A conversation, about a year ago

I WAS STRESSED out.

I was walking around in circles, trying to win an argument on the internet. And Andrea was looking at me. Or I *think* Andrea was looking at me. It was hard to tell, as I was looking at my phone.

'Matt? Matt?'

'Uh. Yeah?'

'What's up?' she asked, in the kind of despairing voice that develops with marriage. Or marriage to me.

'Nothing.'

'You haven't looked up from your phone in over an hour. You're just walking around, banging into furniture.'

My heart was racing. There was a tightness in my chest. Fight or flight. I felt cornered and threatened by someone on the internet who lived over 8,000 miles away from me and who I would never meet, but who was still managing to ruin my weekend. 'I'm just getting back to something.'

'Matt, get off there.'

'I just—'

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The thing with mental turmoil is that so many things that make you feel better in the short term make you feel worse in the long term. You distract yourself, when what you really need is to *know* yourself.

'Matt!'

An hour later, in the car, Andrea glanced at me in the passenger seat. I wasn't on my phone, but I had a tight hold of it, for security, like a nun clutching her rosary.

'Matt, are you okay?'

'Yeah. Why?'

'You look lost. You look like you used to look, when . . .'

She stopped herself saying 'when you had depression' but I knew what she meant. And besides, I could feel anxiety and depression around me. Not actually *there* but close. The memory of it something I could almost touch in the stifling air of the car.

'I'm fine,' I lied. 'I'm fine, I'm fine . . .'

Within a week I was lying on my sofa, falling into my eleventh bout of anxiety.

A life edit

I WAS SCARED. I couldn't not be. Being scared is what anxiety is all about.

The bouts were becoming closer and closer. I was worried where I was heading. It seemed there was no upper limit to despair.

I tried to distract myself out of it. However, I knew from past experience alcohol was off limits. So I did the things that had helped before to climb out of a hole. The things I forget to do in day-to-day life. I was careful about what I ate. I did yoga. I tried to meditate. I lay on the floor and placed my hand on my stomach and inhaled deeply – in, out, in, out – and noticed the stuttery rhythm of my breath.

But everything was difficult. Even choosing what to wear in the morning could make me cry. It didn't matter that I had felt like this before. A sore throat doesn't become less sore simply because you've felt it before.

I tried to read, but found it hard to concentrate.

I listened to podcasts.

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I watched new Netflix shows.

I went on social media.

I tried to get on top of my work by replying to all my emails.

I woke up and clasped my phone, and prayed that whatever I could find there could take me out of myself.

But – spoiler alert – it didn't work.

I began to feel worse. And many of the 'distractions' were doing nothing but driving me further to distraction. In T.S. Eliot's phrase from his *Four Quartets*, I was 'distracted from distraction by distraction'.

I would stare at an unanswered email, with a feeling of dread, and not be able to answer it. Then, on Twitter, my go-to digital distraction of choice, I noticed my anxiety intensify. Even just passively scrolling my timeline felt like an exposure of a wound.

I read news websites – another distraction – and my mind couldn't take it. The knowledge of so much suffering in the world didn't help put my pain in perspective. It just made me feel powerless. And pathetic that my invisible woes were so paralysing when there were so many *visible* woes in the world. My despair intensified.

So I decided to do something.

I disconnected.

I chose not to look at social media for a few days. I put an auto-response on my emails, too. I stopped watching or reading the news. I didn't watch TV. I didn't watch any music videos. Even magazines I avoided. (During my initial breakdown, years before, the bright imagery of magazines always used to linger and clog my mind with feverish racing images as I tried to sleep.)

I left my phone downstairs when I went to bed. I tried to get outside more. My bedside table was cluttered with a chaos of wires and technology and books I wasn't really reading. So I tidied up and took them away, too.

In the house, I tried to lie in darkness as much as possible, the way you might deal with a migraine. I had always, since I was first suicidally ill in my twenties, understood that getting better involved a kind of life edit.

A *taking away*.

As the minimalism advocate Fumio Sasaki puts it: 'there's a happiness in having less'. In the early days of my first experience of panic the only things I had taken away were booze and cigarettes and strong coffees. Now, though, years later, I realised that a more general overload was the problem.

A life overload.

And certainly a technology overload. The only real

technology I interacted with during this present recovery – aside from the car and the cooker – were yoga videos on YouTube, which I watched with the brightness turned low.

The anxiety didn't miraculously disappear. Of course not.

Unlike my smartphone, there is no 'slide to power off' function for anxiety.

But I stopped *feeling worse*. I plateaued. And after a few days, things began to calm.

The familiar path of recovery arrived sooner rather than later. And abstaining from stimulants – not just alcohol and caffeine, but these other things – was part of the process.

I began, in short, to feel free again.

How this book came about

MOST PEOPLE KNOW the modern world can have physical effects. That, despite advances, aspects of modern life are dangerous for our bodies. Car accidents, smoking, air pollution, a sofa-dwelling lifestyle, takeaway pizza, radiation, that fourth glass of Merlot.

Even being at a laptop can pose physical dangers. Sitting down all day, getting an RSI. Once I was even told by an optician that my eye infection and blocked tear ducts were caused by staring at a screen. We blink less, apparently, when working on a computer.

So, as physical health and mental health are intertwined, couldn't the same be said about the modern world and our mental states? Couldn't aspects of how we live in the modern world be responsible for how we *feel* in the modern world?

Not just in terms of the *stuff* of modern life, but its values, too. The values that cause us to want more than we have. To worship work above play. To compare the worst bits of ourselves with the best bits of other people. To feel like we always *lack* something.

And as I grew better, by the day, I began to have an idea about a book – this book right here.

I had already written about my mental health in *Reasons to Stay Alive*. But the question now was not: *why should I stay alive?* The question this time was a broader one: *how can we live in a mad world without ourselves going mad?*

News from a nervous planet

AS I BEGAN researching I quickly found some attention-grabbing headlines for an attention-grabbing age. Of course, news is almost *designed* to stress us out. If it was designed to keep us calm it wouldn't be news. It would be yoga. Or a puppy. So there is an irony about news companies reporting on anxiety while also making us anxious.

Anyway, here are some of those headlines:

STRESS AND SOCIAL MEDIA FUEL MENTAL HEALTH CRISIS AMONG GIRLS (*The Guardian*)

CHRONIC LONELINESS IS A MODERN-DAY EPIDEMIC (*Forbes*)

FACEBOOK 'MAY MAKE YOU MISERABLE', SAYS FACEBOOK (*Sky News*)

'STEEP RISE' IN SELF-HARM AMONG TEENAGERS (BBC)

WORKPLACE STRESS AFFECTS 73 PER CENT OF EMPLOYEES (*The Australian)*

STARK RISE IN EATING DISORDERS BLAMED ON OVER-EXPOSURE TO CELEBRITIES' BODIES (*The Guardian*)

SUICIDE ON CAMPUS AND THE PRESSURE OF PERFECTION (*The New York Times*)

WORKPLACE STRESS RISING SHARPLY (*Radio New Zealand)*

WILL ROBOTS TAKE OUR CHILDREN'S JOBS? (*The New York Times*)

STRESS, HOSTILITY RISING IN AMERICAN HIGH SCHOOLS IN TRUMP ERA (*The Washington Post*)

CHILDREN IN HONG KONG ARE RAISED TO EXCEL, NOT TO BE HAPPY (*South China Morning Post*)

HIGH ANXIETY: MORE AND MORE PEOPLE ARE TODAY TURNING TO DRUGS TO DEAL WITH STRESS (*El País*)

ARMY OF THERAPISTS TO BE SENT INTO SCHOOLS TO TACKLE ANXIETY EPIDEMIC (*The Telegraph*)

IS THE INTERNET GIVING US ALL ADHD? (*The Washington Post*)

'OUR MINDS CAN BE HIJACKED': THE TECH INSIDERS WHO FEAR A SMARTPHONE DYSTOPIA (*The Guardian*)

TEENAGERS ARE GROWING MORE ANXIOUS AND DEPRESSED *(The Economist)*

INSTAGRAM WORST SOCIAL MEDIA APP FOR YOUNG PEOPLE'S MENTAL HEALTH (CNN)

WHY ARE RATES OF SUICIDE SOARING ACROSS THE PLANET? (Alternet)

As I said, it is ironic that reading the news about how things are making us anxious and depressed actually can make us anxious, and that tells us as much as the headlines themselves.

The aim in this book isn't to say that everything is a disaster and we're all screwed, because we already have Twitter for that. No. The aim isn't even to say that the modern world has uniformly worse problems than before. In some specific ways it is getting measurably better. In figures from the World Bank, the number of people worldwide living in severe economic hardship is falling radically, with over one billion people moving out of extreme poverty in the last thirty years. And think of all the millions of children's lives around the globe saved by vaccinations. As Nicholas Kristof pointed out in a 2017 *New York Times* article, 'if just about the worst thing that can happen is for

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a parent to lose a child, that's about half as likely as it was in 1990.' So for all the ongoing violence and intolerance and economic injustice prevalent in our species, there are – on the most global of scales – also reasons for pride and hope.

The problem is that each age poses a unique and complex set of challenges. And while many things have improved, not all things have. Inequalities still remain. And some new problems have arisen. People often live in fear, or feel inadequate, or even suicidal, when they have – materially – more than ever.

And I am keenly aware that the oft-used approach of pointing out a list of advantages of modern life, such as health and education and average income, does not help. It is like a wagging finger telling a depressed person to count her blessings because no one has died. This book seeks to recognise that what we feel is just as important as what we have. That mental wellbeing counts as much as physical wellbeing – indeed, that it is part of physical wellbeing. And that, on these terms, something is going wrong.

If the modern world is making us feel bad, then it doesn't matter what else we have going for us, because feeling bad sucks. And feeling bad when we are told there is no reason to, well, that sucks even more.

I want this book to put these stressed-out headlines in context, and to look at how to protect ourselves in a world of potential panic. Because, whatever else we have going for ourselves, our minds are still vulnerable. Many mental health problems are quantifiably rising, and – if we believe our mental wellbeing is important – we need, quite desperately, to look at what might be behind these changes.

Mental health problems are not:

A bandwagon.
Fashionable.
A fad.
A celebrity trend.
A result of a growing awareness of mental health problems.
Always easy to talk about.
The same as they always were.

Yin to the yang

SO, IT IS a tale of two realities.

Many of us, it is true, have a lot to be grateful for in the developed world. The rise in life expectancy, the decline in infant mortality, the availability of food and shelter, the absence of major all-encompassing world wars. We have addressed many of our basic physical needs. So many of us live in relative day-to-day safety, with roofs over our heads and food on the table. But after solving some problems, are we left with others? Have some social advances brought new problems? Of course.

It sometimes feels as if we have temporarily solved the problem of scarcity and replaced it with the problem of excess.

Everywhere we look, people are seeking ways to change their lifestyles, by taking things away. Diets are the obvious example of this passion for restriction, but think also of the trend for dedicating whole months in the calendar to veganism or sobriety, and the growing desire for 'digital detoxes'. The growth in mindfulness, meditation and minimal living is a visible response to an overloaded culture. A yin to the frantic yang of 21st-century life.

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Breakdown

AS I LEFT my most recent bout of anxiety behind me, I began to waver.

Maybe this was all a stupid idea.

I began to wonder if it was a bad thing to dwell on *problems*. But then I remembered that it is precisely *not* talking about problems that is itself a problem. It's what causes people to break down in their office or classroom. It's what fills up addiction units and hospitals and raises suicide figures. And in the end I decided that, for me, knowing this stuff is essential. I want to find reasons to be positive, and ways to be happy, but first you need to know the reality of the situation.

For instance, personally I need to know why I have a fear of *slowing down*, like I am the bus in *Speed* that would explode if it dropped below 50 miles per hour. I want to work out if the speed of me relates to the speed of the world.

The reason is simple, and partly selfish. I am petrified of where my mind can go, because I know where it has

already been. And I also know that part of the reason I became ill in my twenties was to do with the way I was living. Hard drinking, bad sleeping, aspiring to be something I wasn't, and the pressures of society at large. I never want to fall back into that place, and so I need to be alert not only to where stress can take people, but also where it comes from. I want to know if one of the reasons I sometimes feel like I am on the brink of a breakdown is partly because the world sometimes seems on the brink of a breakdown.

Breakdown is an unspecific word, which might explain why medical professionals shy away from it these days, but at its root we understand what it conveys. The dictionary defines it as '1. A mechanical failure' and '2. A failure of a relationship or system'.

And it doesn't take too much looking to see the warning signs of a breakdown not just inside our selves, but in the wider world. It might sound dramatic to say the planet could be heading for a breakdown. But we do know beyond doubt that in all kinds of ways – technologically, environmentally, politically – the world is changing. And fast. So we need, more than ever, to know how to edit the world, so it can never break us down.

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Life is beautiful (but)

LIFE IS BEAUTIFUL.

Even modern life. Maybe even *especially* modern life. We are saturated with a billion kinds of transient magic. We can pick up a device and contact people a whole hemisphere away. We can, when choosing a holiday, look at the reviews of people who stayed in our desired hotel last week. We can look at satellite images of every road in Timbuktu. When we are ill, we can go to the doctor and get antibiotics for illnesses that could once have killed us. We can go to a supermarket and buy dragon fruit from Vietnam and wine from Chile. If a politician says or does something we disagree with, it has never been easier to voice that disagreement. We can access more information, more films, more books, more *everything*, than ever before.

When, back in the 1990s, Microsoft's slogan asked, 'Where do you want to go today?' it was a rhetorical question. In the digital age, the answer is *everywhere*. Anxiety, to quote the philosopher Søren Kierkegaard, may be the

'dizziness of freedom', but all this freedom of choice really is a miracle.

But while choice is infinite, our lives have time spans. We can't live every life. We can't watch every film or read every book or visit every single place on this sweet earth. Rather than being blocked by it, we need to edit the choice in front of us. We need to find out what is good for us, and leave the rest. We don't need another world. Everything we need is here, if we give up thinking we need everything.

Invisible sharks

ONE FRUSTRATION WITH anxiety is that it is often hard to find a reason behind it. There may be no visible threat and yet you can feel utterly terrified. It's all intense suspense, no action. It's like *Jaws* without the shark.

But often there are sharks. Metaphorical, invisible sharks. Because even when we sometimes feel we are worried for no reason, the reasons are there.

'You're gonna need a bigger boat,' said Chief Brody, in *Jaws* itself.

And maybe that's the problem for us, too. Not the metaphorical sharks but our metaphorical boats. Maybe we would cope with the world better if we knew where those sharks were, and what we need to navigate the waters of life unscathed.

Crash

I SOMETIMES FEEL like my head is a computer with too many windows open. Too much clutter on the desktop. There is a metaphorical spinning rainbow wheel inside me. Disabling me. And if only I could find a way to switch off some of the frames, if only I could drag some of the clutter into the trash, then I would be fine. But which frame would I choose, when they all seem so essential? How can I stop my mind being overloaded when the world is overloaded? We can think about *anything*. And so it makes sense that we end up sometimes thinking about *everything*. We might have to, sometimes, be brave enough to switch the screens off in order to switch ourselves back on. To disconnect in order to reconnect.

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Things that are faster than they used to be

Mail.
Cars.
Olympic sprinters.
News.
Processing power.
Photographs.
Scenes in movies.
Financial transactions.
Journeys.
World population growth.
The deforestation of the Amazon rainforest.
Navigation.
Technological progress.
Relationships.
Political events.
The thoughts in your head.

24/7 catastrophe

WORRY IS A small, sweet word that sounds like you could keep an eye on it. Yet worry about the future – the next ten minutes, the next ten years – is the chief obstacle I have to being able to live in and appreciate the present moment.

I am a catastrophiser. I don't simply *worry*. No. My worry has real ambition. My worry is limitless. My anxiety – even when I don't have capital-A *Anxiety* – is big enough to go anywhere. I have always found it easy to think of the worst-case scenario and dwell on it.

And I've been like this for as long as I can remember. I have gone to the doctor many times, convinced of my imminent demise because of an illness I've googled myself into having. As a child, if my mum was late picking me up from primary school it would only take about a minute for me to convince myself she had probably died in a hideous car accident. That never happened, but it's continual not-happening-ness never stopped the possibility that it *could* happen. Every moment my mother wasn't there was a moment in which she might *never* be there again.

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The ability to imagine catastrophe in horrific detail, to picture the mangled metal and the spray of white-blue glass glittering on the road, occupied my mind far more than the rational idea that such a catastrophe was unlikely. If Andrea doesn't pick up her phone I can't help but think a likely scenario is that she has fallen down the stairs or maybe even spontaneously combusted. I worry that I upset people without meaning to. I worry that I don't check my privilege enough. I worry about people being in prison for crimes they didn't do. I worry about human rights abuses. I worry about prejudice and politics and pollution and the world my children and their entire generation are inheriting from us. I worry about all the species going extinct because of humans. I worry about my carbon footprint. I worry about all the pain in the world that I am not actively able to stop. I worry about how much I'm wrapped up in myself, which makes me even more wrapped up in myself.

Years before I ever had actual sex I found it easy to imagine I had AIDS, so powerful were the British Government's terrifying public awareness TV slots in the 1980s. If I eat food that tastes a little funny, I immediately imagine I will be hospitalised from food poisoning, even though I have only had food poisoning once in my life.

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I can't be at an airport and not feel – and therefore *act* – suspicious.

Every new lump or ulcer or mole is a potential cancer. Every memory lapse is early-onset Alzheimer's. On and on and on. And all this is when I am feeling relatively okay. When I'm ill the catastrophising goes into overdrive.

In fact, now I think about it, that is the chief characteristic of anxiety for me. The continual imagining of how *things could get so much worse*. And it is only recently that I have been understanding how much the world feeds into this. How our mental states – whether we are actually ill or just *stressed out* – are to a degree products of social states. *And vice versa*. I want to understand what it is about this nervous planet that *gets in*.

There is a world of difference between feeling a bit stressed and being properly ill, but as with, say, hunger and starvation, the two are related in that what is bad for one (lack of food) is also bad for the other. And so, when I am well – but stressed – the things that make me feel a little bit worse are often the things that make me feel *much* worse when I am ill. What you learn when you are ill, about what hurts, can then be applied to the better times, too. Pain is one hell of a teacher.