercy of hormones pulling us wildly in

different directions – and our chemical balances can also be influenced by various medications. If you naturally wake up full of energy in the morning, and have a fast metabolism, for example, I may hate you?

## PSYCHOLOGY

The mindset through which you approach life. We all have personal philosophies, views of the world, and values that affect our ability to solve problems, deal with confrontation and learn new skills. We can be held back by past traumas and have different levels of resilience, coping skills, and ways of dealing with strong emotions.

These aspects combine to create a story that is unique to you. For example, I love to criticise myself constantly (Psychology), so when I encounter setbacks in life (Social Environment) I am more likely to blame myself or eternally dwell on my failure. Or, if I get no sleep because I've been contemplating doom until 3 a.m. (Psychology), I have no energy (Biology) and I struggle to find joy in my hobbies and friendships and struggle to cope with the tasks in my day. I am a human.

These different aspects may explain your disposition, but you are more than the sum of these parts. We all get dealt different cards, and end up in different places in life; there are things we can do to take control and make our minds what we want them to be. This book will focus on the things that are changeable – so just remember you may be a product of what made you, but you have the power to change and grow and make yourself feel better. And you are not the only one.

## **Blame evolution**

So many of our unhelpful habits, emotions and natural reactions to situations are leftovers from six million years ago when we were stressed apes. On one hand, perhaps we should be grateful that they survived multiple ice ages for us, but they left us with in-built responses for ancient solutions that affect our modern mental problems.

The main purpose of our brain's evolution was to prevent us from getting harmed. Our incredible great-grand-ancestors were under constant threat from giant birds and moderate weather, so their brains had to be very emotionally reactive – where any negativity or threat was probably a life-or-death situation that had to send their bodies into stress or panic to deal with the danger. Nowadays, we're much safer in general, but we still have the primitive-threat-detection system installed that kicks in whenever we get given a deadline, or try to pass a stranger crossing a street and can't decide which side we're going around for a continuous minute. This, combined with a more recently developed part of the brain that loves to overthink, dwell on problems and converse with ourselves (mostly criticising) means sometimes our brains are not helping. Just know that if you ever jump to a worst case scenario, or feel a full-body convulsion coming on from a random thought, it's not necessarily a real threat, your primordial fish-brain thinks it's a giant shark – blame evolution. Understanding the difference between how your brain wants you to feel, and the reality of your situation, is fundamental to taking charge of your mental health.

## **Horrible helpful feelings**

You will never free yourself from feelings, and you shouldn't want to; some are quite nice. Instead of repressing or trying to rid yourself of the unpleasant ones, we should instead learn to understand them and be comfortable living with them.

Anxiety is what we experience when we perceive a threat, and it's a normal and necessary emotion. It can range from a casual worry to an all encompassing fear of a future danger – so it can scale from an ominous presence in the background to an overwhelming feeling of doom. The feeling of worry or panic is very uncomfortable, but if we understand that it's a natural reaction to stress and threat, we can be less scared of it.

The 'anxiety response' is hard-wired into us, and probably responsible for the survival of our species. For something that ruins so many otherwise lovely afternoons of mine, it's quite an impressive bit of design that I can at least appreciate the idea behind.

When we perceive a threat, our brain triggers an immediate emotional and physical response that prepares us to run, fight, or freeze. Fight, flight, or like a deer in a light, just fright. Our brain might not instantly know how we want to solve a situation, so it just hits the alarm bell, setting off a series of emotional and physical responses so we're ready for anything. Being actively chased by a tiger, you might need your body to run very fast, so a nervous sweat keeps you cool, and your bowels want to evacuate for that extra speed advantage. If you go for the fight (brave and commendable), an increased heart-rate pumps blood into your muscles. Or maybe your brain just wants you to be super-scared of the looming orange threat and play dead, which explains why we sometimes react by freezing in the midst of a trauma – it can be a very adaptive safety response. (People often say this strategy works for bears? Based on what I've seen from domesticated cats, freezing would lead to total annihilation in a tiger scenario.)

The problem now is obviously we're not regularly being mauled by sabre-toothed predators. We get the same reaction from the threat of public speaking, the aftermath of an awkward moment, or even just imagining a stressful situation. The alarm bells will ring and our bodies will do their thing.

Sometimes our bodies' natural reactions to these feelings are so strong we can misinterpret them as being dangers to our physical health. We could feel like our heart pounding as we're standing still is a heart attack, or sudden shortness of breath means we're suffocating. Thank you, body auto-pilot, very helpful.

The key thing to remember is that these bad feelings themselves are not dangerous. Although it feels horrible, anxiety can't actually harm you. Only the tiger can. We don't want to rid ourselves of the acute ways our brain keeps us out of danger and motivates us to do things, but we can understand it better and learn to tame it. Do you see? The real tiger was inside you all along. I'm sorry.



<b>SYMPTOM</b>	<b>FEELS LIKE</b>	<b>BIOLOGICAL EXPLANATION</b>
Racing heart	I'm having a heart attack	Heart beating faster to pump more blood around the body
Dizziness	I'm going to faint	Blood pressure rises to help heart pump blood <sup>1</sup>
Tight chest	I can't breathe	Muscles of body contracting and tightening to be ready for action
Short of breath	I'll suffocate	Rapid, shallow breathing to increase oxygen in the blood and aid quick thinking
Trembling or shaking	I'm going to collapse	Muscles are getting ready for action
Tunnel vision or blurred vision	I can't see	Pupils dilate to allow more light in; vision focuses on danger and minimises distractions
Butterflies in stomach	I'm going to be sick	Blood leaving the stomach to pause digestion and move to limbs
Urge to go to the bathroom	I'm about to have a terrible, terrible accident	Body wants to get rid of unwanted weight to aid fighting/running <sup>2</sup>
Excessive sweating	I'm overheating	Body keeping cool <sup>3</sup>
Blood drains from face / skin surface	I look ill	Blood going to vital organs away from places it's not needed. Also reduces the risk of losing blood through the skin if bitten by a predator!

Of course, this being said, if you aren't feeling catastrophically stressed or anxious and you experience these symptoms, you might actually be having a medical emergency. Use your brain. Please go to see a doctor.

### **DON'T PANIC**

In moments of overwhelming anxiety, our reaction to our bodies' natural physical responses can swell into a panic attack. Panic attacks often seemingly come out of nowhere with no apparent explanation, which makes them rather alarming, but can also be triggered by situations such as being

<sup>1</sup> It's actually impossible to faint due to anxiety, as your blood pressure increases when you're anxious, whereas we faint due to low blood pressure

<sup>2</sup> One way to distract during a fight

<sup>3</sup> Also sweating makes your skin more slippery so it's harder for a predator to grip hold of you – I guess sweaty wrestlers are cheating

faced with a phobia. Panic attacks can be a one off for someone during a particularly stressful moment. For some, they may happen more often, and a fear of further attacks can seriously dent confidence in going outside or putting yourself in other similar situations again – this can be referred to as panic disorder or develop into agoraphobia.

Panic attacks can, understandably, be quite stressful. If you suddenly feel like you can't breathe or that your heart is malfunctioning, it will inevitably lead to more anxiety, which will bring more physical symptoms which pile up, feeding the 'panic cycle', which can feel incredibly dangerous. The natural instinct is often to gasp for air, which only puts our bodies on higher alert, makes it more difficult to breathe and causes dizziness which isn't good for feeling mental clarity. That stereotypical image of someone on the floor breathing into a paper bag? Yes, that is an absolutely terrible idea. They need to breathe slowly and gently, not sharply inhale the sugar from the bottom of someone's bag of popcorn.

In the midst of a panic attack, there's often also the social fear of judgement, or needing to suddenly find a safe place, which can compel you to run and hide. Choosing to escape the anxiety-inducing situation can allow immediate relief, but can also just reinforce the fear in the longer term, when actually the situation that sparked the anxiety was probably not physically dangerous – but now it's extra scary.

Panic attacks subside quite quickly, usually peaking in intensity within around five to ten minutes and ending within twenty. Granted, twenty minutes of panic where you fear the absolute worst may feel a lot longer, but they don't last forever. Common methods of 'grounding' yourself include stomping on the floor, or feeling running water to distract you. If you have a panic attack, allow yourself some time to recover, as even if you logically recognise you're fine, your body probably needs to come down from high alert and your emotions deserve a break too. Just know – it isn't abnormal or concerning for your health or sanity to have panic attacks. It's a perfectly reasonable reaction to what your body is sending you.

In [Part 1](#) of this book, we will go over techniques to manage anxiety and be present that can help if you find yourself in this situation.

## OUT OF BODY EXPERIENCE

Another common, but deeply unsettling response to anxiety, is **dissociation** which can take different forms – sometimes just feeling like you’re ‘zoning out’ from reality. **Derealisation** is that feeling of being detached from your surroundings, or as if things around you are foggy or unreal. It can feel like being in a hazy dream where you can’t wake up. **Depersonalisation** is where you feel you aren’t physically in your body, but observing it. This sense that you’re losing touch with reality is, understandably, quite horrifying. It can be extremely alarming the first time you experience it, but it is often actually a harmless (in itself) symptom of anxiety that most people will experience at some point, and often passes quickly.

During an episode of derealisation, people often panic that this means they are developing psychosis, or losing control of their mind in a serious, permanent way – but this is not the case. It’s natural in one of these moments to search for an explanation, and not being able to find a clear one can bring even more anxiety, making it more overwhelming. The main thing to remember is that short episodes aren’t generally unusual or serious.

We can also experience dissociation as a consequence of trauma – our brains trying to disconnect from something upsetting, as a protective mechanism. If it’s something that you struggle to recover from, or keeps recurring often, it can be worth talking to a professional to explore what’s underpinning it.

I’ve had moments of dissociation before incredibly stressful exams as a teenager, sat around a particularly chaotic and argumentative holiday family dinner table – even sometimes after positive, but quite overwhelming moments when I’ve performed on stage. Many events in life can cause our thoughts to reach a point of chaos where our brains overload, but as long as we understand why this happens and what it means, it can hopefully go from a distressing mental mystery to a rather boring biological reaction.

## ANNOYING POPUPS

At any moment, your brain is popping random thoughts into your head. Some of these are relevant to life, ‘remember to buy toilet paper!’ Some are

completely useless, ‘remember the boob-tripping incident?’ Sometimes, the random thoughts in our mind can, seemingly out of nowhere, be violent, sexual, or otherwise completely shocking to ourselves. A particularly god-fearing childhood friend of mine at community youth theatre (those poor parents) used to tell me how she couldn’t stop thinking blasphemous phrases. She’d be in the middle of some improv, pretending to be a personified spoon, and her brain would go ‘DAMN, HECK, DARN, GOD, JESUS, TITS’ – how horrifying. Straight to hell for you Jess!

These are called **intrusive thoughts**. They are something we all experience. Just because for some reason during dinner you imagined your grandparents having sex, doesn’t mean you wanted to think that. You really, really, really did not want to think that . . . which is why your brain thought it. The trouble is when we get preoccupied with them, or get into a cycle where we dare our minds to summon more troubling, dark thoughts as we’re so desperate to escape them. It’s tempting to focus on a thought like this when it appears in your mind, and wonder if it means you are a pervert, or an aspiring murderer – but know that you are not, hopefully. Any effort to shout over your own brain or do something to prove you aren’t your intrusive thought is an overcompensation. The best thing is to simply accept that our weird minds are just like this: let the intrusive thoughts come, let them pass, don’t judge yourself and don’t give them the attention that makes them stronger. Kind of like wasps, wasps of the mind that look like procreating elderly people killing each other. Let them buzz around and eventually they will get bored.

#### THE BIG D

No, not ‘Dan’ – thank you. Depression. A word that I know very well has a million different meanings depending on who you ask. Feeling depressed is more than feeling sad: sadness is the opposite of happiness, an emotion we usually easily understand the cause of and that doesn’t hugely impact our ability to function. Sadness is usually a reaction to a loss, or that animated movie supposedly created for children but that deliberately manipulates nostalgia to make anyone over the age of thirteen cry a lake. Depression is less of an emotion you understand, but a physical feeling that may not have a recognisable cause. A pressure weighing down on you, draining your energy.

Depression can take many forms, and can range from mild to severe, and everyone will experience it in their own way. To 'feel depressed' is to feel almost emotionless, sometimes struggling to gather the enthusiasm to perform your basic tasks as a person or to do the things you usually enjoy. It can take away your appetite, and impact your sleep. It's not that you want to cry, you probably don't want to do anything at all. The world seems desaturated. Depression can make it hard for a person to have perspective on their position and the negative thoughts can compound and reinforce each other: 'I'm worthless', 'everything I do will fail', 'life is pointless'. Sometimes depression can start to make someone believe that their life isn't worth living, or that there's no way out of their situation, potentially putting them at risk of harming themselves.

For a long period of my life, I simply thought this was my normal. I didn't question how I felt, so when I was told by a doctor I may be depressed, I was honestly shocked at the implication that my mental health was something I had any influence over. If you recognise these symptoms in yourself, please question it, as I wish I had sooner.

The common (obnoxiously irritating) misconception about depression is that someone can just get over it in the same way they would just feeling sad, by 'getting up' and shaking it off with a little dance, a cheeky chocolate bar or smelling some flowers. Granted, laughter is a great medicine in mental health for boosting a mood! It won't fix the fundamental causes of the condition, but as a plaster it can perk someone up. I personally always appreciated someone making an effort to make a joke in poor taste at my expense, my friends knew I'd appreciate the morbidity and it would give me some perspective to push me through the day. I appreciate my sense of humour may not be normal and something a Psychologist could write a book on in itself.

There are a few explanations for depression. Sometimes it is a chemical imbalance, a lack of the 'happy' neurotransmitter serotonin in your brain. Sometimes it's a natural consequence of grief or a trauma. Sometimes it's linked to biological changes in our bodies, like after having a baby, recovering from a major illness or adapting to a new disability. And sometimes there's no obvious explanation – if we struggle to maintain good mental health, we can slide into a depressed state without realising when or why.

An episode of depression can last a few weeks or can go on for many months or years. No two people's experiences will be the same and different approaches to treatment will work for different people.

This book aims to cover general mental health in a way that's relevant for everyone, but if the description above resonates with you, please consider seeing a professional. Depression is highly treatable, through therapy or medication (that we will discuss later in the book), so you needn't suffer alone. The advice and exercises in each part of this book will aim to give you an understanding of mental health, and tools to manage yours, to keep the black dogs at bay and keep you afloat. Look at me – after everything I've gone through, right now, I'm swimming.

Hopefully now mental health seems slightly less mysterious. It's something all of us know far too little about, considering how it dominates our experience in life. Just remember: there's a reason for all the things you think and feel. We all have the same brains, with the same range of emotions. It's perfectly normal to have problems and, most importantly, there are things you can do to make yourself feel better.

## The right attitude

So let's get into action. Whatever you're going through – whether you're feeling stressed and anxious right now, or just want to set yourself up for better mental health in the long term, hopefully this book will have something to help you. Before our journey begins, here are some ground rules:

- **Be open minded.** Give yourself permission to try new things and make changes. Approach them knowing it's to make your life better.
- **Be fair to yourself.** As someone with impossibly high standards for myself, I can tell you it's unhelpful. Don't consider yourself a failure, but a work in progress. Self-compassion isn't indulgent, it's being fair and makes you more likely to succeed.

- **Be proud of yourself.** Celebrate the small wins along the way and measure yourself by your effort, not your achievements. If you are feeling low in life, things will feel harder, so rather than focus on the outcome and feeling down, feel proud that you are trying. Find hope and motivation.
- **Be brave.** Aim to push yourself out of your comfort zone just a little – that’s usually where the breakthroughs happen. If something’s hard, be prepared to practice and push through to the other side. If something scares you, head towards it in case there’s truth and growth on the other side.

