

# Nothing worked for my depression — until I tried meditation

by Keri Wiginton



February 26

I've been on the wrong side of happy since I was 4, when my parents split. I don't remember a sense of devastation, but I doubt this was a coincidence. An adverse childhood event such as divorce increases the risk of depression, especially when coupled with my father's history of mental illness.

Genes play a role in mood disorders, but they don't write your destiny — the same way having a [family history of alcoholism doesn't mean you'll become an alcoholic](#). I had been moderately depressed my whole life. I seized control of it when I stopped blaming my history and focused on my brain. Specifically, the negative thought loops that were keeping me down.

Research shows that factors such as unfulfilling work and increasing isolation affect our mood, but the idea of making grand life changes such as quitting your job so you can toss your meds isn't a realistic option for most. And for many, such as me, that might not even do the trick.

I loved my first job. I worked with inspiring colleagues on meaningful projects, but the pressure of proving myself left me with butterflies in my stomach for a year. Anxiety worsened my depression, triggering a panic attack that left me gasping for air and feeling as though the world were disintegrating around me. A calming nurse and a prescription for Xanax may have saved my life.

## The beginning of my depression

It's hard to pinpoint when my depression started. I know my habit of ruminating — [a risk factor for depression](#) — started before I could tie my shoes. I worried about everything from the decimation of the rain forest to my family's safety. If I let my guard down, I was sure disaster would strike.

But my first diagnosis didn't come until my final year of high school. After more than six months of spontaneous crying spells, bouts of paranoia and a diagnosis of irritable bowel syndrome, I told my mom I needed help. My father never got a handle on his mood, so I knew the warning signs. A psychiatrist diagnosed me with clinical depression at 17 and suggested Prozac, but I was hesitant to try it.

I managed without medication in college. My spells of gloom only lasted a few days at a time, but that changed soon enough. Anxiety plagued me once I started my career as a newspaper photojournalist. My depression settled in like a virus that wouldn't go away. I held out hope that I would spontaneously wake up energized. But day after day, I didn't heal. I still did all the things normal people did. I even got to do them while falling in love and pursuing my passion. But it felt as though I were trudging through every day with lead-filled boots and a rock on my chest. Knowing the world shouldn't feel so heavy made me feel even worse.

When I got married at 29, I could no longer hide how depressed I was. My understanding husband urged me to seek outside help. It's not normal to want to lie in bed all the time, he accurately pointed out.

## How I healed

My despair was not the result of an underlying condition — such as a thyroid disorder or hormone imbalance — my doctor told me. Efforts at positive lifestyle changes didn't make much of a difference. No amount of exercising or socializing made getting out of bed easier. Talk therapy was a bust, too — psychoanalysis never eased my symptoms. Somewhere along the way, I didn't develop the right coping skills.

*[I tried mindfulness to quit drinking. It actually worked.]*

These futile attempts to lift my depression led me to medication. I tried a selective-serotonin reuptake inhibitor for anxiety, but it didn't help with my depression. I did find a pill that eased my depressive episodes — a serotonin-norepinephrine reuptake inhibitor, but it failed to relieve my anxiety. And accompanying this new drug were side effects such as weight gain and constipation that I couldn't tolerate for a lifetime.

While medication is successful for some and studies show that it can be [most effective for treating those with severe depression](#), unfortunately, anti-depressants often provide inadequate relief for those with moderate depression, such as me.

I decided to try meditation when pharmaceuticals let me down. A growing body of research supported the [use of mindfulness techniques for preventing a depression relapse](#), and a friend of mine who battled anxiety had found relief through the practice.

I downloaded the [Headspace](#) app on my phone and set aside time to try it out. My mind felt jumbled for the first few 10-minute sessions with Andy Puddicombe, the former Buddhist monk who guides listeners step by step through meditation.

But after about a week, I noticed a shift in my thinking. In the session, Puddicombe told me not to stop my negative thoughts, but to pause and notice them, then return my focus to my breathing. This helped me distance myself from the ideas running around in my head.

I stuck with it every day. A month later, my attention felt more solid. I could see my thoughts more clearly. I was struck by how often I was caught up in a negative thought loop: Was I doing well at work? Did I get new wrinkles? Is the economy going to crash? The more I observed this habit, the more I interrupted it before it spiraled out of control. I could see the worry, and I

could let it go without dwelling on it.

Soon, I realized I wasn't having these thought loops at all. I was taking back control of my mind, and by extension, my mood.

This breakthrough was huge. I had been clinically depressed for more than 15 years. I thought this disorder would last forever. No one had ever suggested that I could change these thought patterns that made me worried and anxious.

Meditation “kind of shows us how to step back from that thinking and that feeling and to actually witness it,” said Puddicombe, co-founder of Headspace. “As you dig into that, then even the feeling or the sensation of anxiety starts to break down a little bit and not feel so stark or so permanent.”

Rumination is when the brain gets caught up in negative thoughts as it tries to problem-solve and make unpleasant feelings go away, said Judson Brewer, director of research at the Center for Mindfulness at the University of Massachusetts Medical School. This process can be hard to let go of if you've been trapped in such thinking for a long time, even if you don't want to do it anymore.

“The familiarity of feeling anxious is comfortable *because* it's familiar,” said Brewer, a psychiatrist and the creator of the [Unwinding Anxiety](#) app. “Our brains really don't like things that are different, and so they can get anxious that they're not anxious.”

Research shows that depressed people might stay that way [because it's part of their sense of self](#). Lifting my down mood was hard because it had been a part of my identity for so long. It was unpleasant, but it was what I was used to.

Before I became actively mindful, my worrying could go on for hours or days before a rapidly beating heart alerted me to my concerns. Anxiety led to depressive spells, which led to nightmares. When I became more aware, I consciously halted my thoughts and returned my focus to the moment, stopping my roller coaster of reactions and improving my sleep at the same time.

I tapered off my antidepressant — with my doctor's help — after six months of training my mind. Meditating every day is harder than taking a pill, but I find it more effective, there are no negative side effects, and I don't get withdrawal symptoms if I forget a session.

Increasing awareness with an app might seem counterintuitive, but using my smartphone responsibly — and having a psychiatrist and trained Buddhist monk at my fingertips — helps me tend to my mental health daily. So far, it's working.

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