

# **Coping Skills Compendium**

AKA “Stuff I Learned In Therapy”

You are enough. You are loved.  
You’ve survived everything life has thrown at you.  
You can do this.  
Hang in there.

# The legal page:

**Obligatory disclaimer: I am not a mental health professional.** I don't have any degrees or licenses, and I'm absolutely *not* qualified to provide formal medical advice. The most I've done is take a handful of psych classes in college, and that doesn't give me any training or special ability to provide mental healthcare. This document comes from my lived experiences and personal research as a *patient* in the mental health system. It's by no means an official document or guide, and I'm not responsible for what you do with it. No warranties here!

If it doesn't help you, don't do it. Take what works and leave the rest.

**Another disclaimer:** While I've done my best to ensure the information here is accurate as of its publishing date, I'm not perfect. There may be errors, typos, bodes, gobbledegook, garbage, and other nonsense in here that I missed. Feel free to fix it. You're also welcome to contact me at owlcollective@riseup.net if you spot an error.

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**Also on Codeberg:** <https://codeberg.org/Candlebrae/Coping-Skills-Compendium>

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# **Arm Yourself with Information**

# What is trauma?

Our brains store a lot of memories. These memories may be unpleasant or painful, but we can remember them without getting sucked into the past. Our emotions about them mostly come from the present.

Memories normally look like one long story about our lives. When we *process* events, we put them into that life story. All of the sensations and thoughts from that event are cataloged and put into context so we can remember them later in a coherent way.

Some events are too overwhelming to process like this. These events are still stored in our memory, but they're stored very differently from regular memories. All of their emotions, thoughts, and sensations are snapshotted like they're still happening *right now*. All of those unprocessed feelings stay in the background and affect our lives, often without our realizing it. It may be difficult to remember them at all without an external reminder. When we do remember those memories, all of their unprocessed feelings come back up unchanged as if that event is happening again in the present. These unprocessed memories are called *trauma*.

With enough support, we can still process overwhelming events normally and store them like any other event. They don't always cause trauma. Trauma happens when we don't have the support system we need to process those events when they happen. Instead of being processed, they're stored as-is.

## What can cause trauma?

A lot of different events can be traumatic, but they generally have one thing in common: they felt like they threatened your safety in a significant way while overwhelming your ability to cope with what was happening.

People's genetics, environment, and childhood can all affect how susceptible they are to trauma. As a result, the same event can affect two people very differently! Being traumatized by something doesn't make you any weaker than other people; it just means you were affected differently than they were.

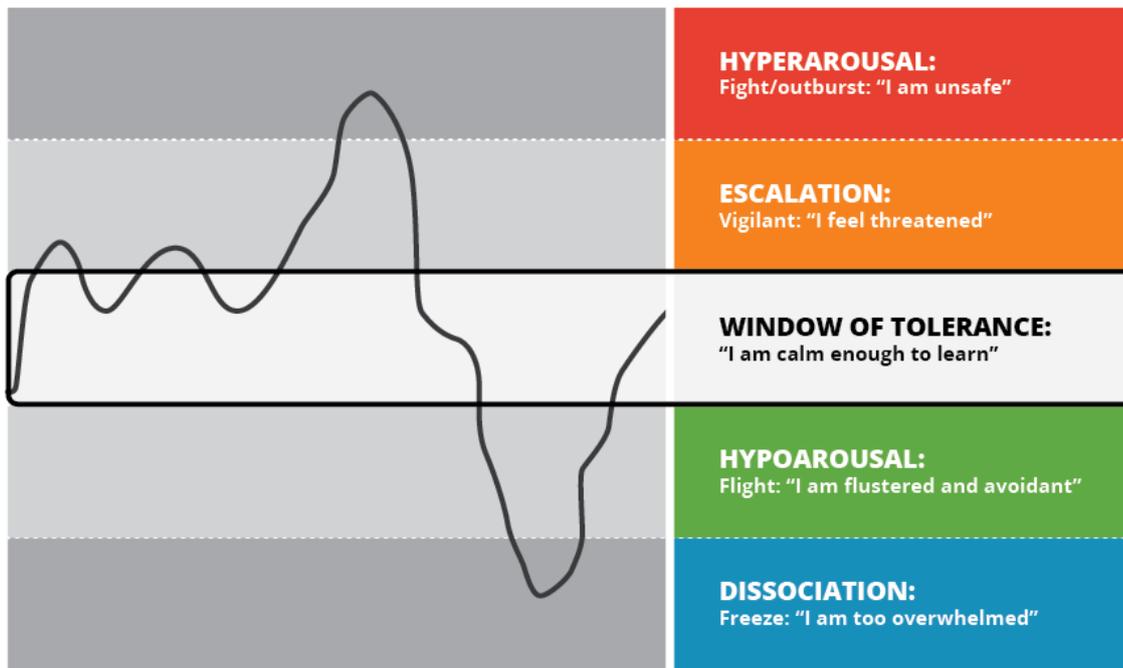
Some people like to separate trauma into "big T" and "little t". Both types of events can cause trauma symptoms, but separating them can make it easier to understand or treat them.

- "Big T Trauma" covers events that directly threatened your life. Abuse, war, neglect, domestic violence, assault, and similar events would be considered "Big T".
  - It's important to remember that emotional abuse is considered "Big T". While you may not have been physically hurt, your security and well-being was still threatened by someone. This is especially true if that person was your caregiver.
- "Little t trauma" covers events that didn't threaten your life but still caused overwhelming distress that you were unable to cope with. Bullying, getting fired, chronic pain, divorce, and other smaller-scale events would be considered "little t".

## **How does trauma affect people?**

Trauma can have a lot of different effects on people. Some things may *trigger* trauma memories, causing them to resurface in the present. You might feel exactly like you did back then. The same thinking patterns and behaviors might show up, or you might have a fight-or-flight response. For some people, they may even forget when and where they are in the present. All of these experiences are called *flashbacks*, and they can be very disruptive. Some people try to avoid things that trigger them, which can mean they miss out on things they used to enjoy.

It can be more difficult to feel calm after experiencing trauma. This is because trauma heightens your "fight or flight" response. Your body is trying to protect you from harm by being ready to act at any moment, but this makes it difficult to feel relaxed.



It might feel impossible to trust other people. Feeling hopeless, worthless, ashamed, or helpless is common, as is feeling “on edge” or numb. You might feel like your emotions are out of control or even missing altogether.

Other common problems caused by trauma are sleep issues, panic attacks, depression, anxiety, substance abuse, eating disorders, dissociation, and other difficulties that get in the way of daily life. Trauma can be serious business!

## How is trauma treated?

Resolving trauma means processing those distressing memories. Those memories will never go away, but the feelings stored inside them can be felt and released so that the memory is stored normally. While it can be very difficult to process trauma because it feels like those memories are happening *right now*, it’s possible to be in the present and the past at the same time. This is called *dual awareness*. Dual awareness is necessary to process trauma. Luckily, it’s a skill that can be practiced!

There are a lot of different kinds of therapy for processing trauma. One of the most effective forms is EMDR, or Eye Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing therapy. A

therapist will ask you to move your eyes side to side (often by looking at their finger or a light) while remembering what happened and sitting with the feelings that brings up. As of 2022, no one is entirely sure why moving your eyes can help process traumatic memories, but there's significant evidence that this therapy is effective.

Other forms of therapy can help address the effects of trauma. Cognitive-Behavioral Therapy (CBT), Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT), and other therapy modalities can help resolve self-worth issues, avoidance behaviors, and other common problems associated with trauma. They can also provide tools to make processing therapies easier to tolerate, such as by teaching distress tolerance skills.

While you're usually best off seeking a therapist's help in dealing with trauma, some work can be done solo. Questioning where your thoughts and beliefs came from and working to change the messages trauma gave you can be surprisingly helpful, as can seeking other ways to help yourself. Learning various coping skills can make it easier to handle day-to-day life.

# What is dissociation?

According to the International Society for the Study of Trauma and Dissociation:

“Dissociation is a word that is used to describe the disconnection or lack of connection between things usually associated with each other. Dissociated experiences are not integrated into the usual sense of self, resulting in discontinuities in conscious awareness. In severe forms of dissociation, disconnection occurs in the usually integrated functions of consciousness, memory, identity, or perception.”

That’s a mouthful! More simply, dissociation is when parts of you are “unplugged” from each other. There are a lot of different things that can be disconnected like that:

- Memory
- Identity
- Time
- Senses / Body
- Emotions
- Etc.

A little dissociation is normal. If people were plugged into everything all the time, the world would be overwhelming! Most people detach a little here and there. It can even be a positive experience. For example, have you ever been so sucked into a book or TV show that you lost track of the world around you? That’s a very common experience of dissociation. “Flow” states are another example of normal dissociation!

Even bigger experiences of dissociation can be normal. If someone experiences an overwhelming event, they might feel numb or distant. They might react unusually or not notice an injury. They may even forget parts of what happened or feel like they’re watching

from afar. There's nothing strange about that. Dissociation is one way the brain protects itself under a lot of stress, and it's a normal part of life.

Sometimes, people dissociate *too* much. Too much dissociation can be a problem in day-to-day life. It can get in the way of doing day-to-day activities or feel very upsetting.

Dissociating all the time can be a serious problem. If you feel that dissociation is causing you problems in day-to-day life, then it may be worth seeking help. Severe dissociation is often caused by trauma, drugs and withdrawal, mental health conditions, and/or medical conditions, so it's important to get checked out.

## What does dissociation feel like?

Dissociation covers a lot of different experiences. Some things are more common, though. Do you remember the list of things on the last page? Dissociation in those areas tends to create certain experiences that mental health professionals may look for.

- Dissociation in the area of memory can cause *amnesia*, meaning that someone may be unable to remember parts of their life. For example, they might forget a traumatic event. The memory is still in their brain, but they can't connect to it- as far as the person is concerned, it's just not there.
  - In more severe cases, people may be unable to answer basic questions about themselves. They may forget their name, age, location, family, and other important life details. Some people have forgotten their entire lives and wandered in a *fugue state* until their memories returned.
- Dissociation in the area of identity can cause someone to feel fragmented or split apart. They might be unsure who they are and lack a strong sense of identity. Other people feel that they're not real or don't exist, which is called *depersonalization*.
  - In more severe cases, someone might have multiple identities instead of only one; in other words, they experience themselves as being multiple people.

- Dissociation in the area of time can cause someone to feel like time is stretching out or compressing. They might feel that time is moving at a strange pace. Some people feel like their entire day happens in the span of an hour because time moved so quickly. Others might “zone out” for most of the day.
- Dissociation in the area of one’s senses or body can cause someone to miss sensations. For example, their skin might feel numb to the touch. Sometimes, this is very subtle and may not be noticed. Other times, it can be very dramatic, such as being unable to see or feeling that one’s surroundings look fake.
- Dissociation in the area of emotions can cause someone to feel emotionally numb or flat. Someone might be in a situation where they know they should be very upset, but they feel almost nothing. They might also feel emotions that don’t seem related to their current situation, which can be confusing!

There are a lot of other experiences that can be dissociative. As stated before, many experiences of dissociation are harmless or even positive. It’s only when dissociation starts to cause problems that it becomes an issue.

## **How is dissociation treated?**

Dissociation is usually treated with therapy that addresses the underlying cause. Therapies based on mindfulness and distress tolerance can also be helpful. Sometimes, medications (such as SSRIs) are used as well, though there are currently no medications made specifically for dissociation.

Good therapists will also teach you grounding skills to reduce dissociation when it happens. These skills are usually easy to use and may help you feel more present.

# What is anxiety?

Anxiety is a normal human emotion that exists to keep you safe. You can think of it as your body's alarm system. When your body thinks that something bad is going to happen, it gets you ready to deal with the threat. This is great if you're facing down a bear. It's a little less useful if you're about to take a test or go on a date!

Everyone feels anxiety sometimes. Anxiety keeps people alert in dangerous situations and can be very helpful. It can also become a problem if it's felt in situations where it's not needed. When you perceive something as dangerous, your body creates an anxiety response regardless of whether the danger is real. Some people's anxiety responses are very sensitive. They may feel anxiety almost constantly or find that it gets in the way of daily life. *Anxiety disorders* can be diagnosed when someone's anxiety is severe enough to need outside help dealing with it.

## What does anxiety feel like?

Anxiety can feel just like any other kind of fear and can create unpleasant feelings in your body. You might have a racing heartbeat, dry mouth, tight chest, or any number of other physical symptoms. It could be hard to control your breathing. The world around you might suddenly look strange or overwhelming. Some people feel like they're having a heart attack when their anxiety gets too big. Others dissociate or break down.

Anxiety also affects thoughts and behaviors. You might get stuck worrying about what could happen. Obsessing over the worst case scenario is common when anxious, as is asking "what if?" questions about things going wrong. These worries might lead you to act in hopes of making your anxiety go away. Some people leave the situation or make excuses to avoid things that make them anxious. Others might lash out, yell, or freeze up.

## **How is anxiety treated?**

Anxiety is usually treated by gradually exposing the person to situations that make them anxious. This is done in very small steps so that the anxiety is never too overwhelming, allowing the person to cope with the feeling and remain in that situation despite feeling anxious. This gradually teaches the person's brain that the situation is safe, lowering their anxiety over time. Usually, people are also taught how to tolerate anxiety and stress more easily so they're able to handle that exposure.

Sometimes, anxiety comes from other mental health conditions. For example, trauma can cause anxiety that doesn't respond to exposure therapy. This kind of anxiety is usually treated by addressing the condition that causes it.

# What is depression?

Depression is a significant negative mood that sticks around for an unusually long time. Some people feel sad, angry, or completely hopeless. Others feel like their emotions have disappeared or flattened.

People experiencing depression also tend to lose interest in things they used to enjoy and may find it hard to make themselves do things. Even if they want to do something, they may not have enough energy to make themselves do it.

Some people with depression consider hurting or killing themselves. If you are considering harming yourself in the immediate future, please stop reading and seek help immediately by calling a hotline, scheduling an appointment with a psychiatrist or therapist, or going to a hospital. You're not alone, and there are people who can help you.

## What does depression feel like?

According to the Mayo Clinic, some common symptoms of depression include:

- Feeling sad, empty, angry, or hopeless for a long time
- Being unable to enjoy most or all activities
- Having problems sleeping or sleeping too much
- Feeling tired, often to the point of not having enough energy to do anything
- Eating more or less than usual
- Feeling slowed down; moving, thinking, and speaking unusually slowly
- Feeling worthless, guilty, or ashamed of oneself; having frequent negative thoughts about oneself
- Brain fog; having a hard time concentrating, focusing, and remembering things
- Frequently thinking about or considering suicide and/or self-harm
- Unexplained physical symptoms (such as chronic pain)

## **How is depression treated?**

Depression is typically treated with medication, therapy, or both.

SSRIs and similar medications can help relieve symptoms of depression. They often do this by making certain chemicals more available in the brain. These medications are prescribed by mental health professionals and occasionally primary care doctors. Because they can have serious side effects, you should have a doctor monitor your use of them.

There are a lot of therapies that can treat depression. Cognitive-Behavioral Therapy is one of the best-known types of therapy known to reduce depression symptoms, but Acceptance-Commitment Therapy, Interpersonal Therapy, Psychodynamic Therapy, and Behavioral Activation are also well-backed. Other therapy types may work as well. A good therapist will work to find the right methods to help you.

# **Coping Skills**

# Grounding Skills

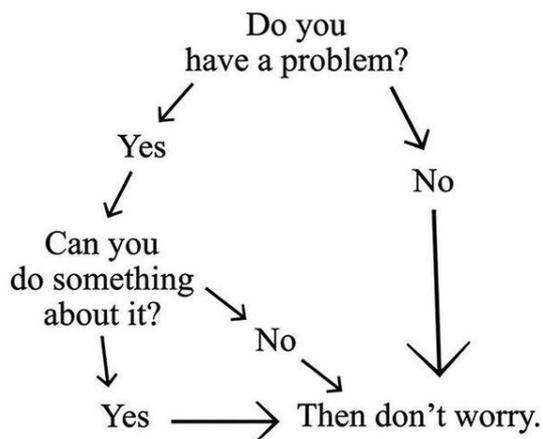
- **Name 5 things you can see**, 4 you can hear, 3 you can touch, 2 you can smell, and 1 you can taste.
- **Focus on one detail in the room.** It should be something very small, like a single fiber of a carpet. Take a slow, deep breath while focusing on that detail. Do this for three breaths in total, picking a new detail each time.
  - One variant of this is to pick *nine* things: three on the floor, three at eye level, and three near the ceiling or sky. For each thing, take a slow, deep breath while focusing on it as well as you can.
- **Count things** around you. Floor tiles, bricks, specks on the wall, etc.
- **Describe the area you're in right now.** This may be more effective if you can do so out loud.
- **Name everything in a category** (trees, cat breeds, colors, etc.). Random trivia works too.
- **Name facts about yourself.** "My name is [x]. I'm [x] years old. I'm at [place] right now. It's [time]. The year is 2022. The month is October. The day is Thursday. I live with [x]." Etc.
  - One way to make this even more effective is to add facts about you that *weren't* true in the past. "I'm safe in my room right now. I can get up and leave the room if I want to. I have a pet cat named Nutter Butter."
- **Focus on how your feet feel** (or some other specific part of your body). Really pay attention to the details.
- **Stimulate your senses.** Find a strong texture and touch it a lot. Look at something really closely. Make noises or pay close attention to the sounds around you. Rock back and forth.
- **Move around.** Shift positions, stand up for a moment, or otherwise move your body in any way you can. Notice how that feels.

# Coping with Anxiety and Fear

- Remember that **all emotions are temporary**, even the ones that stick around for a while. Everything you've ever felt before has passed by eventually. This will pass too.
- **Notice what your anxiety feels like in your body.** Don't try to change it or make it go away; just notice it and sit with that feeling.
  - Being able to "watch" anxiety like this can help a lot with long-term recovery. You're teaching yourself to tolerate the physical feelings caused by anxiety. This makes it easier to stay in situations that make you anxious because the physical feeling won't seem as overwhelming.
  - **You don't even need to be anxious to practice tolerating anxiety.** Exercise can simulate a racing heart, sweating, and shortness of breath. Hyperventilation can be forced (be safe!). Muscles can be tensed voluntarily.
- **Try a few grounding exercises.** They can also help with anxiety.
- **Take deep breaths.** They press on the vagus nerve in your chest; the vagus nerve regulates your anxiety response. Pressing on it can calm your nervous system down. Breathing slowly also tricks your body into thinking you don't need to run away. Do it for longer than you think you need to.
  - If you need help keeping track of your breaths, try square breathing. Breathe in for a count of 4, hold it for 4, breathe out for 4, and pause for 4. If a count of 4 feels too long or short, adjust it to your needs.
  - Variation on deep breaths: breathe from the ground. Imagine light or calm flowing up into one leg and out through the other.
- **Place one hand on your chest and the other on your stomach.** Apply comfortable pressure. Stay like that for as much time as you have. This is another exercise that stimulates the vagus nerve, and the touch can be soothing on its own.
- **Do any movement or exercise that you can do.** It tricks your body into thinking you escaped the threat. Wave your arms around wildly. Bicycle your legs slowly in the air. Wiggle or roll around. Squeeze a pillow really hard. Anything goes if it uses your muscles.

- **Do something mentally demanding.** Brains can't do logic and emotion well at the same time. Listing rhyming words, doing math, rotating shapes in your head... if it makes you think logically, it might help.
- **Anxiety is a cycle.** You feel afraid, so you avoid the thing. That reinforces the fear, making you more afraid next time. Knowing this can help you break the cycle. If you can **stay in the situation despite the fear**, then you can gradually teach your brain that the situation is safe. Tolerate it for as long as you can stand it, then push a little longer before letting yourself stop. Over time, you should be able to stay in that situation for longer periods.
  - You don't have to jump into the scariest situations right away. Take little steps. If crowds scare you, then start by imagining yourself in a crowd. Once that feels okay, spend five minutes watching a crowd from afar. Slowly work your way up to the scariest situation.
- **Ask your anxiety what it needs from you** and find a way to show it that the world is safe right now. Imagine it as a creature or shape. Offer it comfort and support.
- **Imagine your happy place as vividly as possible**, sense by sense. Take deep breathes while you immerse yourself in it. Optional: slowly tap on your knees while doing this, alternating sides.
- **Using your right hand, trace the left side of your face** from the corner of your left eyebrow to the back of your ear, the hinge of your jaw, and down to your collarbone. Do this 10-15 times. Sounds weird, but it can help reduce anxiety (apparently it stimulates a few nerves involved in calming a panic response). If you can do your left hand on your right side at the same time, all the better.
- **Imagine letting your anxious thoughts float away** in a river or other visual metaphor. Really let them float away- don't hang onto them. It's okay. They'll come back if you need them. If they do come back, try letting them go one more time. If that doesn't work, see if you can figure out where they're coming from.
- **Comfort yourself.** Cuddle with a plushie or blanket, listen to soothing music, or do something that makes you feel calm or happy.
- **Fake it until you make it.** Hold your body like you're confident and comfortable. Sit up straight with your shoulders back, then put your hands on your hips or cross your arms. Make yourself take up more space.

- **Imagine a calm, centered place inside you.** Try to feel that place in your body. If you can't find it, imagine what it *might* be like. Remember a time your body felt calm or relaxed in the past (if possible).
- **If you can do something about the cause of your anxiety (if there is one), then do it.** If you can't do anything about it, then why are you worrying about something you can't change? Realizing that can help let the worry go.



- **Let the fear out** by journaling, doing something that gets your adrenaline going, or otherwise expressing the emotion safely.
- **You've survived this feeling before.** You'll survive it again.

# Coping with Depression

- **Make sure your needs are met.** It's very hard to be happy if you have unmet needs (mental and emotional needs included).
- **DO NOT ISOLATE**. You need people more than ever. If you're feeling the urge to cut yourself off, reach out instead. It's a sign you need social contact with others.
- Likewise, **DO SOMETHING**. Even if you have no motivation or reward, engage in something that made you happy in the past. Do it even if it feels blah. *Keep* doing it. Don't stop because it feels blah. Make it your hobby anyway. The more you can make yourself do, the better. Even tiny steps are something.
- If you can, shower and/or change clothes. Washing bedding counts too. Rub yourself down with a washcloth if showers aren't an option. **Being slightly cleaner in any way helps.**
- **Baby steps are always better than nothing.** If you can't muster the energy to do something in full, do it halfway. Do a quarter of the work. Do it for thirty seconds.
- I seriously can't emphasize "**DO SOMETHING**" enough. Make things. Read. Write. Talk to someone. Make a giant list of things you like. Pet as many cats as you can. Do literally anything, and make a point of doing it. Keep yourself busy. Sitting around doing nothing but scrolling feeds depression like nothing else. Find a project and chase it.
- **Talk to the negative voice** in your head. Recognize that it's hurting and find ways to help it.
  - Ask it what it needs from you (and don't accept "die" as an answer). Be kind to it.
  - Show it why its words hurt you, and what you'd prefer to hear instead.
  - Treat it like an injured child if that helps. Teach it to trust you.
  - Yelling back doesn't work as well as kindness, but it works in a pinch if it's an emergency.
- **Find ways to improve yourself or work on something that feels productive.** Feeling like you're contributing to something or improving yourself is a great counter against depression's feelings of worthlessness and meaninglessness.

- **Go places.** Even sitting on the porch for 15 minutes counts.
- **Your worth is inherent.** There is only ever one you. That alone gives you immense value. Nothing anyone else does can change that. You are valuable.
- **You are not evil or bad.** You are not actively choosing to harm others. You're doing the best you can for the situation you're in. It's your choices that make you good, not some inherent property. **No one is inherently bad or evil, and that includes you.**
- **Depression is lying to you.** The people in your life don't hate you. They wouldn't be in your life if they truly wanted you gone. They're not talking behind your back, either- assuming that everyone around you is that malicious when they go out of their way to talk to you is twisted logic. Show yourself that people care by remembering examples of people spending time with you or checking in on you.
  - A note: **this doesn't apply to genuinely abusive people in your life.** Even if they're kind to you sometimes, it doesn't negate the damage they're doing. If someone is abusing you and refuses to change, then the only thing to be done is getting out of there as soon as you can. Waiting for them to change or trying to fix them isn't worth your sanity.
- You have all the tools you need to get through this. You've survived everything before now. **You will survive this.**
- Happy music, favorite movies/books/etc., and **anything else that's made you feel good** in the past can help counter sadness.
- **Think of the people that care about you.** Imagine what they'd tell you to uplift you.
- Assume that you're capable. **You CAN do things.**

# Coping with Suicidal Ideation

- Obviously, **don't die**. That's priority #1.
  - If you're seriously considering acting on a suicide plan, then **anything goes if it keeps you alive**. Radical life changes are on the table. Do what you have to; any other consequences are still better than dying.
  - **The urge will pass**. When suicidal thoughts are really strong, it can feel like they'll never go away. They will go away. Thoughts don't last forever, and you will outlast this. You just need to hang in there for a little while until they let up.
  - **Distract** in the short-term. Change your environment. Follow something that makes you feel better or stops you from thinking about it. Do not hurt yourself unless there's literally no other option. Go outside and wander if you have to.
  - **Use spite**. Live to prove people wrong. Live to give existence a middle finger. Live to spite the hurtful voice in your brain.
  - **Look to the little things**. Remind yourself of anything that brings you even a scrap of joy. "Eating pasta" and "watching cat videos" are perfectly good reasons to live.
  - **Find something to look forwards to**. Is there a game or movie coming out that you want to see? Can you bake or buy cookies and live to eat them all?
- **Recognize that you can have thoughts without acting on them**.
  - Thoughts often happen randomly and outside of our control. Brains are electrified Jell-O that make every connection they possibly can, even the unhelpful ones. One thought can trigger another without any effort on your part.
  - **You're not to blame for having thoughts you don't want**, and those thoughts don't say much about you as a person. They're thoughts. Thoughts happen. It's okay. You can learn to let them pass instead of grabbing onto them.
- **Stop joking about killing yourself**. Yes, even the sarcastic jokes. Jokes have a way of worming themselves into our brains and becoming serious. Try sarcastically praising yourself instead, or joke about doing something ridiculous (like invading England).

- **Pretend the thoughts are coming from an angry 13-year-old playing video games.** An angry old man is another good option. Personifying thoughts can make them easier to dismiss.
- **Tackle the root cause.** Suicidal thoughts are a symptom, not the problem itself. They often mean that something needs to change in your life; whether that means lowering stress or leaving an abusive relative, something is leading your brain to look for a last-ditch escape route. Find a way to either resolve the situation or leave it.
  - If you're being abused and are considering dying because it's too much to bear, then staying isn't worth your life. You're thinking about the most extreme way to leave the situation, and there are so many other ways out of it that don't kill you. Start planning a way out if you can. It might take time, but it's worth it if it keeps you alive. Even foster care or homelessness is better than being dead.
  - If you're having suicidal thoughts but don't want to act on them, then you may be under too much stress. Suicidal thoughts can be the brain's emergency escape hatch when life is too overwhelming. It's your mind saying it feels cornered and needs a significant break. See if you can find a way to pare back your responsibilities and give yourself space to rest. Find ways to be gentle on yourself.
- **Tell someone. Get help.**
  - **Call a hotline or warmline.** Some hotlines offer text chat options if calling isn't an option for you.
  - **Talk to a trusted friend or family member.** Don't expect them to fix your problems, but they can lend you a compassionate ear.
    - **Be clear about whether you want to go to a hospital or not.** Some people will call the cops or an ambulance if you don't clearly tell them what you want.
  - **Talk to a therapist, counselor, or religious leader.** These people are typically trained to listen and/or help you deal with suicidal thoughts.
    - If you talk to a therapist but *don't* want to end up in a psych ward, don't tell them that you intend to act on a concrete suicide plan. It's safe to tell them that you have suicidal thoughts, but they're legally required to step in if you tell them you actively intend to kill yourself.

# Coping with Self-Harm Urges

- **Urges are not actions.** Every time that you can ride out the urge without doing anything is a time you retrain your brain to cope with the urge without acting.
- **Mental/emotional self-harm exists;** for example, exposing yourself to triggers or deeply upsetting things with the goal of making yourself feel worse is self-harm.
- **Delay the urge.** Tell yourself that you're going to wait five minutes before doing anything. When those five minutes are up, tell yourself to wait another five. If five minutes is too long, try one minute or thirty seconds. Make the intervals as small as you need them.
- **"Surf" the urge.** Notice it and be curious about it, but don't try to change it or make it go away. Don't act on it, either. Just notice it. It'll probably be uncomfortable, but that's okay. If you can sit with it like this, it should pass within half an hour or so.
- **If you're struggling to stop cutting, scratching, or similarly injuring yourself physically:**
  - **Draw or write on the sites where you want to harm yourself.** Hurting yourself there would mean ruining the drawing. If you can't draw, try writing poetry or other meaningful phrases on the area.
  - Similarly, **use red marker to draw on your skin** instead of harming. This gives the visual impression of injury without actually being an injury. Red food coloring also works.
  - **Snap a rubber band on your wrist** or otherwise replace the pain with something safer.
    - **Coat the band with red marker, paint, or food coloring** if you need visual feedback. This can make a mark that *looks* like an injury but is actually harmless.
  - **Go for a walk or otherwise exercise.** This gives you an endorphin rush just like self-harm does.
- **Learn what your self-harm triggers are.** Find ways to deal with them or prevent them. If you tend to harm when you're lonely, then plan to spend time with friends often.

# Preventing Problems

- **Take care of physical needs.** Have you eaten in the last few hours? Drank water? Slept 7+ hours total? Need the bathroom? Moved around at all, even if that's just waving your arms around for a few minutes?
- **Take care of mental needs.** Are you lonely? Have you accomplished anything today that feels productive? Have you worked on yourself at all? When did you last go outside or see nature? Have you been hugged or touched recently (pets and plushies count)? Do you feel supported by anyone in your life? Are you overloaded or stressed by taking on too much?
- **Manage sensory needs.** Being understimulated or overstimulated can wreck your mental health.
- **If something is uncomfortable or distressing, take care of it as soon as possible.** Tackle it before it can fester.
- **Emotions are normal.** Every person on this planet has feelings, and every person has felt overwhelmed by them at least once. It's okay. You're not bad, wrong, or weird for having big feelings. Let yourself express them somewhere.
  - **Discomfort is also normal.** Everyone feels upset or uncomfortable from time to time, and some people feel that way very often. Try to sit with discomfort (when reasonable) instead of avoiding it. With practice, your tolerance will increase and what used to be upsetting will be easier to tolerate.
- **Find ways to feel useful or needed.** Humans are a social species, and we need to feel like we're wanted somewhere. If you can contribute to your community, you'll likely feel a little happier.
- **Don't overextend yourself.** It's easy to feel the need to do everything you possibly can, but it's important to know your limits. Offering others more than you have to give won't help anyone in the long run.
- **Remember that other people are capable.** They *can* solve their own problems, and they often will if given the opportunity. Don't discredit their abilities.

- **Remember that other people need to learn to solve their own problems.** If you solve everyone else's problems for them, then they'll never learn to do it on their own.
- **It's not your job to fix other people or handle their emotions.** That's their job. The only person you're truly responsible for is yourself.
- **Make and enforce boundaries.** Good people will not only respect them, but appreciate them. If someone keeps ignoring your boundaries despite reminders, then there may be a deeper problem that needs to be addressed in that relationship.
- **Practice gratitude.** Start your day by thinking of something you're looking forward to, or with something you're happy about. End it by thinking of something you're grateful for. It sounds corny, but it helps.
- **Avoid black and white thinking.** It's very easy to get stuck in harmful patterns otherwise. If you find yourself stuck in "it's this *or* that", then think of a third option outside that binary to shake yourself out of that rut.
- **If you can, meditate.** This doesn't have to be "sit totally still and think of nothing for hours on end"; that's not how meditation works anyway. Meditation is about focusing your attention on one thing (your breathing, for example) and letting other thoughts pass by. You *will* have other thoughts. That's okay. Notice them, then let them go and gently bring your attention back to your focus. You don't need to do this for very long, either. Even 5 minutes a day is helpful.
  - Other types of meditation exist! If this method doesn't work for you, try to find another type of meditation. Even a daily walk or heavy exercise can be meditative if done mindfully.
- **Remember that your worth is not defined by your work.** Your friends didn't latch onto you for your brilliant essays or diligent work ethic. They like *you*. You have worth because you're *you*, and that doesn't change if you need to say "no" to something.

# Shadow Work

# What is shadow work?

Shadow work is the practice of noticing and integrating one's *shadow*. Your *shadow* is the side of yourself that you've pushed away, hidden, or repressed. That side gets locked away in your unconscious mind instead of being accepted as part of you.

Everyone has a shadow. As we grow up and live our lives, we're taught that people don't like some parts of us. These parts are pushed away so we can be accepted by others. They don't go away, but they quietly influence our behavior from the background without our noticing them. Over time, we may forget that these parts of us exist at all!

When you do shadow work, you learn to notice these parts of you and accept them. There are a lot of ways to do this, and many of them involve noticing things that make you feel strong emotions or act impulsively.

## Why do shadow work?

Our shadows don't go away when we ignore them. Instead, they act out of our control or awareness. Have you ever gotten angry and done something you would never normally do, then wondered where that behavior came from? Maybe you've been deeply annoyed with someone for a reason that seems silly when you think about it. Those moments often come from our shadows. Other times, our shadows are the roots of behaviors or mindsets we'd like to change.

When we recognize and accept our shadows, we gain more control over our behaviors by bringing them out of our unconscious. Many people also feel more whole or resolve pain from their childhood. Our shadows can be very powerful if approached with compassion and curiosity instead of hostility!

# Ideas for Shadow Work

## Noticing your shadow

- **Keep a journal.** Our shadows can show up in writing when we least expect it, and you may be surprised by what shows up on paper.
- **List your personality traits.** Notice what's *not* on the list and investigate whether those traits are part of your shadow.
- **Notice things that bother you about other people.** Oftentimes, these same traits are in our own shadows.
  - List traits that you think are the worst to have. Can you see them in yourself at all?
  - List the “best” traits to have. The *opposites* of these traits may be in your shadow.
- **Notice things that upset you more than you think they should.** Our shadows often hold a lot of pain.
- **Think about how you want others to see you.** When we present a certain version of ourselves to others, we have to hide parts of ourselves from our personas.
  - Consider what you admire about others, or what you wish you *could* be.
- If you're feeling brave, **ask other people for criticism or insight.** They might see parts of you that you aren't aware of yet.
- **Notice physical feelings.** If you feel tense or uncomfortable when talking about certain topics, then they may have a connection to your shadow.
- **Do some automatic writing or drawing.** This is the practice of writing or drawing without consciously directing what comes out. It can be surprisingly effective at revealing your shadow.
- **Notice patterns in your life.** Do relationships tend to fail in the same way every time? Are there any fears or traits underlying major events in your past?
- **Ask where your thoughts and behaviors came from.** We're all told things that stick with us, and they're not always positive things.

- **Think about your environment.** What does your culture and family encourage? What do they despise? What traits would have been scary or dangerous to display?
- **Notice what you avoid.** People often avoid situations, emotions, and people that are connected to their shadows in some way. You might find that you're procrastinating shadow work itself as a way of avoiding your shadow!

## Accepting your shadow

- **Find value in traits that bother you.** If you've found a part of yourself that you dislike, try to see how it might be helpful. For example, anger can be destructive, but it's also very important for keeping yourself safe.
  - **No trait is inherently bad.** Even the "worst" traits have an upside to them, and accepting them can turn a struggle into a strength.
  - **Ask how a shadowed trait might help you.** Alternatively, ask how avoiding that trait might hurt you.
- **Think of your shadow as a hidden ally.** Even self-destructive parts of you are trying to do something positive (though their methods leave something to be desired). Everything in your shadow has been trying to help you despite being pushed away. Recognizing those efforts can be a great way to grow closer to your shadow.
- **Do some self-dialogue.** It might feel weird or artificial at first, but talking to yourself out loud or writing a conversation in a journal can get you in direct touch with parts of yourself. This can be a powerful approach for resolving problems.
  - Take care to be compassionate and curious instead of harsh and judgmental. Assume your shadow means well. If you approach it as an ally instead of an enemy, you're more likely to make progress.
  - For more ideas on interacting with parts of yourself directly (particularly for those with trauma histories), read *Self-Therapy* by Jay Earley.
- **Trust your mind.** If you ask yourself a question and find that a memory or emotion comes up in response, then that response is likely important. Listen to it with compassion and curiosity and hear what it has to say.

# Journaling

# Why keep a journal?

Journaling can be an *incredibly* powerful tool for reflecting, brainstorming, and keeping track of your life. It's a simple practice with a lot of potential.

- Journals can listen to your problems without complaint or provide a place to brainstorm solutions.
- Journals can store quotes and phrases that mean something to you, giving you a store of ideas to draw from.
- Journals are great places to write about goals and resolutions. Having them written down might make it easier to hold yourself to them. You can even track your progress.
- Journals are a safe place to express your emotions, thoughts, and identity. Paper doesn't judge.
- Journals can record what your life is like now. If you ever need to consult your past self, it's much easier to do so when you have concrete records.
- Journals can get thoughts out of your mind, making it easier to sleep or focus on other tasks.
- Journals can serve as memory aids and reminders of upcoming tasks.
- Journals offer a space to process emotions and make sense of your experiences.

Journaling has been shown to improve mental health, reduce stress, and help people solve problems in their lives. As little as 15 minutes twice a week was enough to help improve mental health for participants in a 2006 study (Chan and Horneffer). There are even a few studies suggesting it can help boost people's immune systems and physical health. For such a simple practice, the benefits are fantastic.

# Ideas for Journaling

- **Anything goes.** There's no right or wrong way to keep your journal. Use it for whatever helps you most. Want to chuck your grocery list in there? Go for it.
- **Throw perfection out the window.** If you're writing in a journal for yourself, then there's no point in worrying about how it looks. Journal in the ways that work for *you*.
  - It doesn't have to make sense or look pretty. A journal can be chicken-scratch hieroglyphics strewn across the page if that's what works best.
    - If making it pretty does work best for you, then go wild! Some folks color-code their journals or use washi tape to decorate.
- **Traditional lined-paper journals are far from your only option.** Bullet journals, creative journaling, scrapbooking, digital notebooks, and more are all wonderful options. What matters is that you can turn to your journal when you need it.
  - **Pick a journal format that you like.** It's easier to write in something when you look forward to using it.
- **Skip the first page.** If you have a hard time starting because you want the first page to be perfect, then start on the second page. You can always go back and fill in the first page later. You can even start halfway through the journal if you need to!
  - **Put what scares you most on the first page.** If the idea of someone seeing something specific in your journal is preventing you from writing in it, then write that down first. That can make it easier to write in that journal because the "worst" bit is already written down.
- If you want to make a habit out of journaling, **start small.** You don't have to write pages and pages of prose if you don't want to. **A single sentence is enough.**
  - **There's no need to write paragraphs.** If paragraphs aren't working for you, try writing lists or scratching out the occasional phrase. You could even draw instead of writing.
- **Copy down quotes and phrases that strike you.** Some people keep a separate journal just for quotes (called a commonplace book).
  - This includes your own writing! If you're a writer of any sort, a journal can be a great place to jot down phrases to use later.

- **Plan for the day ahead or reflect on the day before.** This is especially helpful if you make a habit of journaling in the morning or evening.
- **Interview yourself.** Asking yourself questions can be a great way to explore who you are.
- **Ramble about your current project or interest.** Journals are great listeners, and you might like reading your rambling later.
- **Plan out future projects.** If you're working on something, your journal can be the perfect place to plot out all the steps you need to take to finish it.
- **Write letters that you'll never send.** Want to rant at your boss? Confess your insecurities to a friend? They don't have to see it if it's in your journal.
- **Pick apart media.** Analyzing a show, book, game, or other piece of media can be fun and interesting. You may even learn about yourself in the process.
- **Take notes or jot down new information.** Writing things down can help you remember them later.
- **Write about your emotions.** It can be helpful to jot down your feelings. You might even gain insight into where they come from.
- **Write down assorted thoughts.** You never know when you'll want to refer back to that one idea you had last week.
- **Answer prompts.** There are hundreds of journaling prompts out there to give you inspiration. There are even prompt challenges.
- **Keep your eyes open for other ideas.** There are as many ways to use a journal as there are people.
- **Consider carrying your journal with you.** You never know when you'll want to note something down.

# Appendix A: Mantras

When doing something difficult, having the right words to get through it can make a big difference. Some phrases can make it easier to sit with distress. Others remind us that this will pass. There are no magic words to feel better, but words can be a powerful tool for some people.

- Bear witness.
- Do it anyway.
- Bravery is doing things in spite of fear.
- Everyone feels emotions. It's okay and natural to have intense feelings.
- Every emotion serves a purpose.
- There are no bad emotions, only unpleasant ones.
- It's okay to cry.
- No one has any idea what they're doing. Folks who seem to have life figured out are fumbling through life just as much as the rest of us.
- Life is hard. That's what makes it worth living.
- If it's worth doing, then it's worth doing halfway.
- You already have everything you need inside you. You *are* strong enough.
- Turn towards fear.
- Anxiety is a cycle of avoidance.
- Recovery is a process, not a goal.
- You're the only one that can help yourself.
- Your emotions are your responsibility.
  - Other people's emotions are *their* responsibility, not yours.
- Good things take time and effort.
- Mistakes are opportunities to grow.
- You've survived everything life has thrown at you so far. You can survive this too.
- You will outlive this.
- You are loved more than you know.

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