

YOUR
MENTAL HEALTH
TOOLKIT

This is your stockpile of proven methods that will equip you to weather the toughest times. "These strategies build up our mental health bank account," says Waters, "and so when life throws its curve balls at us, which it will, we can dip into that bank account we've developed. These actions are great to use on an everyday basis, but they have the most power when life is dark."

BE THANKFUL

You've heard about gratitude lists before, but that's because they work. Being consistently grateful increases the activity levels in your hypothalamus – the part of your brain that controls bodily functions such as eating and sleeping – thus improving sleep, optimism, relationships and physical health. Author Elizabeth Gilbert scribbles down one thing every evening that she's thankful for and throws it in a happiness jar, to read during hard times or whenever it gets full. "Some people keep a gratitude diary, or keep photos of things they're grateful for on their phone," says Waters. "It doesn't take away the stress of life, but it puts it in perspective." Stark agrees: "You can't just tell yourself everything is fine when your life is blowing up around you. But a gratitude journal allows you to see the chink of light on a really dark day. The more you practise gratitude, the more your brain starts to see it."

GET BACK TO NATURE

Two hours per week spent in nature is enough to boost health and happiness – and it doesn't have to be all in one block. You don't even need to be exercising – just sit in a park or by the water with a book, if that's more your speed. >

FINDING

THE

SMILE

MOST OF US ARE HEALTHIER, WEALTHIER AND MORE PRIVILEGED THAN EVER – BUT STATISTICS SUGGEST OUR MENTAL HEALTH IS GETTING WORSE. SO HOW CAN WE FIND HAPPINESS IN 2019?

PURSUIT OF HAPPINESS THE BEST WAY TO FIND JOY? IT STARTS WITH REDEFINING WHAT HAPPINESS MEANS TO YOU

BY HANNAH JAMES

FAIRYTALES STILL WRAP their endings up in a bow with "happily ever after". But for those of us living in the real world, slipsliding our way through the fast-moving, hyper-connected, always-on 21st century that's careering closer to climate catastrophe, happiness seems ever more elusive. New statistics bear out the suspicion that we're all hovering on the verge of burnout and despair, and plenty of high-profile figures have made their mental-health battles public, including Sophie Turner, Cara Delevingne, Lizzo and Ariana Grande.

Yet we also have more resources at our disposal than ever. Society's treatment of mental illness has come a long way since depressed mums suffering in suburbia were handed out valium like lollies. Although diagnoses of depression and anxiety have risen dramatically during the past eight years, particularly in women aged 15-34, according to the 2019 Housing Income And Labour Dynamics Survey, psychologists say this actually reflects greater rates of diagnosis, rather than greater rates of mental illness. There are many people and programs in Australia working to destigmatise the conditions and offer new and more accessible treatments.

The search for happiness might be the defining quest of our era. So this is where we begin: by redefining happiness and how often we can expect to feel it. "The human condition is one of struggle as well as joy," says Jill Stark, author of *When You're Not OK*, which distils the lessons she learnt from her

mental breakdown in 2014. "It's not abnormal to have periods of sadness and disappointment and grief and all the things that make us human. But from an early age we're taught that happiness is the ultimate goal – and this relentless pursuit makes us miserable. We're always reaching for this goal we can never quite get to. I had a serious breakdown at a point when everything in my life was perfect: I had just written a bestselling book, I had a very attractive boyfriend, I owned my own home, I had great friends and family – and I fell apart. The underlying cultural message is that once you tick off all those boxes, you'll be happy. But I was just chasing all these external fixes to fill a gap in me."

So how does she find happiness? "I don't strive necessarily for happiness now – more a sense of wholeness and accepting the full range of human emotions. I've changed my perspective from the happy-ever-after to the happy-in-between – little moments of joy are what life is all about."

Lea Waters, a psychologist and founding director of the University Of Melbourne's Centre For Positive Psychology, agrees. "We can intentionally tune in to those little moments of positivity. One of the benefits of taking a positive psychology approach is that it allows psychology to step out of the clinic. You can be an everyday person who is not struggling in terms of mental illness but wants to make your mental health better, to have more joy, more gratitude and do better in your world."

The takeaway: yes, life is hard, but getting help is less stigmatised and more accessible than ever before. So here's what to do when you don't know what to do.

STRESS FEST: AN ANXIETY FESTIVAL MIGHT SOUND LIKE A DOWNER, BUT THE BIG ANXIETY, WHICH IS ON UNTIL NOVEMBER 9 IN SYDNEY, BRINGS TOGETHER PERFORMANCES AND EXPERIENCES TO FOCUS ON BOOSTING MENTAL HEALTH. VISIT THEBIGANXIETY.ORG.

7%
That's how much of the health budget the government spends on mental health.

ARTWORK BY
DENIS SHECKLER

WHEN SHOULD YOU SEE A PSYCHOLOGIST?

"You're looking for lack of happiness, social withdrawal, sleep disturbance (either being really fatigued and sleeping all the time, or insomnia), change in appetite and when things that used to bring you happiness don't bring you happiness anymore," explains Waters. "Plus changes in habits – either reducing healthy habits, like you can't be bothered running anymore, or bad habits creeping in, like too much time online, substance use or alcohol use. Everyone has those things occasionally, but if they're happening frequently and over a long period (more than a month), that's when you need to see someone."

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"It's never a bad idea to seek support," says Stark. "You know when you get to the point where you're like, 'I can't do this alone.'"

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If you feel you need to see a psychologist, go to your GP and ask for a mental healthcare plan.

That entitles you to 10 Medicare-subsidised sessions with a psychologist every year.

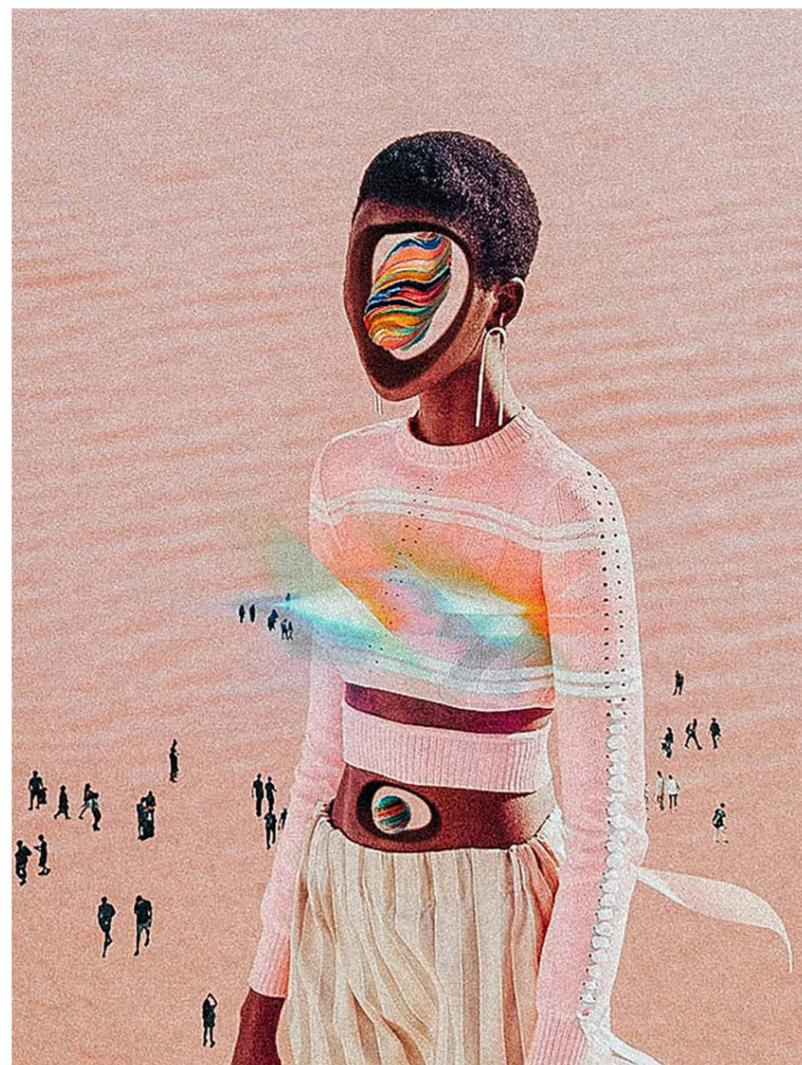
And don't worry, your doctor has seen it all before and won't judge: mental health is the most common reason

Australians visit the GP.

HOW TO FIND THE RIGHT ONE

"The first experience I had of anxiety was when I was seven," says Maddie Holm, 23, a graduate policy officer for the NSW Government and Beyond Blue volunteer. "I got a lot of nerves in my stomach and I'd feel very sick. I would fidget a lot, pull at my hair, pick my fingers and get sweaty palms. And any time I was away from my mum, I'd get panic attacks."

Holm saw three different psychologists before she recently discovered her perfect match. "I spoke to my GP and said I needed someone who specialises in anxiety in young people, and she took more of a holistic approach. She recommended a couple and I spoke to each on the phone about my issues and the treatment I'd already had. They were able to point me in the direction of appropriate colleagues. And I finally found the right one – I felt immediately comfortable. She understands where I'm coming from and lets me talk. She never makes me feel like I'm being judged and always helps me find new solutions. But it did take time and patience to find her."



*** THERAPY, BUT MAKE IT INSTAGRAM YOU'RE STRUGGLING AND DON'T HAVE MONEY FOR A THERAPIST, BUT YOU DO HAVE INSTAGRAM

Trained therapists are turning to Instagram to help destigmatise mental health issues and offer useful advice. @nedratawwab's grid is full of posts with dot-pointed ideas on everything from how to deal with emotionally draining people to overcoming impostor syndrome.

@lisaoliveratherapy's posts have lengthy captions filled with psychotherapeutic exercises. And people living with specific disorders have many options for targeted assistance, including @cptsd_support for trauma survivors and @theoedstories for people with OCD.

These helpful, free resources provide community support and are tailored to the way we take in information in the 21st century. But while psychologists argue that an Insta quote is no substitute for therapy, they might just help you through a bad day.

WORKING IT OUT WHEN THE SUNDAY-NIGHT BLUES BECOME A LITTLE MORE SERIOUS, IT'S TIME TO TAKE ACTION

THERE'S NEVER BEEN more attention on mental health at work, and for good reason: mental illness costs the Australian economy \$60 billion a year, and a new report from research agency Gartner has led to talk of a "workplace mental health epidemic". The spotlight is now on it at the highest levels: Federal Health Minister Greg Hunt has reaffirmed the government's commitment to – and funding for – mental health initiatives, while this year's Queen's Birthday Honours List celebrated Lucy Brogden, chair of the National Mental Health Commission, whose focus is on the workplace.

Yet despite all this attention, the old stigmas persist, says Dorothy Hisgrove, chief people officer at PwC Australia – one of the Big Four accounting firms, where employees can face intense work pressures. "One in five people experiences a mental health issue every year," she says. "And in Australia, 54 per cent of people who experience a common mental health condition don't access any professional help. So we really need to change the stigma around this."

And the stigma has very real consequences: a 2013 study found that four out of 10 Australian workers who take sick leave for depression hide it from their employer, and almost half worry they'd lose their job if they disclosed their illness.

But the law is on your side. You don't have to tell your employers about any mental health condition you have if it doesn't affect your work. If you do want to tell them, the Privacy Act says they're not allowed to tell anyone else. You're

protected from any "adverse action" from your employer thanks to the Fair Work Act, and the Disability Discrimination Act states that your boss must make "reasonable adjustments" to accommodate your needs. Yet we all know that taking legal action to affirm those rights if your company doesn't provide them would be an expensive and stressful exercise.

PwC is one employer that's doing its best to change the conversation. "We invest in mental health to ensure our employees are happy, that they're bringing their whole selves to work every day, and then they're more productive and more engaged," says Hisgrove. "When our partners speak up about their mental health challenges, it makes others feel supported if they too share their challenges."

The HR team have filmed 13 partners talking honestly about their experiences with mental health, with the stories made available to all employees. "That's had a profound impact – it's made people feel they will get support and not be judged." The company has also trained employees at all levels in mental health first aid, and provides digital mental health check-ins as well as a 1800 number to call for support. And it's working, with the use of the program increasing by seven per cent in the past three years, proving people are more comfortable asking for help.

But what if your employer isn't quite so enlightened? Holm says that, ideally, you'll share your concerns with your boss, but advises: "It's about finding strategies that you can fit into your work life, if you're not ready to open up to people at work. So whether that means fresh air and making sure that you're getting out of the office once a day, or driving to work instead of using public transport, if that's what makes you nervous – just find little things to make your day a little bit easier."

A PwC report commissioned by Beyond Blue in 2014 found that for every dollar invested in effective mental health strategies, businesses received an average return of \$2.30.

START MOVING

Research shows that just 15 minutes a day of vigorous activity can reduce your risk of depression by 26 per cent. "If you don't want to go to the gym, don't – find a way of moving your body that feels good to you," says Stark. "You will never feel worse afterwards." Kitchen dance party, anyone?

BUILD YOURSELF UP

"I keep track of my achievements and try to build my confidence so whenever I feel like I can't do something, I look back on those achievement journals," says Holm.

FIND YOUR FLOW

Getting into creative "flow" helps the brain's pleasure chemicals (such as dopamine) fire all at once. You can find flow by doing any activity you enjoy that requires skill and focus, whether it's yoga, singing, sex, skiing, gaming, painting – or even working. It's all about hitting that sweet spot between something that's too hard and stressful, and too easy and boring. Check out psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi's books or flowgenomoproject.com for more.

KEEP IT SMALL

"Place your attention on the small moments of pleasure throughout the day – the first spray of hot water when you get into the shower, the feel of sunshine, the smell of coffee, getting into a freshly made bed with clean sheets, the snuggle your dog gives you when you get home," says Waters. "We all have these micro-moments of positivity – intentionally tune into them. That's called savouring and it's a technique that brings us joy." >



I'VE NEVER SEEN MY MUM CRY. Not a single tear. When I was little, this worried me greatly. "But why don't you cry?" I would squeak, through my own snuffled sobs. "Because it doesn't solve anything," she once replied. Yes, my mother is the ultimate pragmatist. (She doesn't drink, either, because "it doesn't get you anywhere".

Well, no, I used to say as a teenager, but it's fun.) While I'm no longer fazed by the fact I've never seen my stoic mother cry, I can't claim to take after her on that front.

To quote Jude Law in *The Holiday*, I am a "major weeper". I cry at the usual fare – adverts, books, someone I love getting ill, seeing a friend get married, watching films on planes (there's actual science behind this last one) – but also for no reason at all. In my most narcissistic moments, I've even been moved to tears by the prospect of my own death. A good old cry

offers catharsis. How many times have you curled up into a ball and bawled, then on finishing felt a little bit reborn? It is a "healing experience" that is vital for its "reprocessing of a memory or thought," says psychologist Natalie Cawley.

Crying is perceived as a feminine emotion. We cry over men, ripped stockings (and spilt milk). Our tears are irrational, copious and tedious.

Gwyneth Paltrow sobbing at the 1999 Oscars was cemented in the media-ordained canon of worst acceptance speeches ever. Meanwhile, men rarely deign to cry, and certainly not in public, because society has taught them they must "buck up"; only sissies cry.

But, thankfully, that is changing. Not only tears shed as a private act, but as part of the public discourse, from Cara Delevingne saying her sanity depends on crying every day, to Drew Barrymore red-faced and sobbing on Instagram (because "sometimes life can just get to you and take you down for a minute") and New Zealand's Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern tearfully mourning the victims of the Christchurch terrorist attack earlier this year. And it's not just women. When Andy Murray announced his retirement from tennis in January, he broke down in tears and his weepy face made front page news.

Crying has gone from being viewed as a sign of weakness to an experience that is highly encouraged. Last October, the World Economic Forum published a video revealing that Japan is recommending crying once a week to its population to relieve stress, while a "tears teacher" (former high-school teacher Hidefumi Yoshida) recently made the news for his series of lectures aimed at raising awareness of the benefits of crying.

I call Professor Ad Vingerhoets, who's been studying crying for more than 20 years and wrote the 2013 tome *Why Only Humans Weep*. The man who behavioural psychologists refer to as "the tear professor" says one of the biggest misconceptions is that we cry because we're sad. Rather, we cry because we're angry, helpless, grieving, surprised or empathetic. Vingerhoets, who's carried out dozens of studies all over the world, says "crying waxes and wanes in society" and that we are going through a "sentimental time in society. Never before will you have seen so many tears on television, from politicians to athletes."

But he adds that the widely held notion that tears are always followed by relief is a myth. Instead, he explains, we feel better for what our crying represents. "It signals to others that you need them. It shows that you are not aggressive and that you have peaceful intentions. And if you cry in a positive situation (if you are moved by something, for example) then it reveals your morality. It is about altruism and self-sacrifice; the good overcoming the bad."

My quest is to determine if women are biologically predisposed to cry more than men, or if we have been socially conditioned to do so. "There may be a specific female hormone that facilitates tears, but social learning is more important," says Vingerhoets. "There are factors that shape our crying behaviour: our exposure to

emotional situations (women engage in more emotional material, whether that's books, literature or friendships), our choice of profession (historically more women have worked in emotive industries like healthcare) and how powerless or helpless we may feel" – the latter being a central factor in campaigns such as #MeToo.

"As a practitioner, I don't think men cry less than women, but in my social realm that observation would be true," says Cawley. "Prior to puberty, there's no difference in the frequency of males and females crying. This suggests men learn via their social context that it is less acceptable to be seen exposing their vulnerability."

Mental health activist Matt Haig agrees: "The flipside of patriarchy is that, for all the privilege and social space men take up, we have backed ourselves into a corner emotionally. I cry quite often, but not in front of male friends. This shit is ingrained. But I can talk about crying with men now, so I suppose that's personal progress."

The drive to remove the shame from crying is gaining momentum. Author Holly Bourne is so passionate about destigmatising crying, she has written a YA novel about it, *The Places I've Cried In Public*. "I wanted to explore how common public crying is – every girl has lost it in public at one time or another, but we never talk about it." In trying to make sense of a recently demised dysfunctional relationship, Amelie, Bourne's protagonist, travels to all the places she cried during their time together. "It's a book about consent and power dynamics," says Bourne. But it is also an encouragement for teenage girls to acknowledge their feelings "and see that they are telling us something. This obsession with happiness and wellbeing means we fall into this trap of chasing happiness. We need to spend more time with our emotions and stop labelling our feelings – happy equals good, sadness equals bad – and just let them sit."

So, is it bad if you don't cry? Will my mum explode like Violet Beauregarde? Experts are divided. Vingerhoets says that some people cry more than others – and it's as simple as that – though "criers are more empathetic and feel more connected to other people". But when clinical psychologist Cord Benecke conducted an experiment with criers and non-criers, he found non-crying people have a tendency to withdraw and experience more aggressive feelings, such as rage, anger and disgust.

I don't think I'll ever agree with my mum that crying is pointless. But I might not have to. Just before I finish this piece, I ring her for a chat. I tell her what I'm writing, and that she features in it. "Oh, I do sometimes cry now," she says. "You WHAT?" I reply. "Yes," she says. "I cried watching Poppy [my niece] sing a solo the other day." I'm shocked. But also quite excited. Maybe, for once, I'll be the one to hand my mum a hanky.

NET BENEFITS THE INTERNET PUTS UNPRECEDENTED STRAIN ON OUR MENTAL HEALTH, BUT IT CAN ALSO HELP

MINDSPOT is a free, government-funded online service. Once you've taken an assessment on the website, it offers you access to a therapist, plus tailored online courses based on cognitive behavioural therapy. It's suggested you commit four hours a week to each eight-week course. Check out mindspot.org.au.

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The INSIGHT TIMER app offers thousands of free guided meditations on various topics, as well as bedtime stories and meditation music tracks, plus paid courses.

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SMILING MIND is a free mindfulness app from an Aussie not-for-profit that provides meditations and explainers on topics including sleep and relationships.

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"I use the MOODFLOW app, which tracks your moods using different colour palettes," says Stark. "For those of us who are anxious, our brains lie to us and say we've been depressed forever. But this app shows you that maybe you haven't had a bad day in two weeks."

GET INFECTED

"There's a phenomenon called contagious joy – you don't have to do anything, you just catch the joy from someone else," says Waters. "Watch little kids playing or a dog chasing its tail, or that funny YouTube clip your friend sent you – it boosts your serotonin and your dopamine and gives you a few minutes out. When you come back, you feel elevated and energised."

FIGHT FOR A CAUSE

Helping to fix the issues that are stressing you out benefits society and your mental health. Worried about climate change? Get involved with Extinction Rebellion or the Wilderness Society. Turning up to a march or stuffing envelopes may not seem significant, but doing your bit can provide purpose and boost both body and mind.

QUESTION YOURSELF

"I question my thoughts by visualising them as clouds, seeing them pass by and realising they have no power," says Holm. "Anxious thoughts are not reality."

BE GENEROUS

"Giving to others brings us joy," says Waters. "What's beautiful is we get two for the price of one – we get the feeling of joy because we've done something nice for another person, and they get joy too because they've had an act of kindness."

OPEN UP

"Nowadays I'm pretty good at opening up to others," says Holm. "When I don't feel I have to hide my anxiety, it makes it easier to manage."

For more support, contact Lifeline on 13 11 14 or Beyond Blue on 1300 22 4636 E

CRYING SHAME WE DIG INTO THE SCIENCE AND EMOTION BEHIND A GOOD CRY

BY PANDORA SYKES

4,680

That's how many times women cry in their adult lifetime.