

Mental Health Cheat Sheet (For Those Affected)

If you feel like you are in a bad place mentally and want to get better, this is for you. This is a collection of techniques and helpful resources that can help you help yourself. Please don't stress yourself over it, if you don't have the energy to deal with this right now. In this case, simply remembering that this starting point exists and that you can come back here any time, is a little achievement in itself.

External Resources: Professional Help

International / General

Websites

opencounseling.com - This is a great resource to quickly find crisis numbers and helplines for most countries.

findahelpline.com - Another great resource to quickly find crisis numbers and helplines for most countries.

therapyroute.com - Helps you find nearby therapists, counsellors, psychologists, etc.

befrienders.org - Network offering emotional support hotlines for people are feeling suicidal or going through emotional distress.

Web-Search Suggestions

„Emergency Psychiatry Services + Your City“

Most hospitals have a department or can refer you to one.

„Mental Health Counseling + Your City“

Useful for finding general counseling and therapy options near you.

„Mental Health Crisis Hotline + Your Country“

Find the emergency contact number for psychological crises in your area.

Other Resources

Local Doctors / General Practitioners (GPs):

It's never wrong to call in sick if you have a job and get help there.

Hospital Emergency Service

If it's urgent and you can't be helped anywhere else, don't hesitate to go there

Online Therapy Services - Platforms like BetterHelp or Talkspace offer virtual counseling sessions anywhere in the world.

Germany (Country of Publication of this Book)

Phone Numbers

Terminservice Psychotherapie: 116 117

Info-Telefon Depression: 0800/334533

Überregionales Krisentelefon: 0800/1110111 & 0800/1110222

Web-Search Suggestions

„Krisendienst + Your City“

Immediate, urgent help in psychological emergencies

„Psychologische Beratungsstelle + Your City (and + „für Studierende“ if you're a student)

Good initial support, therapy, preventive counseling

„Sozialpsychiatrischer Dienst + Your City“

Long-Term, comprehensive support for chronic of severe mental health conditions

„Arbeitskreis Leben + Your City“

Counseling and emergency help if you're suicidal

Other Resources:

Your **„Hausärztin / Hausarzt“ (General Medical Practitioner)**

It's never wrong to call in sick if you have a job and get help there.

The **„Notaufnahme“ (Hospital Emergency Service)**

If it's urgent and you can't be helped anywhere else, don't hesitate to go there

Note: You might have or have not experienced „professional“ help in form of 1-on-1 or group psychotherapy, before.

If you have experienced it, and that did not work out for you, this is certainly the fault of the psychotherapist - not yours. This is because finding a skilled psychotherapist is probably the single most effective thing you can do to better your condition. But looking for and finding one can be - other than being outright impossible depending on where you live - exhausting and difficult. So please don't get discouraged in the process - this is normal and would already be exhausting for someone not affected by mental health problems. If you're managing to go through this, please be proud of yourself and if you can - try to keep going until you find a skilled therapist. You will immediately notice. But if you're having too many difficulties doing this alone, you could take your next chance asking someone to help you with that - maybe a person that has already offered you help before.

Other than that, while therapy is effective, keep in mind, that it is only just one of many options.

Books

Undoing Depression by Richard O'Connor - An incredible self-help book written by someone who really knows his topics. A lot of people who read this are immensely helped, even in cases of severe depression.

Dopamine Nation by Dr. Anna Lembke - An easy to read book that gives you insight about the mechanisms behind addiction and depression. It also focuses on several practical methods to overcome depressive cycles characterized by overconsumption of highly stimulating behaviour and / or addiction.

The Road Less Traveled by M. Scott Peck - Another great book that gives deep insights of the mechanisms of mental illness and perspectives out of it. This book has certainly a lot of „light-bulb moments“ and furthermore goes on about broader topics of life, like relationships and love.

Mental Health Cheat Sheet (For Those Affected) Page 2: Self Help Methods (Short to Medium Term)

If external help isn't an option right now, or if you want complement therapy with other stuff, here is a list of scientifically proven self-help methods, most of them *individually* as effective as antidepressant medication. So feel free to try them one by one, or more, for multiplicative benefits.

Cold Exposure

Deliberate exposure to cold water—like finishing your shower cold or doing ice baths.

Why it works:

It strengthens your nervous system's ability to regulate stress, making daily challenges feel less overwhelming. People with depression often have blunted dopamine responses—cold can help reawaken that system.

Effect: Immediate.
- Continued use leads to weekly improvements in mood and stress tolerance.

Progressions:

Starting out: Finish your shower cold, starting from your feet, to your arms, to head and torso until your body overcomes the initial stress response. Alternative to showering: Immerse yourself in cold water for a maximum of 4 minutes. Notice if you feel any different afterwards

Progression: Do it 3 (or more) times a week for 1 week

Max Level: Transform in into a regular habit by completing a whole month and sticking to it

Training the aMCC

The anterior mid-cingulate cortex is a part of the brain that is responsible for willpower and discipline. Through small acts of effort it can be trained and improved.

Why it works:

This brain region is central to motivation and persistence. Training it helps reduce the feeling of „I can't“ that dominates depressive thinking. It's especially valuable in getting out of inertia—a core symptom in both depression and addiction cycles.

Effect: After a few days to a week
Continued exercise leads profound improvements in discipline and executive function

Progressions:

Starting out: Do a *single* thing you really don't want to

Progression: Do it more often and observe if your situation changes

Dopamine Fasting

Taking long-term breaks from overstimulating behaviors (like scrolling, bingeing, gaming) or your addictive substance and environment, to reset your brain's reward system.

Why it works:

Dopamine fasting resets your system by giving receptors time to regain sensitivity—making normal life feel rewarding again. It also breaks compulsive loops.

Effect: Hard at first, then possibly life-changing after 2-4 weeks

Progressions:

This works in reverse: After you were strictly abstinent for 2 - 4 weeks you could try to slowly introduce highly stimulating behaviours, but monitored and controlled

Avoiding Blood Sugar Spikes

Managing your diet in a way that keeps your blood glucose levels steady throughout the day—avoiding big crashes that can wreak havoc on your mood and energy.

Why it works:

Big blood sugar swings cause a spike of energy followed by a crash, which can mimic or worsen symptoms of anxiety, irritability, and low mood. These crashes increase cortisol and can make you feel suddenly helpless, shaky, or drained—often leading to cravings for quick relief (more sugar, drugs, etc.).

Effect: After Few days to a week you'll have fewer energy crashes after meals, more and more stable energy and reduced cravings

Simple How To / Progression

Simply eat your meals in this order: Vegetables or Salads first, proteins (meat, etc.) second, and carbohydrates last [Credit to: Jessie Inchauspé, Nutrition Expert]

Progression I: Do it 3 times (or more) for a week

Max Level: Do it every time you have a meal, make it a habit

Exercise (Truly the miracle-cure and wonder-drug it is always praised as)

Physical activity that gets the blood moving—can be anything from walking to heavy lifting.

Why it works:

(If you are going to pick only one thing from this list, it should be exercise) Exercise triggers a surge of mood-enhancing neurotransmitters like dopamine, serotonin, and endorphins—chemicals often depleted in depression. It also lowers stress hormones and resets your reward system.

Effect: Immediate.
Continued exercise leads profound improvements in anxiety, mood, energy levels, over-all well-being and also all-cause mortality

Progressions:

Starting out: Do a *single* repetition of a strength exercise of your choice (e.g. a pushup) Alternatively: Go out for a run until you feel exhausted (even if that's quickly) Notice how you feel afterwards.

First Progression: Do it 3 (or more) times a week for 1 week.

Second Progression: Gradually add more repetitions and / or exercises

Wim Hof Breathing Method

A breathing method using rounds of deep inhaling and breath-holding, designed to shift your nervous system and focus.

Why it works:

This breathwork reduces anxiety and inner agitation by stimulating the parasympathetic nervous system (the body's calm-down mode). It also helps release stored tension and brings a sense of control.

Effect: Immediate.
Continued use leads to weekly improvements in anxiety and low energy levels

Progressions:

Starting out: Do a single round or a single guided breathing session (Videos on YouTube) Notice if you feel any different afterwards

Progression: Do it 3 (or more) times a week for 1 week

Max Level: Transform in into a regular habit by completing a whole month and sticking to it

Meditation

Sitting still and gently guiding attention—usually to the breath, body, or sounds.

Why it works:

Meditation reduces overthinking, boosts self-awareness and helps create distance from urges. It increases GABA, the brain's natural tranquilizer, which reduces stress and anxiety. It increases serotonin, a neurotransmitter associated with contentment and well-being. Furthermore it lowers cortisol levels (the main stress hormone) in the body

Effect: Immediate.
Continued use leads to weekly improvements in high stress levels, overthinking and anxiety

Progressions:

Starting out: Do a single session of guided meditation (videos on YouTube, apps like Headspace). Notice if you feel any different afterwards

Progression: Do it whenever you feel like it

Max Level: Transform in into a regular habit by completing a whole month and sticking to it

Intermittent Fasting

Eating only during a certain window of time (e.g. 12pm–8pm)

Why it works:

Fasting boosts BDNF, a brain chemical involved in repair and plasticity—key for recovering from depression.

Simple How To:

Skip either breakfast or dinner (figure out what works better for you). If you get hungry, simply drink water, have a single coffee or tea (no milk, no sugar: this will break fast!)

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Bonus: Self Help Methods (Long-Term Structural Methods)

If you want to start exploring these ideas, it might be good to start only with one of them, otherwise it could be overwhelming. As the headline says, these techniques are for the long term and will produce slow, yet long-lasting and possibly life-changing effects.

1. Observe yourself: What works for you?

Every Person works differently. We are a bit like programs that react in certain ways to certain events or circumstances. For example I have a good friend that was totally symptom-free whenever she was traveling in the summer. The thing is, you probably often think you should be able to accomplish this and that or be able to enjoy this and that, or be or feel one way or another. Often times this stems from growing up or living in an environment where it doesn't really matter what *you* want, what *you* think, what *you* feel and what *you* need. So this method is about departing a bit from the mentality what you think you should accomplish, or feel, or be. And instead you could start to observe yourself every now and then and get to know yourself better: What are things that work for you? What do you enjoy? What actually motivates you? In which situations are you symptom-free? If you have accomplished something small today, how did you do that?

2. Act on your own terms.

This is the next step, basically. Let's say someone invites you to their birthday party and you would like to go, but you know, that after an hour you'll be exhausted. Here you already achieved something great in realizing what your social capability is. In this situation Neurodiverse people often feel like facing a dilemma between not going at all and regretting it, or going there but forcing themselves to stay and be overly exhausted the next day. But there is a third option: Acting on your own terms: You could ask your friend if it's o.k. to visit for a short time (and on the same note, only bring a small gift, or no gift at all). So, this is like an extension of point 1 where you can observe yourself what works out for you and what doesn't and then go one step further and practice to act upon it.

3. Start small / Take the smallest step

You wouldn't expect yourself starting the gym and picking up the heaviest dumbbells. Still, in terms of psychological workload, self-improvement or other things, we often expect too much from ourselves. Maybe it could be an idea, the next time you are stuck in executive disfunction or wish for something to get better in your life to start with the tiniest, easiest step towards it. I, for example, when I am depressed (which still happens from time to time) struggle with even getting out of bed. When this happens I either try to focus *only* on getting out of bed and try to *not* think about what comes next afterwards, or simply start with the tiniest step that comes before - like simply moving, or sitting up.

4. Finding the right environment.

Sometimes, this is as easy like: If I'm not here or there or doing this and that - I don't have any symptoms. Some people are mentally not affected at all by a lack of sunlight, others fall magically out of their severe depression as soon as the spring-sun starts shining frequently. This also applies to your living and working environment. Over time, you could observe yourself when you feel better (and also what makes it worse) and slowly build your life towards a situation that supports your long-term well-being.

On Helping Others / For Those Not Affected

It's natural to want to fix things, but not knowing how to properly deal with people in acute or chronic states of mental illness—and trying to fix them—often makes things worse. You wouldn't undertake an operation to fix a broken bone without medical knowledge. Sadly, this is a skill even professionals—as well as people affected by these conditions themselves—often lack. Here is some guidance in the form of “do”s and “don’t”s. If you find yourself in a situation that requires some orientation, you can come back here.

Don't-Do List

1. Don't assume you are in a position of superiority just because you're healthy.

If someone is depressed, addicted, or suffering from other mental health problems, it doesn't make them less of a human being than someone with a cold or a broken bone. This might sound obvious, but people struggling with mental conditions often experience all kinds of derogatory behavior from others—adding weight to feelings of shame or guilt for their illness. If you take away only one “don't” from this list, let it be this one, as many of the others stem from it.

2. Don't offer help unless you're asked.

While this might sound counterintuitive, there's important nuance here. When someone has opened up to you, suggesting help can be appropriate (e.g., “If you want, I can help you”) - yet the better thing is to ask an open question like: “Do you want me to help with that?” It may seem like a tiny detail, but for affected people, it makes a huge difference. The second version centers their agency and leaves space for any answer, thus creating less pressure.

3. Don't say things like “cheer up” or “snap out of it.”

Depression, addiction, and other mental illnesses are not mood swings or laziness—they are real, devastating conditions. If getting better were as simple as knowing what to do or “pressing a button,” people would be fine by tomorrow. But the truth is, they are often already investing an incredible amount of energy into dealing with their condition—trying to change, to stop, to improve—and are likely already experts in certain techniques.

4. Don't take their behavior personally.

If someone constantly misses appointments, deadlines, or relapses into addiction despite promising to stop—don't take it personally. It is often the defining part of their condition. Again, there's nuance here, which brings us to the next point.

5. Don't let your own well-being suffer.

If you notice that you can't handle a certain situation, feel overwhelmed, or simply annoyed (e.g., if someone keeps you waiting constantly), it's absolutely okay to protect your own well-being by setting boundaries or stepping back. While we shouldn't ostracize people with mental health struggles, acute or severe cases should ideally be handled by skilled professionals, and if you feel like you can't handle a certain situation, it is not wrong to distance yourself from it.

On Helping Others / For Those Not Affected

What You Can Do

1. Accept them as they are.

Few things are as healing as feeling truly accepted. This starts with treating people like anyone else and, second, adjusting to their situation. For example, someone might still ask themselves—after you said it's totally fine they left your birthday party after one hour—if it really was fine, and whether you secretly judged them. Convincing them might often be impossible, but over time and with repetition, they'll realize you genuinely mean it. If someone suddenly starts crying or sobbing, and you manage to treat that as something normal and not shameful, you've done something truly valuable. It means - in the short term - not making a big deal out of certain behaviours, which can include, messiness, forgetfulness, mood swings and sadness and treating affected people with a consistent „I accept you as you are“ feeling in the long term.

2. Ask open questions that preserve their self-responsibility.

As mentioned earlier, it makes a huge difference to ask questions that are truly about them. Instead of saying “You look down, is everything alright?” you could simply ask “How are you?” Let them decide what to share. Here are other examples of what questions might be good to ask:

How are you feeling?

How are you dealing with that?

Is there anything you can do to help yourself?

Are there things that make it worse?

In what situations do you feel good?

Have you considered therapy?

Even a question like “Why don't you stop?” can be okay if it's truly open and not accusatory.

3. Listen without judging / Try to empathize

Let's say someone tells you that they are scared to even go to the supermarket. It would be good - instead of being in disbelief or thinking that you certainly aren't - other than asking things like: „do you know why you are scared?“ - simply to listen to them. It is also okay to agree with them on the negative side of the situation. E.g. saying things along the line of „I can imagine that feels very restrictive“.

4. You can make suggestions—carefully, in the right moment, and only if you have a plan.

If someone has opened up to you and you have a good idea of what might help, you can suggest it—but gently. If it's not something you can frame as a question, let it sound like: “Maybe it's a good idea to...” or “You could try to...” and leave it at that.

5. Help the person to get professional help

Lastly, helping someone through the process of finding a skilled psychotherapist or a group therapy - if they want to - can be immensely helpful. You can help make phonecalls and appointments (you can also use the resources on the „For those affected“ part of this sheet) - this is already an incredible help.