

THE COMFORT BOOK

Hopeful reflections on the
beauty & unpredictability
of existence



Matt Haig



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Hopeful Reflections on the Beauty and Unpredictability of Existence

By Matt Haig

24-minute read

Synopsis

The Comfort Book (2021) is a compendium of practices, philosophies, stories, and encouragements to help you get through tough times. Matt Haig shares the insights he gained while experiencing years of severe anxiety and depression, as well as his own unconventional strategies for developing a sense of self-worth and looking after your mental health.

Who is it for?

- Fans of Matt Haig's honest and unconventional approach to discussing mental health
- Anyone looking for strategies to build emotional resilience
- People grappling with pandemic-related uncertainty

About the author

Matt Haig is the best-selling author of nonfiction books *Reasons to Stay Alive* and *Notes on a Nervous Planet*. His novels for adults include *The Midnight Library* and *The Humans*. His children's book *A Boy Called Christmas* was adapted into a film.

Introduction

Have you ever had the experience of hitting rock bottom? Of feeling so depressed and anxious that you felt like you couldn't bear to be alive? That's a feeling that the author Matt Haig knows very well. When he was 24 years old and living in Ibiza for the summer, he had what he describes as a "breakdown." He was flooded with an anxiety so intense, he couldn't get out of bed.

From the outside, he looked "normal." Inside, he was in a constant state of panic and despair. He was so desperate to escape from those feelings that he decided he had to end his life. He went to the top of some cliffs and prepared to jump. But something held him back: he thought about the pain he'd cause his family if he were gone.

In his toughest moments during the years that followed, Haig clung to what he calls "life rafts": small comforts that gave him a momentary reprieve from his painful thoughts and reminded him of his own resilience. Twenty years, two children, and many books later, these life rafts have carried Haig into a life he loves. Although he would be the first to tell you that there's no such thing as complete recovery, his life now looks very different from how it did when he was in the grip of his breakdown.

What gave Haig a sense of comfort, even as he felt he was falling apart? What allowed him to keep going through years of severe depression and anxiety?

That's what you're about to find out in these blinks.

Whether you're feeling depressed or just want to develop your emotional resilience, prepare to draw inspiration from Haig's honest and sometimes unconventional advice. These blinks distill *The Comfort Book* into 14 key points or mantras, brought to life by an audio soundtrack.

Number one: When you're lost, just keep walking.

Imagine you're walking through a dark forest, crashing through the undergrowth. You can't see where you're going, and your skin is full of red welts from the mosquitoes swarming around you. Nothing looks familiar anymore. You're hungry, tired, and just want to get home. But how do you find your way?

There will be times in your life when you're in that metaphorical forest – when all your carefully laid plans have gone wrong and you're faced with a wilderness you simply weren't prepared for. When that happens, just keep walking in a straight line, putting one foot in front of the other. Trust that there is a way out, even if you can't see it immediately.

And know that while you're lost and searching, you're actually gaining valuable knowledge and skills. Think about it: you can't get out of a maze in just one try. You

need to hit a few dead-ends before finding which route will work for you.

Number two: Don't believe everything your depressed brain tells you.

Sometimes, being depressed can feel like being stuck in the bottom of a valley. You can only see what's right in front of you, so you're unaware of the beautiful view that lies just up that hill. Depression whispers in your ear: saying "You will never get better." And you believe that voice in your head because, in that moment, you can't imagine ever feeling joy again. But your depressed brain is telling you lies. You *will* feel better – even if you can't imagine it now.

Think back to a time when you felt pretty crummy, and it seemed like you'd feel that way forever. Maybe it was when you were a moody teenager. Or perhaps it was when you were an exhausted, sleep-deprived parent of young kids. Have you had moments of joy or pleasure since that time – moments you couldn't have imagined in the grip of your despair? How you feel today is not necessarily how you'll feel in a week or a year.

And no matter how depressed you feel, know that *you* are not your depression. Depression is a part of your life, but it's not the totality of your life. And it's definitely not who you are. You're a lover of books or movies or coffee or stargazing. You could be a parent, or a partner, or a good friend. You're funny or quirky or thoughtful. You're a nuanced human being.

Right now, you may be in the eye of an emotional storm. But you're not the storm. You're the sky, the vastness that contains the clouds, and the rain and hurricanes. Weather changes – and so will your feelings.

You're not destined for a lifetime of pain. You're someone who's in a lot of pain right now. And those feelings are real. But the things they make you believe about your future are not.

Number three: Embrace imperfection.

You're allowed to be messy.

You're allowed to be emotional.

You're allowed to cry at stupid things and stay stony-faced at a funeral.

You're allowed to love who you love.

You're allowed to forget to email that person back.

You're allowed to be broken.

You're allowed to have a wrinkled shirt.

You're allowed to eat chips all day.

You're allowed to never email that person back.

You're allowed to not know where you're going.

You're allowed to take one step forward and three steps back.

Your life has value – exactly the way you're living it, exactly the way you are. *You're* valuable.

Number four: Borrow faith from someone else.

When your own world is very dark, it can be impossible to feel any faith in yourself and imagine that things will get better. But, luckily, you can borrow faith from other people by learning about their lives.

Next time you're feeling stuck and hopeless, look up some stories from people who've also encountered adversity – and made their way through. People like Maya Angelou, the author and poet who survived an abusive childhood and became one of the world's most powerful activists and writers.

Or Juliane Koepcke, the sole survivor of a plane crash who managed to make her way out of the Amazon to safety at age 17.

Hearing these stories of other people surviving – and thriving – can give us a vital sense of connection. Other people, amazing people, have had hard times. Learning how they made it through external obstacles and internal fears gives us a blueprint for doing it too.

Number five: Write it all down.

If your leg is broken, a cast and crutches signals to other people that you've been through something and are currently going through something. But mental illness is largely invisible. The way you look on the outside doesn't represent how you feel. Your insides and your outsides don't match.

Writing can be a bridge between the inner and outer you. It can be a way to put all your feelings into words that other people can understand. Or a way to make sense of what's going on in your mind.

People think that writing down bad things makes them worse, more real. But that's not true. Writing things down is just a way of expressing what's already there.

And writing can be important for remembering good things, too. Like when you have a real laugh with a friend, or find an inspiring quote, or realize that today you've had times of feeling inexplicably optimistic. Write those times down to savor them – and to help you remember that it can get better.

Number six: Just say no.

Self-care isn't all bubble baths and candles. Often, it's about being tough and having firm boundaries. It's about saying "no":

No, I don't want more cake.

No, I can't help you.

No, I don't agree it's all my fault.

No, I don't want to work for free.

No, I don't think that's selfish.

No, there's nothing wrong with seeing a man cry.

No, I can't forgive you.

No.

No.

No.

Every "no" makes a little bit of space for you to say "yes" to something else – to your mental health, to your self-esteem, to your joy.

Saying no also makes space for people who are drawn to your clarity and respect your boundaries. People who don't want you to be anything more – or less – than you are.

Number seven: Get lost in music.

There's something magical about music. It can transport you into the past, rev you up, or change your mood entirely. Like when you're in the car, and a song comes on that you can shout along to with the windows down. Or how sad music can allow you to have a good cry and mourn a breakup. Or how another song might remind you of a dear friend.

So put some music on, and allow yourself to get lost in the sounds.

Number eight: Find your own squad of goldsaddle goatfish.

Divers who were swimming in the ocean around Hawaii noticed something strange: a fish they'd never seen before was swimming around. It looked like a small, golden fish they were familiar with called the goldsaddle goatfish. But it was much bigger.

When they swam up to it, the big fish suddenly split into eight little fish. It turns out that goatfish swim together in perfect formation when they're feeling attacked, so that they appear more threatening to predators.

This is a beautiful example of strength in numbers. Find your own crew of goatfish, in person or online, to support you when you're feeling vulnerable. These people's company can make you feel your own power and "bigness" at difficult times.

Number nine: Stand in the rain.

Have you ever tried to make it stop raining? Give it a go! Shout at the sky, and shake your fist.

It doesn't work, does it? You can shout as much as you like, but it will just keep raining.

But there is something else you can do: Accept it. Stop scowling or trying to outrun it. Allow yourself to just stand there, in the middle of a busy street, getting wet. Feel the cold water trickling down your neck, soaking your hair. Feel your clothes getting wetter and sticking to your body.

At some stage, the rain will stop.

Pain, especially mental pain, is a lot like that rain. You can try and shout at it or repress it or dull it with drugs. But it doesn't go anywhere – until it does.

Number ten: Seek out wonder and cultivate curiosity.

You want to know what the mortal enemy of anxiety is? Curiosity. That's because it's hard to be anxious and curious at the same time. As soon as you start wondering about something – or someone – else, you become anchored to the world instead of stuck in the scary world in your head.

So look around you and practice cultivating curiosity. Eavesdrop on the fight happening at the table next to you. Or google something you've always wondered about, like how gravity really works.

Along with curiosity, the most important antidotes to depression are wonder and delight. Staring at a beautiful, starry night sky won't make you instantly shrug off the depression you're experiencing. But it will momentarily distract you. And the majesty and scale can be a reminder of what else is out there in the universe. Allow yourself to experience one wondrous or delightful thing every day. Study an old tree, or listen to a beautiful piece of music. Allow yourself to sample a deliciously moist lemon drizzle cake, or spend some time in nature. Collect small moments of wonder to sustain you along your way.

Number eleven: Know that you're already, always enough.

Babies are universally adored. They just exist, stare at us, blink from time to time, and demand food. And we love them for it.

Nobody stares at a baby and thinks to themselves, *If only that baby were wealthier, or more popular, it would be a valuable human being.* A baby's value is innate in its raw state. Just like our value is innate. But that's so hard to remember.

The author has always craved six-pack abs. And popularity. And success. And he's always been terribly insecure because, in his mind, he never measured up to those ideals.

How do you measure your own worth? By how needed you are? How kind? How many Instagram followers you have? We've internalized the idea that to be worthy, we need to be beautiful, or have a perfect body, or be loved by other people, or earn lots of money. But that's not true. We don't need to have any of those qualities to be valuable.

And even if we did have them, it wouldn't mean our lives would magically improve. Because here's the thing: the night sky doesn't look more beautiful to the person with the six-pack. And pizza tastes just as delicious to the millionaire as it does to the unemployed person. And having a laugh with a friend isn't more enjoyable because you got an achievement award.

So, next time you're hustling to climb the ladder to success, ask yourself where exactly you're going – and why.

And remember:

You're already, always enough.

Number twelve: Stare down your demons.

The classic horror movie *Jaws* is known to keep people on the edge of their seats – and yet we only see the famously terrifying shark 1 hour and 21 minutes into the movie. That's because, sometimes, what we don't see or what we're left to imagine is scarier than what's actually there.

You probably have your own ominous *Jaws* soundtrack in your head: your own inner sharks, parts of yourself that scare you or feelings you'd rather ignore.

The problem is, ignoring or resisting your problems and fears doesn't make them go away. In fact, it makes them worse. So take some time to acknowledge painful feelings and fears. Acknowledge that you're not doing great, and you're hurting, and that's OK.

Lie down on the floor, and let the pain flood through your body. Let it take over, and accept that it's there. All the insecurity, all the doubt, all the worry about being so worried, all the grief at the parts of your life that you feel you're missing out on.

Take some time to meet your sharks. If you stare hard enough, you might realize that what you thought was a terrifying predator is actually a mechanical puppet from a '70s horror movie.

You can be with it, and it won't kill you. It's not as powerful as you'd always believed.

Number thirteen: Don't be in the moment.

This might seem like strange advice. We're always told to be in the moment – to appreciate every second of every day. But that can add a whole lot of unnecessary pressure to our lives. On top of everything else, we have

to add “being in the moment” to the list. But think about it. You’re always in the moment. You’re alive, aren’t you? Even if the moment is spent scrolling through Instagram, you’re still experiencing it.

When people say we should “be in the moment,” they often mean we should be mindful of the moment we’re in. But, let’s face it, being exquisitely aware of what’s going on in our minds all the time can be awful. In fact, it was when the author was at his most depressed that he felt most in the moment. He was excruciatingly aware of his surroundings, and of what was going on in his brain. He would have given anything to be mindless sometimes.

So give yourself permission to not be in the moment. Watching TV and getting absorbed in a series like *Game of Thrones* is an excellent way to be mindless for a while. Chats with friends can also work. Or getting sucked into an addictive detective novel.

The point is, get through the moment whichever way you need to. Your survival is the most important thing, and it doesn’t need to look a certain way.

comes from improving your self-esteem and knowing that you’re intrinsically worthy. Nurturing your mental health is a lifelong journey. And it’s personal. Only you know what you need to sustain yourself through difficult times.

And here’s some more actionable advice:

When you’re having a tough day, make something.

Making something is one of the most soothing things you can do when you’re not feeling great. It could be a sandwich or soup or some music – anything that puts some power into your hands when you’re feeling completely out of control.

Number fourteen: Cultivate irrational hope.

Did you know that one of the most hopeful songs was written at one of the most hopeless points in human history? *Somewhere Over the Rainbow* was composed by two Jewish musicians – Harold Arlen and Yip Harburg – for the movie *The Wizard of Oz*. The movie came out in 1939, the year Adolf Hitler unleashed a tide of anti-Semitism on the world. The fact that these musicians chose that moment to create one of the most optimistic songs ever written is probably not coincidental.

There’s nothing rational about hope. In the middle of a global pandemic, it can feel extremely irrational to be hopeful. And if you’re struggling with anxiety or depression, hope can be even harder to find.

But you don’t need to be cheerful or optimistic to have hope. It isn’t about being naive or Pollyannaish. It’s simply saying, *I don’t know what the future holds*. And because so much is uncertain, it’s entirely possible that things can get better.

We can’t predict what will happen next year. Or even tomorrow. And yes, that can be scary. But if we’re able to sit with the uncertainty, we realize we have just as much reason to be hopeful as we do to be fearful. And, as the author says, “Nothing is stronger than a small hope that doesn’t give up.”

Final summary

The key message in these blinks is that:

Comfort arises from confronting your demons – and practicing strategies to deal with them. It