

ANGIE READ

Mental Health Hacks

*10 Easy Hacks to Help to Manage Anxiety and
Depression*

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I

Part One

Welcome

Thank you for purchasing this book. Before we start, it's important to point out that I am not a mental health or healthcare professional, and only a licensed mental health professional can diagnose and treat a mental health condition.

But I believe you're reading this book because you know something isn't quite right with you or a loved one's mental health. If you're looking for simple, practical advice from someone who's been in your shoes, this book should be a great place to start. And I toss in some research here and there to prove my advice is sound.

What I share here is based on what I've learned in my personal 20+ year mental health journey. After years of talk therapy with different licensed counselors at various times in my life, a few in-patient stints in mental health facilities, taking numerous medications throughout the years (only to finally find the right combination of meds with the help of my amazing psychiatrist) and helping my son through his severe anxiety and depression, I know a thing or two about this topic.

My advice isn't meant to replace professional intervention and help. But I also know these tips work for me and many others, and even if just one or two of them work for you and help you feel better, I will

have accomplished my goal: to help you improve *your* mental health!

During my most anxious and depressed days about five years ago, I wasn't sure I wanted to go on living and even contemplated taking my own life. After surviving a massive stroke just months before, I should have been thrilled just to be alive.

Instead, I had constantly racing thoughts about one work-related issue, and I felt like I had a giant hole in me, an emotional void (I wasn't sad or angry - I felt nothing except the pain of existing). I had zero appetite and no motivation to do anything besides stay in bed. I also had horrible insomnia - which only made my anxiety and depression worse. And the medications they put me on after my stroke gave me horrible side effects, like nausea, dry mouth, and diarrhea. Looking back, I'm almost surprised I survived that dark period. Nothing in my life made sense anymore. I JUST. COULDN'T. FUNCTION! So, my family stepped in and found me the help I needed. I'm so grateful to them because I couldn't have found my way out alone.

Do you recognize these feelings? If so, it's important to know this:

You are not alone, and it's NOT YOUR FAULT!

“We would never tell someone with a broken leg that they should stop wallowing and get it together. We don't consider taking medication for an ear infection something to be ashamed of. We shouldn't treat mental health conditions any differently.”—

Michelle Obama.

More than one in five U.S. adults have a mental illness (57.8 million in 2021). Mental illnesses include different conditions that vary in degree

WELCOME

of severity, ranging from mild to moderate to severe. ¹

About one in four American adults suffers from a diagnosed mental disorder in a given year, and one in ten will suffer from a depressive illness, such as major depression or bipolar disorder (Johns Hopkins).

If you are having suicidal thoughts, help and hope are available.

Call or text 988 immediately. The 988 Lifeline provides 24/7 confidential support to people in suicidal crisis or mental health-related distress. By calling or texting 988, you'll connect to mental health professionals with the Lifeline network.

Who is Angie?

My name is Angie, and I'm a 52-year-old wife, mom, grandma, sister, daughter, etc. While I'm blessed in many ways, my life hasn't always been a walk in the park. I've lived through my parents' contentious divorce when I was four, my stepfather dying at home after a nasty three-year battle with cancer when I was a teenager, a rocky marriage that produced three exceptional children but ultimately resulted in divorce, another toxic romantic relationship, and finally my second marriage to a wonderful man who loves me and my kids unconditionally.

However, in our 15 years together, we've lived through things I wouldn't wish on anyone. Starting with my stepson's legal troubles (and incarcerations) from the age of 13 to my husband's alcohol addiction that nearly tore us apart. And then, after surviving all that, out of the blue, I had a massive right-side ischemic stroke when I was 46 that could have killed me. Thankfully, my husband's quick thinking and actions (calling 911 at the first signs of stroke) saved my life!

Of course, there are people who've had it worse. We all have burdens and battle scars from life. I'm probably not much different than many Gen X type-A women, except I was in my late 40s when I first experienced a *catastrophic* mental health crisis. However, I did have some warning

WHO IS ANGIE?

signs years prior. And mental health disorders run in my family, which can also be a red flag. I won't get into this topic in this book, but mental illness can run in families.

In my early 30s, when I was a young mom running around like a chicken with my head cut off trying to do and be everything for everyone, I experienced a mental health roadblock that presented itself through a physical health issue. I had two young boys at the time, I was training for my first marathon, I was the president of the local chapter of my professional association (the International Association of Business Communicators), and I was working three days a week in the PR department of a major wireless phone company. I also had horrible stomach pains that made me double over in anguish, followed by bouts of diarrhea regularly.

At the same time, I was also utterly convinced that tiny ants were eating my house, so I'd crawl around on my kitchen floor every morning, looking for new holes in our hardwoods. My husband thought I was crazy. I was tormented and couldn't be convinced that ants weren't eating through our hardwood floors.

I visited my doctor to see what was going on with my stomach. After interviewing me about everything else going on in my life, she determined I was experiencing anxiety-fueled IBS and needed to slow down. She said I should learn to say "no" to too many opportunities and better pace myself. But I didn't listen.

Two months later, when it was clear I wasn't slowing down, and my IBS and wood-eating ant obsession were worsening, she suggested trying a low-dose prescription anxiety medication, Celexa. I fought it at first, thinking I didn't need medication to help me, but I was wrong. Once

I finally agreed (I couldn't get the ants out of my head) Celexa helped ease my anxiety, and I finally stopped thinking those tiny ants were out to get me.

But that's the thing about anxiety. You can start to obsess about something that may seem absurd to others, but you can't help yourself, and it just keeps worsening until you treat the anxiety. Your mind is on a hamster wheel of racing thoughts, and you can't seem to get off. Those thoughts consume your mind and wreak havoc on your life. And your thoughts likely aren't even rooted in reality—your mind is lying to you. That's one way to think about anxiety and depression—**they are lying to you**. It's up to you how you deal with those lies and learn ways to identify and cope with them.

That was my first real experience with anxiety. And it wasn't until my mid-40s that it reared its ugly head again, only this time it was accompanied by its evil cousin: debilitating depression. If you suffer from both anxiety and depression, you know it's a special kind of hell. Your mind and body are constantly at war with each other. Depression feels like you're in a dark hole with nowhere to go, while anxiety makes you think you're losing your mind. Depression destroys your motivation to do any activity, but anxiety makes you want to do those activities constantly. It's a never-ending push and pull and debilitating to live with.

Approximately 60% of people with anxiety also have symptoms of depression and vice versa. But this book will help you brave that battle and learn easy techniques to lessen your suffering. It'll just take a *little effort* on your part. If you're depressed, I know you probably don't have the energy or desire to try something new right now. But please try. I know in my heart it can only help.

Anxiety and Depression Explained

What is anxiety?

Anxiety is a feeling of fear, dread, and uneasiness. You might feel restless and tense and have a rapid heartbeat. It can also feel like a ton of bricks sitting on your chest. Anxiety can be a normal, temporary reaction to stress, like facing a complex problem at work or making an important decision. But for people with anxiety disorders, the fear is not temporary and can be overwhelming, debilitating even. The symptoms can interfere with daily activities such as job performance, schoolwork, and relationships.²

What is depression?

Depression is more than just feeling down or having a bad day. For me, it was like having no feelings at all; I wasn't happy or sad—I didn't have any emotions, and that hurt. Physically hurt!

Symptoms of depression can include:

- Feeling sad or anxious often or all the time
- Not wanting to do activities that you used to enjoy
- Feeling irritable, frustrated, or restless
- Having trouble falling or staying asleep

- Waking up too early or sleeping too much
- Eating more or less than usual or having no appetite at all
- Experiencing physical aches and pains that don't improve with treatment
- Having trouble concentrating, remembering details, or making decisions
- Feeling guilty, worthless, or helpless
- Thinking about suicide or hurting yourself

For those of us who struggle with mental health, it's not always easy, or even possible, to pinpoint the cause. Many factors impact our mental health, including genetics, family history, childhood experiences—or living in a volatile world and witnessing violence, discrimination, and other societal issues.

While there may be nothing you can do to change any of these things, it might help if you understand what's contributing to your state of mind so you can play a more active role in caring for your mental health.³

Where can you turn?

Mental health services in the U.S. are sorely lacking, even though more than half of us (56%) seek help. Limited options and long waits for appointments are standard, which truly sucks. Also, depending on where you live and your socioeconomic status, you may have an even harder time finding adequate, affordable help. Lack of or insufficient health insurance can make paying for mental health treatment difficult. Geography may also limit your access to reliable services.

Social Stigma

Nearly one-third of Americans have worried about others judging them for seeking mental health help. Over a fifth of the population has lied to avoid telling people they were seeking mental health services.⁴

If you fall into this camp, I'm sorry you're worried about other people's thoughts. It seems the tides are changing, and more and more people are talking about mental health, reducing the stigma. And that's an excellent thing because the more we can normalize talking about mental health, the more treatments we'll uncover, and more people will recognize the signs and take better care of themselves.

Mental health providers are professionals who diagnose mental health conditions and provide treatment. Most have a master's degree or more-advanced education, training, and credentials. Be sure that the professional you choose is licensed to provide mental health services. Licensing and services depend on the provider's training, specialty area, and state law.⁵

The difference between a psychiatrist and a psychologist

The biggest difference between a psychiatrist and a psychologist is that one can prescribe medication, and the other cannot.

A **psychiatrist** is a physician, doctor of medicine (M.D.) or osteopathic medicine (D.O.) specializing in mental health. A psychiatrist can:

- Diagnose and treat mental health disorders
- Provide psychological counseling, also called psychotherapy
- Prescribe medication

A **psychologist** is trained in psychology—a science that deals with thoughts, emotions, and behaviors. Typically, a psychologist holds a doctoral degree (Ph.D., Psy.D., Ed.D.), and can:

- Diagnose and treat many mental health disorders, providing psychological counseling in one-on-one or group settings
- They cannot prescribe medication unless they are licensed to do so
- May work with another provider who can prescribe medication

That's not to say everyone needs to see a psychiatrist or psychologist to get help. Sometimes, seeing a licensed clinical social worker or professional counselor is a great place to start. These licensed counselors can:

- Provide diagnosis and counseling for a range of concerns
- Are not licensed to prescribe medication
- May work with another provider who can prescribe medication if needed

To find mental health resources, you have several options:

- Ask your health insurance company for a list of covered providers. Many insurance companies provide an online list of providers they cover.
- Get a referral or recommendation from your primary care provider.
- Ask trusted friends or family. That's how I found both my therapist and psychiatrist, who have helped me tremendously.
- See if your company's employee assistance program (EAP) or student health center offers mental health services or ask for a referral.

ANXIETY AND DEPRESSION EXPLAINED

- Contact a local or national mental health organization by phone or the Internet, such as the National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI).

New online tools continue popping up to help you explore the kind of therapy you want. They can match you with a licensed, accredited therapist who will work with you virtually, online, or via phone. Online therapy platforms, like TalkSpace and BetterHelp, can also be more convenient and affordable than in-person therapy.

Two websites for locating psychologists include the Psychologist Locator on the website of the American Psychological Association and the National Register. Your state psychological association may be another source of potential names.

10 Easy Hacks to Combat Anxiety and Depression

Nothing I share here is rocket science, nor should it replace professional medical support. But from my own experience, they are a great place to start and available to everyone.

One: Journaling

Keeping a journal is a great idea when struggling with your mental health. Writing down your thoughts, feelings, and emotions can help you gain control of your emotions and improve your mental health.

Trust me. I didn't want to try journaling when my therapist first suggested it. Even though I love to write, I don't love to write about my feelings. And I don't particularly appreciate feeling "obligated" to write in a journal. But I got tired of my "negative-Nelly" attitude and eventually decided to try it.

Once I got started, it was easier and more helpful than I expected. My career coach, Mo Faul, a wise woman in my life, says to write ten gratitudes and ten self-brags in your journal every morning. Every.

Single. Morning. To start your day on a positive note and help manifest the life you want. It took a while to come up with ten things I was grateful for and ten nice things to say about myself. It didn't just take a while, it was really hard! But it doesn't matter how small these things may seem or if you write the same things day after day. It's the process of writing and putting them out into the universe that matters.

From there, journaling about my thoughts and feelings naturally started pouring out. If you're hesitant, give it a shot. Nobody will read it - you don't even have to re-read it. That's not what journaling is about. It's about expressing your thoughts and feelings to help you gain self-awareness and manage your mental health. You can draw, doodle, write poems—just let your feelings out in the most natural form.

Journaling can also help you prioritize problems, worries, and concerns. It can help you track your symptoms, recognize triggers, and learn how to control them better. And, as I said, it's an opportunity for positive self-talk. Journaling is just one aspect of pursuing a healthy lifestyle.

Here are a few tips to help you start journaling:

1. Try to write every day. Block off a few minutes every day to journal. I like to journal first thing in the morning to start my day on a positive note. Some people prefer to do it as part of their bedtime routine to help relax and quiet the mind.
2. Keep it simple—no need to go out and buy a fancy-looking journal. Keep a pen and paper at hand throughout the day. I use several small notebooks for work and journaling, and I'll grab whatever's closest when I need to write something down. You can also keep a journal on your smartphone, but I prefer to do it the old-fashioned way.

3. Ditch the rules. Your journal doesn't need to follow a specific structure. It's your private place to discuss and create whatever you need to express your feelings. Let the words and ideas flow freely. Don't worry about grammar, mistakes, or other people's thoughts.
4. View writing time as "me" time. Use this time to destress and wind down. Write in a calm and quiet place while enjoying your morning coffee or tea or looking out the window at the birds. Find a pleasant environment so you can look forward to your journaling time.

Two: Meditation

At first, I had the preconceived notion that meditation was too "new age" for me. It sounded like a bunch of nonsense at first. But that was me being judgmental and ignorant. Once I opened my mind to the possibility that meditating could help me, I tried it and found I really loved it! There are so many great apps to help anyone who wants to try meditation, and I strongly encourage anyone struggling with their mental health to try it. What have you got to lose?

Meditation is simply the practice of focusing your mind for a while (even just a few minutes will do) to quiet the stream of jumbled thoughts that may be hijacking your mind. There are countless ways to meditate, but the desired outcome is always a feeling of relaxation and inner peace, which can improve your mental health.

One study published in the journal *Psychiatry Research* found that people with generalized anxiety disorder who participated in a

Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) program significantly reduced stress markers more than a control group.⁶

Here's more good news

Anyone can do it. It's simple and inexpensive - often free if you know what to do and where to look. And you don't need to spend money on equipment or clothing. You can practice meditation wherever you are, in whatever you're wearing—even in the middle of a business meeting. Granted, that takes some skill and practice, but it's doable.

Meditation has been practiced for thousands of years. It was initially used to help deepen understanding of the sacred and mystical forces of life. Today, meditation is typically used for relaxation and stress reduction.

Emotional and physical benefits of meditation include:

- Building skills to manage your stress
- Increasing self-awareness
- Focusing on the present
- Reducing negative emotions
- Increasing imagination and creativity
- Increasing patience and tolerance
- Lowering resting heart rate
- Lowering resting blood pressure
- Improving sleep quality (which is another important tip for managing your mental health).

Get started with guided meditation

Not sure where to start? Don't worry. You don't have to go it alone. Many meditation apps offer excellent, bite-sized guided meditations, encouraging you to use your senses—like smells, sounds, tastes, and textures. I've tried both the Calm and Headspace apps and found both very helpful. Most apps charge a small monthly or annual fee. If you're not ready to make a small investment, most also let you try them free for a short time. In addition, you can find lots of free guided meditations on YouTube. I stumbled across the Great Meditation channel on YouTube and have yet to find a 5, 10, or 20-minute meditation I didn't love.

Three: Exercise/Movement

Don't pretend like you don't know exercise is good for you. But knowing and *doing* are two separate things. Exercise (or movement) is essential for our physical health as well as our mental health. Because movement can boost your mood, improve your sleep, and help you manage depression and anxiety. Research shows that people who exercise regularly have better mental and emotional well-being. Exercise also helps treat some mental health conditions, like depression and anxiety.

In fact, for mild-moderate depression, research suggests physical activity can be as effective as antidepressants or psychological treatments like certain types of therapy.⁷ Exercise can also be a valuable addition to other treatment options. But again, I'm not a medical professional, and this does not supersede your doctor's advice. Never stop taking your medications unless told to do so by your doctor. And before starting any new exercise routine, please consult your doctor.

Need more proof that exercise should be part of your mental health recovery or maintenance? A recent study by the Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health found that running for 15 minutes a day or walking for an hour reduces the risk of major depression by 26%. In addition to relieving depression symptoms, research shows that maintaining an exercise schedule can prevent you from relapsing.⁸

If exercise is not already a part of your daily routine, I urge you to add it for an almost guaranteed mental/emotional boost. Let me share a piece of advice my psychiatrist gave me. When he wrote his first prescription for my new psych meds after my dual diagnosis of generalized anxiety disorder and major depressive disorder, he said, “Not only am I prescribing medication, I’m also prescribing 30 minutes of exercise daily. So, when you take your pills in the morning, I also need you to commit to 30 minutes of exercise that day. Even if it’s just a casual walk, any movement will do, preferably something you enjoy, so you want to keep at it.”

There were days I wanted to strangle him for making me do this. The first few weeks were a massive undertaking! I was so depressed that simply getting to the treadmill only eight feet away from my bed was arduous. I started with just ten minutes of very slow walking at first. That was all I could muster, even though I’ve been exercising regularly since I was a teen. I’d even run four full marathons in my 30s. But nothing was as hard as forcing me to get in those ten minutes of walking. Some days I cursed my doctor’s existence for this “punishment.” But he was so right, and eventually, I increased my treadmill time to 15 minutes a day, then 20, and so on. Fast forward to today, and I’m training for my first 5K run in nearly eight years!

How exercise can change your brain

No matter how hard it is to get motivated, do it anyway. Make it a nonnegotiable, mandatory part of your day, like taking medication. If you need to curse my name for making you do this, I'm ok with that. But I think you'll eventually thank me, like I still thank my psychiatrist, Dr. Erick Brown, for making me do the same.

The best news is any exercise or movement is better than none. Activities like stretching and yoga can also improve your mind and body. Even doing light housework like folding laundry or vacuuming can get you moving. And bonus, you'll get some chores done. Because when you're depressed, letting daily tasks slide is common. It's just too darn hard to find the motivation!

Four: Get outside – Breath fresh air and get grounded

When I was a kid, I loved playing outside. Like many kids, I lived for recess during the school day, and during the summer, we spent entire days outside, sometimes only coming home for meals or bedtime. (Clearly, I'm showing my age as a bonafide Gen Xer. It's a miracle any of us survived without constant parental supervision).

Throughout history, we humans spent most of our time outside: working, farming, and living off the land. Our bodies are wired to be connected to Mother Earth. We feel better when we go hiking, to the beach, or hang out in our backyard for a while, but why? Sunlight, fresh air—and even the mood-boosting aromas from grass, flowers, and trees—nourish our bodies, minds, and souls.

Spending time outdoors can have many positive effects, including:

- improving your mood
- reducing stress and anger
- helping you feel more relaxed
- improving your physical health
- boosting your confidence and self-esteem
- Inspiring you to be more active
- connecting you to your local community
- reducing loneliness⁹

Being outside in natural light can also be helpful if you experience seasonal affective disorder (SAD), a type of depression that affects people during certain seasons or times of year - especially winter when it's darker outside for longer and temperatures get colder.

Something else that's surprisingly helpful: touching the earth directly or touching anything touching the ground with your bare skin, like walking barefoot on the grass, touching flowers in a garden, or even hugging a tree while out on your daily walk. Sound ridiculous? You should give it a try and see for yourself. Don't worry about looking silly. Everyone is so caught up in their own business they likely won't even notice the tree-hugger.

And while it may sound a little "out there," this isn't some new-age nonsense. The earth has a negative charge and is full of free electrons flowing directly into your body when an electrical path opens up. These free electrons can also quench free radicals, preventing cellular damage and sparing the body's critical antioxidant reserves so they can serve other functions.¹⁰

Once you begin to experience the benefits of earthing, you may want to walk barefoot in your yard more often. I know I do! I'm not outdoorsy these days, but I enjoy a barefoot walk in my yard. Even just standing still, barefoot in the grass, feels great. Go ahead, give it a try. It's also fun and makes you feel like a kid again.

Five: Listen to uplifting music

“Music gives a soul to the universe, wings to the mind, flight to the imagination, and life to everything.” — Plato.

Research shows music can positively affect brain chemicals such as dopamine, which is linked to feelings of pleasure, and oxytocin, the so-called “love hormone.” And there is evidence that music can help lower stress hormone cortisol levels.¹¹

Also, research indicates music can lessen the impact of depression and anxiety. A study done in 2019 found that college students who listened to classical music every day for two months significantly lowered their anxiety levels.¹²

Suppose you want music to help uplift you. In that case, Dr. Bethany Cook, PsyD, a psychologist and music therapist in Chicago, recommends picking songs with a storyline different from your challenges. She says this can temporarily transport you elsewhere and give you a short break from your concerns, just like reading a good book.

Part of my daily routine is to listen to upbeat music while I'm getting ready in the morning. It raises my frequency and makes me feel good!

I love a good Prince song in the morning! My favorite is “Raspberry Beret.”

Six: Eat nutritious food

From a young age, we’re taught that eating well makes us grow up strong and healthy. But we probably weren’t told that good nutrition also affects our mental health. A healthy, well-balanced diet can help us think clearly and be more alert. It can also improve concentration and attention span.

On the other hand, a bad diet can lead to fatigue, impaired decision-making, and delayed reaction time. In fact, a poor diet can aggravate and may even lead to stress and depression.¹³

Our reliance on processed foods is killing our health as a society. Processed foods are high in flour and sugar and train the brain to crave more of them, rather than nutrient-rich foods such as fruits and vegetables. Ever notice that you don’t binge-eat carrots, apples, or broccoli?

Many processed foods we eat are highly addictive and stimulate the dopamine centers in our brain, which are associated with pleasure and reward. To stop craving unhealthy foods, you’ve got to stop eating those foods. You can start to change the physiology in the brain when you remove added sugars and refined carbohydrates from your diet.

Also, sugar and processed foods can contribute to mood disorders, including anxiety and depression. Do you find yourself reaching for a

bag of chips, or an ice cream pint and spoon when you're stressed or depressed? Eating too much or too little during periods of stress and depression only makes matters worse.

To improve your mental health, focus on eating more fruits and vegetables and foods rich in omega-3 fatty acids. Dark green leafy vegetables are brain protective. Nuts, seeds, and legumes like beans and lentils are also excellent brain foods.

Mindful Eating

It's also important to pay attention to how you feel when you eat and what you eat. This is called mindful eating and is one of the best first steps to ensure you get well-balanced meals and snacks. Since it's so easy to sit on the couch and mindlessly gorge on whatever we can find in the pantry, nutritionists recommend keeping a food journal. Documenting what, where, and when you eat is a great way to gain insight into your patterns.

Healthy Eating Tips

- Avoid processed snack foods, such as potato chips, which can weaken your ability to concentrate. Cut out sugar-filled snacks, such as candy and soft drinks, which lead to fluctuations in energy levels.
- To support your brain function, consume plenty of healthy fats, such as olive oil, coconut oil, and avocado.
- Have a healthy snack when hunger strikes, such as fruit, nuts, hard-boiled eggs, baked sweet potatoes, or edamame. This will give you more energy than packaged products.

- Create a healthy shopping list and stick to it. Some people only shop the perimeter of the grocery store, where you'll find whole, healthy foods and less processed, boxed, or canned food.
- Think about where and when you eat. Don't eat in front of the television, which can be distracting and cause you to overeat. Instead, find a place to sit, relax, and notice what you eat. Chew slowly. Savor the taste and texture.

Seven: Get better sleep

Sleep is closely related to mental health. There's even some truth to the saying that someone "woke up on the wrong side of the bed." Sleep has links to depression, anxiety, and other mental health conditions. Nearly 75% of depressed people show insomnia symptoms, and many people with depression also suffer from excessive daytime sleepiness and hypersomnia, which is sleeping too much.¹⁴

No one knows this better than me. At the low of my darkest days, I literally COULD. NOT. SLEEP, regardless of how much I wanted to or how bone tired I was. I had horrible insomnia that kept me awake most of the night. No wonder sleep deprivation is a legitimate form of human torture. Trying to go to work and function the next day was nearly impossible. To say it was horrendous to live through, night after night, would be an understatement. And it fueled my anxiety and depression to the point of requiring in-patient mental healthcare help. Getting my sleep under control was a critical first step in my recovery. For me, that required a prescription sleep medication.

Thankfully, most people won't experience this level of sleep deprivation. However, one-third of us aren't getting enough sleep regularly. In the short term, this can make it hard to focus, think, and perform everyday tasks. Chronic lack of sleep can lead to feelings of depression and anxiety. When you don't get the rest you need, much can go wrong and put undue stress on your body.

How to improve your sleep

There are some simple things you can do to improve your sleep habits. These include but aren't limited to:

- Having a consistent bedtime and maintaining a steady sleep schedule
- Winding down with relaxation techniques as part of your bedtime routine (i.e., meditating or journaling)
- Avoiding alcohol, tobacco, caffeine, and other stimulants in the late afternoon and evening
- Putting away electronic devices an hour or more before getting into bed
- Dimming the lights in your bedroom
- Aromatherapy—use a quality lavender essential oil in a diffuser by your bed
- Getting regular exercise (another great benefit)
- Making sure you have a good mattress, pillow, and bedding for maximum comfort
- Blocking out sounds, like turning off the television or background noise.

Try not to get discouraged if finding your best sleep routine and remedies takes trial and error. And if necessary, talk to your doctor

about possible medical causes (like sleep apnea) and appropriate interventions.

Eight: Keep your hands busy

Have you ever noticed when you're drawing, doodling, folding laundry, or doing the dishes, your mind quiets, and your body calms down? It's not just your imagination. Keeping your hands busy is a proven technique to help slow the hamster wheel in your head and produce greater relaxation.

It doesn't matter how you keep your hands busy as long as you do it. Perhaps you're cooking, gardening, doing a puzzle, or crafting. It's all in the hand-brain connection – which helps your mind pause and become more centered.

My therapist recommended I take up a new hobby, like crocheting or knitting. I tried, but it just wasn't for me. After my stroke, my hand-eye coordination wasn't working so well. My first attempt at a crocheted scarf turned into a weird little triangle, so I gave up with a giggle. But one way I do enjoy keeping my hands busy is to play with makeup. When applying my makeup in the morning, I zone out and forget my worries. The same is true with writing. I can write for hours and hours and not even realize huge chunks of time have passed.

No matter how busy you are, carving out time to work with your hands is essential. Find something you love to do that requires using your hands even if it's only for five or 10 minutes a day in the beginning. Try to combine the joy of working on a favorite project with keeping your

hands busy, and you'll likely notice you're calmer and more relaxed.

Nine: Get into a routine

The anxious mind needs a routine. Daily routines support better health. Routines help us cope with change, create healthy habits, and improve our relationships. Setting aside time daily to take care of tasks can also help us focus on our mental and physical health.¹⁵

At the start of the pandemic, I panicked. Yes, because of the potential of contracting Covid and possibly dying—and because of the worldwide devastation it was bringing. But on a much less catastrophic level, I was worried about disrupting my daily routine. I've come to understand how important it is for me to keep my routine to protect my mental health.

Without my daily routine, I worried about how my mental health would fare. About a month into the pandemic, when my coworkers and I began working from home full-time, I started my “fake commute.” Rather than just rolling out of bed and into my desk chair, opening my laptop, and jumping right into my workday, instead, I showered, changed, fixed my hair and makeup, and got in my car to drive halfway downtown, turn around, and come right back home. For me, restoring this piece of my former routine helped me balance my mental health during a difficult transition period. And when I told my psychiatrist what I was doing, he said it was brilliant and started suggesting the “fake commute” to his other patients.

Listen, if you're depressed, I know that just getting out of bed can feel impossible some days. But having and sticking to a daily routine can help. Getting up in the morning and going to bed at the same time daily will help you develop a routine. Do so even on the weekends. This will also help you develop better sleep patterns.

Creating daily or weekly routines allows our bodies and minds to adjust and know what to expect throughout the day, which is essential for the anxious brain. Also, creating predictable scenarios helps alleviate anxiety over the dreaded unknown. Journaling at the same time every day can also help you start a routine of mental restoration and wellness. Are you beginning to see how everything I've discussed so far overlaps?

Here's the deal, you don't have to schedule out every minute or hour of your day. But creating and maintaining a routine that makes time for many of the things I've outlined in this book will help you live a healthier lifestyle. And while you're establishing your routine, try to ensure it includes ways to treat yourself and wind down.

Take it slow and give yourself grace. If your mental health issues make it impossible to follow your routine, it could be time to seek professional help.

Ten: Talk it out

When you're going through a tough time, talking about it with someone you trust can help you better understand and manage your feelings, which can aid in improving your mental health. Talking to someone can help you feel less alone, help lighten the load of your concerns, and

help you look at your circumstances differently, making them easier to handle.

I don't advise talking to someone who doesn't have the knowledge, training, or background to empathize with or understand your situation. Anyone who hasn't experienced anxiety or depression— either directly or indirectly— will find it difficult to rationalize and understand what you're feeling. It's not their fault - they don't know what they don't know. And they don't realize that depression and anxiety fall outside of rational thinking.

Talk therapy is a safe place to discuss feelings and emotions. Therapists are qualified to apply scientifically validated procedures to improve their clients' mental health and well-being, according to the American Psychological Association (APA).¹⁶

Talk therapy can significantly affect how patients feel and change their outlook. In a therapy session, a counselor may help you do the following:

- gain a better understanding of your emotions
- identify roadblocks and obstacles to optimal mental health
- overcome anxiety and insecurities
- cope with stress
- process previous traumatic experiences
- work on breaking unhealthy habits
- discuss possible lifestyle changes
- pinpoint triggers

Whether you pursue talk therapy is up to you and your situation. Low-

cost or free mental health services are available in most communities if you can't afford treatment.

The most comprehensive directory of mental health and addiction services available in the United States is provided by the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA). This treatment-services locator can find all the mental health and substance abuse services in a given area. Enter your address, city, or zip code here to begin your search for mental health services: <https://findtreatment.samhsa.gov/>

Once you've entered your address information, the services locator will list services by type: either mental health or substance abuse (narrow your search by selecting only one type in the box in the upper-right corner of your screen). The website shares directions to the facility and contact information. If you click on the More Information link for any service, payment information and other information about the service are available.¹⁷

Some mental health clinics and other services are on a sliding pay scale based on income and other factors. Listed in the above treatment locator is whether the facility accepts insurance, Medicare, Medicaid, or other forms of payment. It's best to contact any facility to see if they offer the free mental health service you need.

● You can also call SAMHSA's National Helpline for this information at 1-800-662-HELP (4357) or 1-800-487-4889 (TDD)

Take Action Today

Now that you've read about ten proven tools to boost your mood and improve your mental health, I hope you're not overwhelmed. If you are, let me offer some advice if you need help knowing where to start. TAKE IT SLOW. Don't try to boil the ocean in one day.

Try picking one thing from the list of ten that you commit to doing today. For me, the easiest first step was taking a short walk around the block. I honestly didn't want to in my darkest days, but I forced myself to go on short walks. My mom and sisters would come over and walk with me. And every time we got home, I felt a *teensy* bit better. Not that I felt great (I didn't), but I was proud of myself for doing something—*anything*—and getting fresh air into my lungs.

Also, while walking, we talked. My sisters and mom encouraged me to share my struggles or discuss my feelings. Sometimes I did, and sometimes it was the last thing I wanted to do. Often, I couldn't even put my feelings into words. It's hard to explain how anxiety and depression feel when you're in the thick of it. And it can be painful to think about or talk about.

Advice for Loved Ones

If you're a loved one trying to help someone who is struggling with anxiety and depression, try not to ask too many questions about how the person is feeling. Assume they feel like shit and don't want to describe it to you. No offense to anyone—I know you're just trying to help. But the best thing you can do is just be there. Sit beside your loved one, offer a shoulder to cry on or a hug for support. Be there to listen, but not judge or try to analyze what's happening. Just *be there*.

This is so hard because we tend to want to “fix” things or help in tangible ways. Perhaps that tangible thing could be taking it upon yourself (without asking what the person needs, because in most cases, they probably don't know) to help with a few household chores or bring over a home-cooked, healthy meal and invite your loved one to sit and eat it with you. You could even offer to meditate with your loved one or invite them to go on a walk, as my mom and sisters did for me. But please don't guilt them into walking or doing anything. That will only add to their suffering. Trust me, it's not because they don't want to take action. Often, they simply can't.

II

Part Two

Notes

WELCOME

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About the Author

Angie Read Doyal is a career-driven mother of three who had a massive stroke at 46, even though she was an active, seemingly healthy woman. She had a career she loved and thrived in, one she never expected to be ripped away from her so suddenly. She survived the stroke because of her husband's quick thinking and action. But two months after the stroke that could have killed her, she faced an even more formidable foe while trying to return to work - debilitating anxiety and depression. When released, she was admitted to two in-patient mental health facilities at the height of her anguish and felt numb to the world around her. Her struggles required deep resolve, discipline, and an unwavering commitment to healing. She wanted her old life back. She wanted to be here for her kids and husband. And she wanted to return to the career she had before life went sideways.

Today, Angie is back in the marketing career she'd been building for nearly 30 years and she enjoys stable mental health while living a fulfilling life. It still requires daily effort to maintain solid, strong mental health, but she now has the tools and knowledge of how to keep a handle on things. And her personal struggles helped her know what to do when

her middle son, 22, was going through his own mental health crisis.