

Our guide to mental health and wellbeing





Contents

	Page
Introduction	03
How to use this guide	04
Who's who?	04
Support network	06
Therapy and counselling	08
Interests	10
Mindfulness	11
Exercise	12
Practical approaches	14
Medication	16
Self-awareness and reflection	18
Be kind to yourself	20
Faith, acceptance and time	22
Helpful advice	23

As mental health is something we care deeply about, we wanted to create a mental health guide which is like no other. A guide that has weight and meaning, and helps give a new perspective to mental health; that treats the topic with respect and acknowledges how messy it really is. A piece that recognises just how unique and individual a person's mental health is, and that every person is likely to tackle and deal with it in different ways.

How did we do this? We decided to talk to people and find out what techniques have helped their mental health, or brought relief when life was hard, as well as techniques that have not helped them. We wanted to make a guide from real life experience.

We spoke to people who were suffering from a variety of mental health illnesses, with depression and anxiety being the most common. But there was also agoraphobia, anorexia, social anxiety and, in fact, most people were affected by a combination of illnesses. One woman also talked about Asperger's Syndrome, another talked about dealing with traumatic life events and stress, and another spoke about her sister's depression and the effect that has on the family.

These conversations showed that it didn't matter what you were suffering from, there didn't seem to be a technique that was better for one type of illness; in other words, everyone has to find what works for them, as what works for one person may not work for another.

So, whether you are exploring the topic of mental health for the first time, or it's a topic you are familiar with, we hope this guide will bring you some comfort and insight.



How to use this guide

You will find the guide broken down into two main sections: techniques and helpful advice.

The **techniques** explore the different methods people have tried and tested explaining what they are, what has worked, what hasn't and why.

Our **helpful advice** section is a collection of thoughts or pieces of advice which kept cropping up. Insights which have been gained over time, and which one can only arrive at through experience.



Who's who?

We have collected all the techniques and advice from interviews conducted specifically for this guide. Each person spoke eloquently and openly about their battles, sharing their unique stories and perspectives, and you'll find these are used to support the techniques and explain their pros and cons. To protect each person's identity, we have changed their names and some details.



Charlie

Opened up about having a naturally anxious nature and struggling with social anxiety.



Jackie

Discussed how she deals with borderline agoraphobia and anxiety whilst having Asperger's syndrome.



Jane

Talked about her struggles with anxiety over the past few years.



Katy

Opened up about her depression.



Lily

Shared how she has struggled with anxiety on and off since she was about 11.



Mary

Opened up about her sister's depression, how she got over it and the effect it had on the family.



Max

Discussed his experience of depression, agoraphobia and anxiety.



Natalie

Discussed her depression.



Nina

Discussed having anorexia, depression and anxiety.



Anne

Discussed how her mental health has been affected by traumatic events in her life, as well as chronic illnesses.



Carla

Discussed how her anxieties and extreme worries affected her life.



Robert

Opened up about his depression.



Ru

Shared her experience of having depression and how she continues to deal with it



Susan

Discussed how she has dealt with mild depression over the last decade.

"Finding my support network or 'tribe' at university was the game changer."

Jane



Support network

It must be acknowledged that battling with mental health problems can feel incredibly lonely – it can trick you into thinking you are the only one that feels that way, or you sense a loss for the friendships and relationships you feel you have missed out on. Therefore, is it any wonder that all our interviewees spoke about the importance of a support network to help get them through?

A support network is vital when you are struggling through tough times, or battling with mental health issues,

as it is a lot harder to get through it by yourself. Support networks don't have to be large, in fact they are most effective when you focus on the quality of the support rather than the quantity. Who makes up a support network can vary too. Katy said her support network was predominantly her partner, others said it was friends that they turned to, whereas Max said he preferred to turn to his family. Ultimately it is important, though, that you find the people, or person, who really understands you.

Food for thought...

Your support network may not be who you expect

Some friends or family might not understand what you are going through and can't offer the support you need, and it is fine to recognise and realise that.

Robert talked about his moment of realisation. When it became clear that some of his friends were actually damaging, he made the decision to distance himself from them. This is a brave and difficult decision to make, and one that is acknowledged as sometimes being necessary for your mental health.

Find someone you can talk openly with

This may seem obvious, but it is best to find someone with whom you can talk openly. Charlie summed it up well when she said it is important to find someone you can talk to, and who will acknowledge what you are going through.

Carla felt the same. She found being able to talk openly with her partner about her worries and anxieties, especially when they affected her relationship, was a huge help. It both allowed them to see each other's side and gain understanding.





Therapy and counselling

Therapy is often suggested by GPs once other methods have been exhausted. It can be accessed through the NHS, though there are often long waiting lists, or it can be accessed privately. Among the interviewees, everyone who had tried it (bar one) found it useful, and classed it as one of the key ways they used to understand their mental health.

Overall, it is a process and provides an opportunity to work on long-term changes. It provides guidance, an outside perspective and a safe space to go deep and fully understand yourself better, as well as make sense of any confusion.

There are many different types of therapy and it is important that you find the kind which suits you – please see the British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy link in the Helping Advice section for a complete list.

Common types are cognitive behavioural therapy (most commonly known as CBT), person-centred therapy and psychoanalysis or psychodynamic therapy. Many therapists, though, combine different approaches (using an 'integrative approach') – using whichever they deem appropriate for the client.



"I gained lots from therapy, but what I found most beneficial was the different perspective I gained about myself, one I could only truly get from someone I didn't know."

Charlie



Food for thought...

You have to consider timing and a desire to go

Jane remembered when she was persuaded to go to therapy and was unsure why she was there. What sticks in her mind is the therapist's wasting of paper as he drew explanation after explanation. As a result, she didn't gain much from it at all. But she knows people who have, and would consider it again if she felt it was needed.

Jackie, on the other hand, has never considered therapy as she knows she isn't comfortable talking to people she doesn't know, so knows it is a non-starter.

Think about what you want from it

Different people want different things from therapy.

Some of the interviewees found CBT, or CBT-based methods, more beneficial. CBT is a practical style of talking therapy that challenges your thoughts but doesn't go as deep as other talking therapy types might. You are often taught practical techniques and methods to use, which can be especially useful for managing worries or anxious thoughts. It was these methods Carla and Jackie preferred, though

they accessed them through classroom-based sessions rather than therapy sessions.

Ru, Charlie, Lily and Max, on the other hand, found CBT frustrating as the deeper insights they desired weren't gained. In turn, they found more in-depth talking therapy most beneficial. This therapy allows you to explore yourself, become curious about who you are and get to the root of the problems.

Therefore, make sure to keep in mind the different types of therapy on offer and explore the best type for your needs – some people went through numerous therapists before they found the one that worked for them.

It is an investment and a process

Max, Ru, Lily and Nina stressed the importance of seeing therapy as a long-term investment in yourself, and accept that it is unlikely to be a quick-fix solution. Anne explained that she has been going on and off for 17 years now, and always goes back if she needs a top-up. This highlights how mental health is a fluid thing; you go through good and bad patches and you always have to be honest with yourself as to whether you need help again.

"There's definitely a positive correlation between knitting and my mental health."

Jackie



Interests

It may seem obvious, but interests can be incredibly beneficial to your mental health. They can give you purpose, confidence and a focus. They are often cited as something which offers significant help.

Mary explained how her sister started improving when she discovered martial arts. The activity pushed her out of her comfort zone, and allowed her to

get outside of herself. Social interests and activities can be a source of strong support networks as well. Mary went on to explain how her sister gained many friends and a larger social network. Natalie also described a similar scenario, explaining that discovering and playing pool, and the friends she was introduced to was a turning point for her mental health.

Food for thought...

Allow yourself to step out of your comfort zone

Activities, social or not, can be daunting. You are allowing yourself to be vulnerable, and are potentially setting yourself up to fail. It may be hard, even

painful at times, but that is also what people have said was most satisfying. It develops you and, as a result, brings you joy – for these reasons alone, it's worth stepping out of your comfort zone.

Mindfulness

Mindfulness is popular at the moment, and encompasses breathing techniques and meditation. It is popular for good reason – it costs nothing, is relatively easy to use and is teaching the importance of being present.

If you find yourself in a stressful moment, mindfulness techniques are successful for combatting stress and anxiety and regaining focus in the moment. It can help you create space for yourself – create space to think and breathe, and create distance between ourselves and our reactions. It helps you return to the moment and pay attention to the present.

There are many books out there now, and classes are popular, often

"I felt euphoric after, as if I had taken something."

Ru



combining exercise with mindfulness techniques and they can leave you feeling fantastic. Finding the time to use the techniques in your day-to-day life can be more difficult, though, and people have admitted that that can be a cause of stress.



Food for thought...

Best used in conjunction or as maintenance

There was a definite consensus regarding how to best use mindfulness. As beneficial as it is, it is recognised that it has short-term benefits and has to be employed regularly to be effective, and does not get to the root cause of a problem. In fact, no one relied solely on it, instead

finding it most effective when it was used in conjunction with other techniques.

For example, Lily described how she started using them after she had gone through a burnout. She attended therapy to unpick everything, and then started using techniques such as meditation to help maintain that inner peace.

"Go for walks,
stomp it out."

Nina



Exercise

Exercise appears on many top tip lists for mental health. And, in many ways, rightly so. Exercise has positive health benefits, not just physically, but mentally as well. But, like mindfulness, those who use it as a technique said it was never their only one, and it has to be used alongside others. But they did gain profound effects from it. Charlie said she found running and

swimming really helped her with her stress and anxieties, whereas Jackie took up dancing as a way of helping her with her anxiety and has found it really brought her out of her shell. Jane found that walking her dogs helped her overcome her anxiety, and Nina uses walking to help clear her head and gain headspace and perspective.

Food for thought...

You have to choose something you enjoy

Exercise is most beneficial when it is something you actually enjoy doing; in fact, it can negatively affect your mental health if you force yourself to do something that you don't really enjoy just because you feel it should be helpful.

Susan discovered just this. She shared her experience of trying a 6-week yoga course as she heard it would help with her stress. Instead, she found the opposite. It actually added to her stress, as it wasn't for her, and she was left feeling a failure. In the end she decided to cut the yoga course short, and this awareness to stop was key – you gain no benefits from doing something that you don't enjoy.



Practical approaches

Sometimes you just want to approach your mental health issues practically, using an approach that you can turn to anywhere and at any time. Or, sometimes, you just need to give your mind a break; find something that can distract you and keep your mind occupied.

Practical approaches help you address your issues logically and practically. They are beneficial if you want quick, easy-access techniques, or if you don't want to reflect or go too deep into your issues. They can also help you find instant relief. In that sense, they are similar to mindfulness.

Carla finds these types of approaches the most useful to her. She is a constant worrier and has high levels of anxiety, which eventually took its toll. She was advised to see a Psychological Wellbeing Practitioner who supplied her with ways to challenge or manage her worries.



She was advised to question her worries, which encouraged her to assess the severity of them:

- *Is it a real worry or a hypothetical one?*
- *Is it likely to happen?*
- *What can you put in place to alleviate the situation?*
- *What can you do to help?*
- *Who else can help?*
- *What's the worst that can happen?*
- *What's the likelihood that it will happen?*

She was also advised to write her worries down, then wait a day or so to see if they still held their strength. Another suggestion was to limit the time she was allowed to worry in a day.

She found these approaches useful as they pulled her out of her thought loops, and encouraged her to see her worries in a logical way, which, in turn, removed their strength. She found she could apply these at work, which bought some relief and allowed her to get on with her tasks at hand.



"You feel proactive as you have something to work with."

Carla



Food for thought...

They don't always work

Though Carla did find them helpful straightaway, she admits that they don't always work. Sometimes the worry is too strong, too overwhelming and these approaches can't get close. But in times like those, she just accepts it and 'rides it out', knowing that, ultimately, time has proven to be a healer and the worries will pass – she may just lose some nights of sleep in the process.

Remember, though, these approaches might not help everyone, especially those who prefer a more reflective approach.

Distractor activities

These are activities that keep your mind occupied and distracted. They are brilliant for combatting worries and anxieties, as Jackie found. She discovered a number of activities that helped her manage her anxieties – crafts, swimming, walking, video games and escapism, such as board games and role-playing. Like the practical approaches, they provide some relief.

They can provide support networks

Jackie found that she discovered a support network through one of her distractor activities – video gaming. She found the common interest in video games created a safe space and she was able to open up and talk.

"They make the lows easier to bear, but don't make you happier."

Nina



"They stop you from experiencing all sides of yourself. But they did help when I didn't yet have the knowledge or insight to help myself."

Max



Medication

Medication is often offered by doctors as a way of relieving people of the symptoms of their illness, and it's no different when it comes to mental health. But mental health medication, such as anti-depressants, are hard to discuss without acknowledging the differing views around them. There is a wariness around them, with many of the interviewees saying they turned to them as a last resort. People often worry about what happens when you stop taking them – do you just return back to how you are? But, still, it cannot be ignored that many people find great relief when taking them, as well.

"I can rely on panic attack medication in an absolute crisis. It's perfect for taking the edge off, so you can see more clearly what you are dealing with."

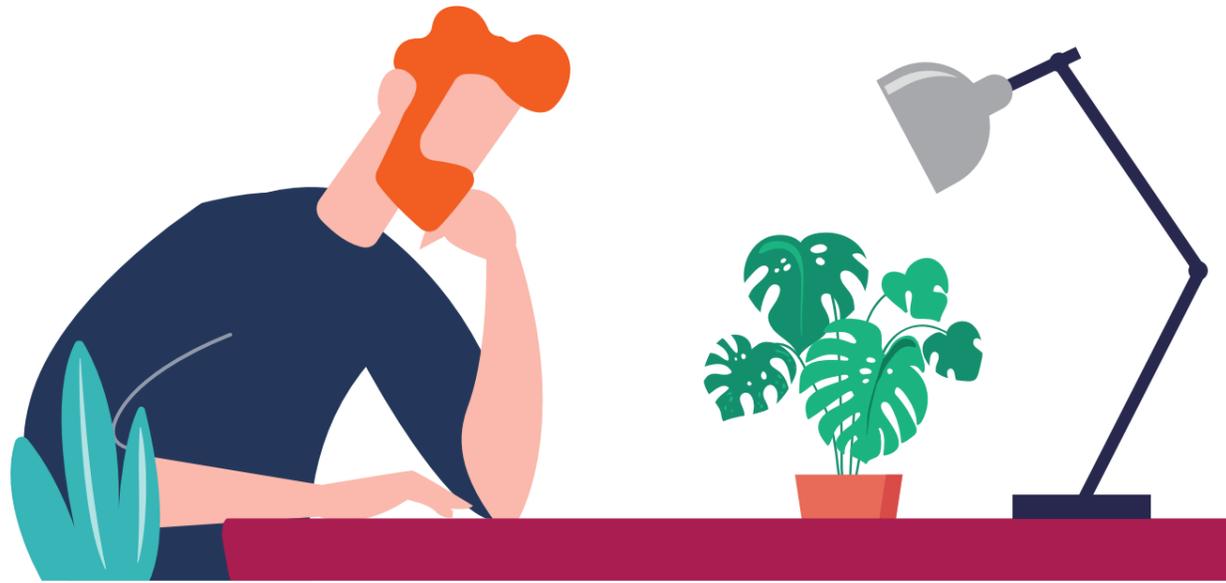
Anne



Food for thought...

It's rarely the only answer

There was a definite consensus between those who had tried medication. They all found it had benefits but they could never have relied on them solely, it doesn't get to the root of your problems. As Anne says, they work purely to take the edge off so you could see more clearly, enabling you to be able to properly address what you are really dealing with.



Self-awareness and reflection

Self-awareness is knowing yourself, and can be an extremely strong weapon. Taking the time to get to know yourself, what your triggers are, why and what can help you overcome them, can be incredibly helpful. It is through this work that you learn to assess your behaviours and emotions.

This self-awareness can be gained through the use of reflection. Natalie found reflection helped her become aware of how she was reacting to things, and taught her to ask questions such as: *are things making me unusually angry or upset? Am I reacting to things differently?* She realised that if the answer to any of these questions was a 'yes', it could be a sign that something wasn't right and would work on uncovering what was going on.



"It's a constant trial and error, constantly proactively assessing and reassessing how I feel and adjusting as I'm going. An ongoing process that I know never ends."

Katy

An internal journey

Max was a rare one, as he worked on his depression and agoraphobia almost entirely internally. Early on in his illness he tried other techniques, but to no avail. He soon realised that if he was going to fully understand himself and his struggles, he was going to have to undertake an internal journey.

He had to make a conscious effort to find the headspace and freedom to process as much as he could. He had to face himself, try and tease apart his anxieties and fears and understand them at a deep level. He found it slow, torturous and often wanted it to be over quickly, but also realised that this journey was necessary to getting better – it was accessing a core fundamental part of himself, and there was a lot of beauty to be found

in it. By being in tune with himself at such a deep level, he was able to make adjustments and tweaks to himself and the way he was in the world.

This type of internal approach is a very individual experience, and deeply personal. It is a slow approach though, and one that is not often in line with the speed of life. But Max is finding that through the depth and thoroughness required that he is truly getting a grasp of who he is, and is feeling the gains. It has helped shape who he is.

But faith and patience are definitely required, and an innate curiosity about who you are and a desire to find out. Not everyone will fit this description, but the ones who do may find this approach incredibly insightful and rewarding. Max certainly has.

Food for thought...

You're an onion – it's up to you whether you get to know all the layers

This comes down to the type of person you are. Some people love to know the layers and found that reflective techniques were the most beneficial to them and the understanding they gained is what they required. Others found that the more practical approaches worked for them, and they didn't need the deeper understanding. It's entirely up to the person.

Be kind to yourself

When we are struggling with our mental health or trying hard to overcome it, we can forget to be kind to ourselves. We get wrapped up in guilt, shame and become incredibly hard on ourselves. Yet, it's this time when we should be the kindest.

Here are different ways in which you can achieve this.

- 1. Give yourself a break.** This is important and you may need to do this every day, especially on days where your usual techniques or approaches don't work.
- 2. Put in time to find out what you love.** This not only will bring you joy, but give you a focus and motivation. But don't be too hard on yourself here either, it is all about taking tiny steps and setting realistic goals.
- 3. Rediscover things that used to bring you joy.** An old album? A favourite film? Don't forget these things, they may be small but can be incredibly effective.
- 4. Treat yourself.** Take yourself out to lunch, to a spa, a walk, or a day trip – anything you consider to be a treat, and remember it should be guilt-free!



"It's ok to feel the way you do."

Robert



Food for thought...

Don't be afraid if techniques seem to stop working

A common piece of advice was the importance of realising that techniques don't work all the time, and there can be times when nothing works. And you have to be kind to yourself at this point. Katy explained how techniques should be related to a positive behaviour. If they start working against you, stop them, or take a break and don't beat yourself up about it. It's important to be patient too; it doesn't mean the technique won't work again. Just let that feeling be, and try not to be scared of it.

Everyone is on their own journey

It's important to recognise this and use it as a reminder to stop us from comparing ourselves to others. Only once we recognise that we are on our own journey and 'it's all relative', can we truly allow ourselves to move in the way that works best for us. It really doesn't matter what everyone else does, it's important to find our own way and understand ourselves.





Faith, acceptance and time

Lastly, coping with mental health requires faith, acceptance and time. Mental health problems such as stress and anxiety are often ones that people struggle with for a long time, and a lot of our interviewees said that they had come to accept that they are playing the long game, and there is no quick fix. They recognised that the techniques they used often brought about a gradual change, and that nothing was instant. Ultimately, they

had faith in themselves; faith that they can cope with it and manage it.

This can be a horrifying realisation but acceptance of it can bring relief. It isn't a resignation, it's a starting point for change. It helps you see it as a journey and one that needs to be taken in order to get better.

Ultimately, with acceptance, comes freedom.



"As much as possible, give yourself space and time and remove the pressure from yourself to try and be better than you are - have faith."

Max

Helpful advice

To conclude, we wanted to share some words of wisdom. Hopefully they will provide some comfort and reassurance.

- **Nothing's fool-proof: some days the techniques won't work.**
- **Mental health is, unfortunately, messy. You have to accept the fear and dark places.**
- **Three things: be kind to yourself, don't judge yourself, have faith in yourself. You are doing the best you can.**
- **Accept that it's a long journey, a long haul.**
- **Don't rush or force yourself. Instead just take one day, or even one hour, at a time.**
- **You need to be willing to ask for help, receive help and recognise when you need help. It's ok – there is nothing wrong with you. Don't be afraid.**
- **Don't try so hard. Aim a little bit lower.**
- **Don't forget to learn from yourself.**
- **Be who you want to be.**

Types of therapy

<https://www.bacp.co.uk/about-therapy/types-of-therapy/>

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