8.3 Winner

August 8, 2021

5 Things that Actually Helped Me with Depression.

Katie O'Hara (7,360)

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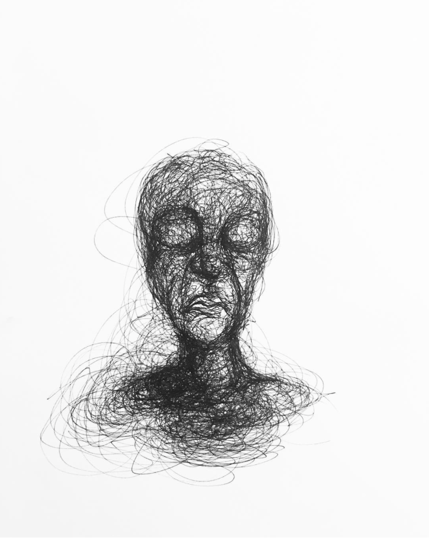

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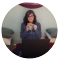

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treatment. Always consult a health professional before trying out new home therapies or changing your diet." But we can't afford lawyers, and you knew all that. ~ Ed.

When I was 15 years old, I was diagnosed with major depressive disorder.

I remember going to the family doctor, talking about what my symptoms were, and getting prescribed antidepressants.

"Take these and give it some time. It will get better," he said as he sent me on my way.

That year, I also saw a therapist occasionally, but other than that, I wasn't given any real coping tools other than medication, which was a pretty typical approach to mental illness 18 years ago. (Just a quick note: I want to be clear that I took medication for many years and am a strong advocate for using medication when and if needed.)

I took my medication, and I lived my life. I hung out with friends, I rebelled against my parents (a lot), I drank, and I partied. I got grounded and then did it all again. Deep down, I knew there were some things I could do to make myself feel better when "the darkness" set in.

I could read, rest, explore nature, make art, write, and journal. These things helped, but to me, they were also boring. I associated getting better with being boring, which was my own misconception. I wanted to have fun and be fun. Plus, while all these things helped, it was usually only a surface-level fix. Things would get better. And then they would get bad again. And then better. This cycle continued for well over five years.

When I was 20 years old, my older brother, who was truly my best friend in the entire world, suddenly and tragically passed away. Leading up to his death, he had been in an active war zone for four years. While the experience I had while he was at war doesn't hold a candle to his, I spent those four years in a state of elevated stress and constant terror.

Every time we spoke, I thought it would be the last time I would hear his voice. Every time he was home on leave, I hugged him a little longer and held onto his every word, every laugh, and every breath as I braced myself for the chance that it would be the last. The years I lived in this state were truly half lived.

When his commitment to the military was over and he was discharged and came home, my entire family breathed an immense sigh of relief. We no longer had to worry about him; he would be with us forever. However, fate had other things in mind, and we were dealt a cruel blow. He was home for a month and a half when he died in a horrific accident.

To say that our entire family and community were rocked by his passing

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Jill Renee Stevens is literally The JOYful Writer who knows that Words Are Her SuperPowe...

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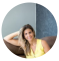

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#10 Megan Gewitz

$50

Megan Gewitz is a psychotherapist specializing in Dialectical Behavior Therapy (DBT), S...

is truly *the* understatement of the century. I was in shock for months, and I developed severe anxiety on top of my depression, and I suffered from post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) because of the trauma of his passing. Throw grief into the bag and it was a regular mental health crisis party for me.

Looking back now, it saddens me to see that due to my complete disregard and lack of groundwork for truly learning healthy coping mechanisms to manage my anxiety and depression, which were then compounded by my severe PTSD, I spent 10+ years of my life bumbling around. *I was lost, broken, devastated, and essentially inhuman.*

The things I tried to do to deal with my pain just intensified it and made my suffering unnecessarily more intolerable. In an attempt to conquer my pain, I became an expert at avoidance techniques, and I wasted a lot of my own and others' time.

I was 26 when I saw the first doctor who gave me some of the best advice I have ever received. He continued me on my antidepressant prescription, but he reminded me that medicine alone is not the whole answer; it's just a piece. He told me that humans essentially need three things to feel happy and fulfilled:

> *1. We need a strong support system.* Friends and family with whom we can be ourselves and be supported.
>
> *2. We need to have a purpose.* This can be what makes you want to get out of bed each day. Whatever that is, find it, do it, hold onto it. This one took me *much* longer to find and is an ever-evolving concept as well.
>
> *3. We need a belief in something greater than ourselves.* This doesn't have to be any sort of religion, but it absolutely can be. It can truly be anything you want it to be. God, the universe, the Broncos—something that reminds us that we are all interconnected in some way and that we are not alone.

I was astonished to hear this. Here was a practitioner of western medicine talking to me about whole human health and wanting me to combine medication with positive lifestyle choices. It seemed almost *too* obvious at the time. He wanted me to change my diet, stop drinking and partying, and make exercise part of my daily routine.

He told me to search deep down and find my purpose, my true calling, my will to live, and find a way to engage with that purpose every single day.

It took me another five to six years to really digest what he said to me that day, and honestly, every single day since is still about making a choice. I have to wake up every day and actively choose to be an advocate for my own mental health. I have to choose to be around people who bring out my best, I have to stop trying to be everywhere with everyone all the time, and I have to pick and choose the people and places and activities that don't stress me out.

Over the years, while seemingly doing everything wrong, I learned a lot and picked up a few tricks that are now nonnegotiable for me when deciding to choose myself and my mental health every day.

1. Consistency is the name of the game.

Once I realized what the exact magical recipe for helping me to manage my depression and anxiety was, the next step was sticking with it. Sure, I have days when I don't put myself first, but when I continue to show up for myself and choose the same habits that have been proven to be successful for me, and when I am consistent in my choices—thoughts and actions—the length of time in between "the darkness" gets fewer and farther apart. And when "the darkness" does come knocking, it doesn't stay as long or cast quite as long of a shadow.

2. You are what you eat.

And I don't mean food (though that is coming next). Think about everything that you engage with on a daily basis as having nutritional value for your mind and soul. The accounts you follow on Instagram, the music you listen to, the books you read, the people in your inner circle. *All* of it affects the way you connect with yourself.

Recently, I was sad—and quite shocked—to learn that my pension for true crime podcasts was really bringing me down (this may be obvious to an outsider, but to me, it was actually a news flash). I *love* true crime—I always have. I thought that by listening to those podcasts, I was engaging with a topic I loved to study, and therefore, bringing myself happiness. Makes sense, right?

I switched over to motivational podcasts and my entire life changed. Seriously. I was more inspired, more creative, more positive than ever. I was *lighter*. I felt a higher frequency of love and power vibrating in my entire existence. Am I still going to listen to true crime? Absolutely. But I'm not going to consume that content at the level I had been previously because I didn't have the same elevated frequency I did when I was "eating" something that was actually good for me.

3. Focus on whole human health.

As I said before, taking medication is an amazing way to manage anxiety and depression. I took antidepressants for many years and just recently weaned myself off of them (under the supervision of my doctor).

Antidepressants are part of my toolbox and served as a bridge for me to get to the other side. I also work with a therapist regularly. These tools aren't the only things that have helped me. The other tools? Healthy diet, exercise, adequate sleep, and drinking in moderation (or not at all).

There is a direct link between our gut health and our mental health, and the more fresh, whole, real, foods we eat, the happier our brain will be. Working out, even if it's just going for walks, is another necessary tool for my mental health management. The physical effects of working out are honestly the least important ones. They're the frosting on the cake, and the actual cake is the mental health benefits.

Exercise releases endorphins and serotonin, which are the "happy" chemicals in our brains. Having a regular exercise practice ties back into consistency and showing up for ourselves. Going to sleep and waking up at the same time are also tools that can help keep our depression at bay. (And drinking in moderation.)

If I'm being honest, I had a hard time with this one until the last year. I recently took 90 days off from drinking and reevaluated what role I wanted alcohol to play in my life, and instead of riding shotgun, it's now in the trunk of the ol' car. Best decision I have ever made.

Alcohol is a depressant, and it increases anxiety. Having a healthy relationship with drinking is one of the most beneficial things you can do for yourself. If you are regularly overdrinking, chances are you're not making the best nutritional choices, you're probably not exercising, and your quality of sleep suffers.

It's a vicious cycle that takes down your other tools with it. And there is truly no way to drink away our problems or pain. Once we sober up, it'll all be there waiting for us, but we'll also be hungover, which makes everything so much worse.

4. Develop a game plan for the darkness.

This one is really important. I know that my dark days are not all behind me. Far from it. When they come, I know that what makes me feel the best is hunkering down, watching a lot of TV, reading, sleeping, eating some comfort foods, taking baths and doing face masks, and just being alone. Alone with my cats, that is.

I give myself a few days to ride the wave out and wallow as much as I need to and by allowing myself to feel the feels and sink into it, the darkness and emptiness tend not to linger as long. I know what makes me feel the most comforted and safe, and I set myself up in a safety net.

Once you determine what makes you feel the safest and most comfortable, write your game plan down and refer back to it every time you need to. Having a game plan in place leads us directly to the *most* important point.

5. Give Yourself Grace.

I am human. You are human. Mistakes will be made. It's how we talk to ourselves during these setbacks that allow us to thrive and move forward faster. I used to engage in terrible self-talk every time I did something that I wasn't proud of or that didn't set me up for success.

By shifting my perspective and forgiving myself for being human and encouraging myself to go one step at a time, I have learned to embrace my off days. They're another part of the journey.

Give yourself grace. Remember that even on your worst days, you are so deserving of love and kindness, and never forget to give it to yourself.

Everyone has their own journey and experience with mental health. My depression has been part of my life for as long as I can remember, and my path had a lot of bumps along the way that made it worse, and maybe yours does too, but it's important to remember that even the seemingly perfect person with the perfect life can still suffer from mental illness.

No one is immune to it. By approaching our mental health in the same way we approach our physical health, we can set ourselves up for success in managing depression and anxiety. Through a lot of trial and error, I have finally established an arsenal of tips and tricks to keep me in check.

Hopefully, peeking into my life and my experiences can help you on your path too.

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Katie O'Hara | Contribution: 7,360

Katie O'Hara has been writing short stories, poetry, and prose since she before she could even properly hold a pencil. Growing up as a self-proclaimed "book nerd,... Read full bio

AUTHOR: KATIE O'HARA
IMAGE: DUST_._DUST/INSTAGRAM
EDITOR: ELYANE YOUSSEF