THE CHALLENGE
Step-by-step depression recovery plan
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5 habits, WHY and HOW they work and WHAT to do exactly.

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The 5 habits

As promised, this book is not meant to just give you a quick glimpse of hope for recovering that will quickly be forgotten.

It will give you the knowledge, the system (5 habits) and the actionable steps I used to get out of the darkest place I've ever been in a matter of weeks.

Each chapter will present a new habit, why it will help you and how exactly to develop it, step-by-step.

Here they are:

1. Stress reduction
2. Proper exercise
3. Visualization
4. Keeping yourself busy
5. Building self-esteem
STRESS REDUCTION

Stress is what got you in this situation and what keeps you in it, not yourself or your job. Getting rid of it gets you out.
Why it works

The human brain is a result of somewhere between 150 000 and 200 000 of evolution and most of it dates back to those prehistoric times.

Back then the world was cold, scary and hostile so the human brain developed as a survival machine, a danger detector. All it needed to do is make sure you survive and mate. Stress developed as a defence mechanism to signal for danger.

Sadly, our emotions, including depressive thoughts, are driven by our subconscious, which operates from the prehistoric, danger-avoiding part of our brains. Mostly the amygdala, also known as the "lizard brain".

Today, 150 000+ years later, stress still equals danger for our brain and danger always provokes the same neurobiological reactions - restlessness, hyper-concentration, quick reflexes, anxiety. Stress literally shuts down the reasoning, conscious parts of your brain. It decreases all non-vital bodily functions like sleep, metabolism, long-term memory. Ergo, you feel butterflies in your stomach when stressed, or have problems sleeping when work's been crazy for too long. Or you forget things you should know by heart.

But there's good news too. You can turn off the danger-detector that keeps your brain feeling in danger. To do this, you just need to reduce stress to minimum, which in turn will start sending signals to your subconscious that you're safe and it can relax and let go now.

A proper stress reduction will quiet the lizard brain.
How it works

To reduce stress, we will gradually create a **low-stress diet**, which aims to quiet the amygdala (the danger detector) in your brain. As it's starting to feel safer and is letting go of that stress, you will start feeling much better, fast.

Depression is just your brain in a very low mental shape. To recover from depression, all you actually need to do is get in good mental shape again. We're building a mental immunity, if you will.

The important moment here is to understand which things cause stress and then to start reducing and eliminating them. You'll be surprised how many things can stress you, especially if you're more sensitive or vulnerable (as I am). Stress builds up cumulatively, so every source of stress we get rid of is a giant step towards recovery.

Your new low-stress diet will need you to avoid or reduce those, until you recover:

- being or running late
- making promises you're not 100% sure you can keep
- setting external goals (which you can't fully control)
- self-accusations, negative self-talk
- making too many decisions, especially tough ones
- trying to impress and please others in any way
- trying to recover alone or hiding your emotions
- feeling you need to control your life and you can’
Step-by-step plan

1) REDUCING SMALL STRESSFUL ACTIVITIES

Step 1: Notice small stress factors.

Take a piece of paper and write down a list of the most usual 20-25 things that give you stress during the day, however small. For example: “Deciding what to eat for lunch”, “Not having enough time to get ready for work”, “Not knowing what to wear”, “People calling to meet me”, “Don’t like my direct supervisor”, “One of my colleagues is really annoying”, etc. Don’t underestimate anything. If it happens on a regular basis, put it in the list.

Step 2: Focus on a few.

Now circle the top 5 things that give you most stress. Just pick the 5 most regular or unpleasant. Don’t sweat if you can’t choose, just pick the first 5 on the list.

Step 3: Attach actions to stress factors.

Now it’s time to start reducing that stress. Realize those small things, as harmless as they might seem, can be the key to your recovery. Addressing them will start shifting things in your brain. Remember, your subconscious can’t tell if you’re being chased by a bear or having a tough day - it’s still stress to it and it triggers the same existential panic in your brain which in turn causes the depression.

So write a small action step next to each stress-factor. For instance:

- Not having time to get ready for work → Preparing breakfast, clothes, keys, etc. the previous night
- Not knowing what to wear → Deciding what I’ll wear each day on Sunday, when I’m not pressed to choose
- People constantly asking to meet me → Deciding I’m only going out on Fridays and asking everyone who wants to see me to come then
- Don’t like my direct supervisor → Finding something that they have taught
me, even if it’s how not to treat my subordinates one day and starting my workday by silently appreciating it and thanking them.

- One of my colleagues is really annoying → Saying no to him once a day, until I get used to saying it and interrupting them before they start annoying me

**Step 4: Repeat.**

*When those 5 actions steps start to become a habit (normally in about 2 weeks), pick the next 5 and repeat. Then again.*

**2) LETTING GO OF CONTROL**

**Step 1: Realize you can’t control life. And you don’t need to.**

Being in depression is often the result of trying to have your life under complete control. But sooner or later, you will realize this is impossible. We can only control our own efforts but not the outcome of them. We only control how much we work on the presentation, not if our boss is going to like it, to give a simple example. We control doing our best to get out of depression (and reading this proves it), we just gotta trust the Universe will help us too.

You probably think pulling yourself together is the way to get out of depression, but we’re trying to get rid of stress here and forcing yourself only brings more stress. Instead, try to surrender to life and kind of trust it has the best in store for you.

**Step 2: Let go of control. You’re not alone in this.**

Cooperate with life, don’t fight it. It may look like chaos, but there’s a higher power that keeps things together and is friendly to you, because you’re part of it. Call it God, Universe, Buddha, Mother Nature or whatever you want but once you trust it, you will feel it helping you. Trust it and it will quickly help you get out.

*Repeat the following at lunch every day (or change it a bit if you wish):*

*I may feel depressed but it’s just a phase I’m going through. It’s*
not my fault and I didn’t cause this so I neither feel ashamed, nor guilty. I’ve been blaming myself and trying to get myself out of this and I can’t do it alone. But that’s not shameful. I will cooperate with life, not fight it. I trust the Universe will help me, as it had a reason to put me through this challenge. It needs me stronger for something important. I let go of control because I know everything is going to be OK and that takes an incredible burden off my shoulders.

**Step 3: Practice. It takes time but you’ll get better and better.**

Learning to trust the Universe, which is putting you through that awful struggle is not easy. But think about it - a still sea never made a skilled sailor. It’s here to teach you something and instead of desperately trying to break free, try to listen what it’s saying. Letting go of control is hard because you’ll at first feel vulnerable and resist it. But letting go of control doesn’t mean giving up! It just means you’re not putting too much on your plate and having faith things are going to get better soon. And that’s the Law of Attraction in action.

**3) BASIC MEDITATION**

**Step 1: Focus on your breath for 5 min / day.**

Every morning, for just 5 minutes, sit comfortably and focus on your breath - how it’s going in and out, what the feeling is on the inside of your nostrils, whether it’s cold or hot. This is really important because it takes your attention off your problems. You can’t focus on both your breath and anything else, you can just switch your attention between them.

**Step 2: When thoughts come, just observe them.**

When your focus switches from your breath to any thought, good or bad, just observe it for a little while. Don’t judge them, just notice them. They’re not completely yours however, just a product of your active mind, so no need to judge or avoid them.

_Here’s what the process sounds for me:_


I can see the thought of feeling stressed arising but I just watch it, instead of acting upon it (to feel stressed). I’m curious about the thought but I feel separate from it. My mind is the sky and the thought is just one of many passing clouds. It will soon be gone. I don’t try to stop it or resist it, I just notice and watch it pass. I don’t identify with my thoughts - they’re temporarily here. They’re not necessarily true. And if I don’t act on them, they never become true.

This technique separates you from your thoughts. If you can observe something, it means you’re something separate of it. It means thoughts are not orders, they’re just thoughts. More often, they’re your poor lizard brain’s cry for attention. Don’t believe everything you think. This itself is an incredibly powerful notion.

**Step 3: Return your attention to the breath.**

This will keep you from spending too much time on thoughts. They’re just thoughts after all, they’re feelings and worries, a product of your mind, but you can’t control them. *Don’t try to stop them, just notice them and return to the breath. If you can’t keep it there, count the breath from 1-10 and then start from 1 again.*

Instead of controlling your thoughts (impossible), this trains you to control your attention (both possible and a superpower). The better you get, the easier it will be to switch from depressing thoughts to something of your own choosing. You’ll be the master of your own mind.
PROPER EXERCISE

Stop treating your body and your mind as something separate and you will find a whole new, stronger you.
Why it works

Exercise naturally produces the hormones responsible for happiness, sleep, motivation. It is like taking strong antidepressants, minus the risks to your health.

Something as simple as moving stimulates the production of several hormones and neurotransmitters that are key to the healthy, normal functioning of your brain: endorphins, dopamine, serotonin, melatonin.

Endorphins trigger a positive feeling in the body, similar to that of morphine. For example, the feeling that follows a run or workout is often described as "euphoric." That feeling, known as a "runner's high," is normally accompanied by a positive and energizing outlook on life. Which is exactly what you’re looking for. Imagine suddenly feeling positive and happy, as if the stress has completely disappeared? Now you know it’s within your reach.

Regular exercise has been proven to:

- Reduce stress
- Eliminate anxiety and feelings of depression
- Boost self-esteem
- Improve sleep

Dopamine is the chemical that mediates pleasure in the brain. It is released during pleasurable situations and stimulates one to seek out the pleasurable activity or occupation. This makes it directly connected to motivation. Healthy dopamine levels result in better memory and higher cognitive abilities, i.e. you get and feel smarter and more capable which improves self-esteem and thus your general mental condition.

Serotonin is crucial in transmitting impulses between nerve cells, regulating cyclic body processes (incl. metabolism, mood, sleep) and contributing to wellbeing and happiness. Serotonin is regarded by many researchers as a chemical that is responsible
for maintaining mood balance, and its healthy levels help eliminate depression. Exercise can increase the brain’s serotonin production.

Melatonin is involved in the synchronization of the circadian rhythms of physiological functions including sleep timing, blood pressure regulation. It gives you better sleep. Which is crucial to feeling more relaxed, which in turn reduces the number and intensity of depressive thoughts and boosts your mood and motivation.

As you see, exercising gives you a whole cocktail of important natural chemicals that will help you get out of depression much quicker.
How it works

Not all types of exercise are made equal, of course. Experiments have shown that cardio exercise (those that make your heartbeat go up) like running, dancing, hiking are far more efficient in producing those vital hormones and neurotransmitters. Another way to get them is with strength exercises like heavy lifting.

You don’t have to run a marathon or squat with 200 pounds, of course. Some exercise, regularly, done right, will do the trick. 20 of jogging 3 times a week is normally all your brain needs to start recovering quickly.

To understand how exercise could help you feel better, think about vaccines. To help you build immunity against a certain disease, a vaccine injects you with a small dose of the weakened disease. Then your body easily builds the antibodies to kill it and forms the new immunity.

Exercise works in a similar way. You jogging, running, lifting weights means a moderate physical stress, which your body is perfectly capable of coping with - it just send painkillers, feel-good hormones and motivation boosters to keep you compensate for the strain. But reducing the discomfort of doing exercise also has the side effect of making your nervous system calmer, your mind clearer and your mood better.

To get out of my dark place, I forced myself to run or use the exercise bike every other day and to make it more fun, I listened to music or ran a movie at the same time. You can do the same - listen to an audio book or some good music while exercising.
Step-by-step plan

Step 1: Start small. So small you can’t say “No”.

We all want to do better at important habits like eating healthy, working out, talking to strangers but we often push ourselves too much and as a result feel discouraged and demotivated with ourselves if we flop. We lose trust for ourselves, which is a big problem if we want to build better habits.

The sustainable way to building a habit - in our case, exercising 3 times a week - is starting really small. So small, you don’t feel the pressure of having to deliver every time. Just 2 minutes are enough to get started.

Don’t focus on running for 20 minutes, focus on the first two minutes of your exercise, which may even be your ritual before running: putting your workout clothes, jumping in your sports shoes, getting out the door and stretching. It’s a lot easier from then. Friction is strongest when trying to get an object out of a static state. Start small, every time you exercise and it will soon be much easier - once it’s a habit you won’t need to even think about it.

Jogging / running is the most effective exercise for depression recovery, so that’s what I recommend you try first. But going to the gym to lift weights is also an option. Something that forces your body to sweat, not just stretch. Yoga is nice but won’t do. Aerobics, zumba, tae-bo will, on the other hand. If you want to go to the gym instead, do squats, bench press

Have patience. Do things you can sustain, otherwise you will only rely on your motivation and when you slip (we all do), you may take it as a sign you can’t do it, which is far from the truth.
Step 2: Set a schedule, not just a goal.

For most of us, the path to getting anything done, including recovering from depression is to set goals and pursue them. What I’m starting to realize, however, is that when it comes to actually getting things done and making progress in the areas that are important to you, there is a much better way to do things. Focus on the process, not the outcome.

Feeling better is a great goal but it may reduce your current level of happiness and motivation when you compare your current state of mind to the ideal in your head.

Instead, make a schedule and stick to it. Monday, Wednesday, Friday at 07:30 or 18:30 is a perfect schedule to start with. Now all you have to do is show up. As Woody Allen said, 80% of success is showing up (in life and in recovering).

Measure your progress, if you can. This will make it easier and more enjoyable. Get a journal and write down your schedule for a month. Then put the reps or the time spent running next to each day when you finish it.

Step 3: Never miss twice.
Everyone makes mistakes, commits errors, and gets off track, just like you and me. The difference between success and failure is whether you get back on track as quickly as possible. Research has shown that missing your habit once has no measurable impact on your long-term progress. This kind of takes some of the stress off from exercise and as you must have noticed, we’re all about reducing stress here. Rather than trying to be perfect, plan how you will react if you stumble in order to never miss two exercise sessions.

Don’t worry if you miss once. You don’t even need to compensate the one missed on Monday, just call it a day and show up on Wednesday. Your goal is to be the most days and to never miss twice.

**Step 4: Reward yourself.**

Rewarding yourself is sometimes almost as important as doing the exercise itself. The magic lies in being consistent and rewarding yourself is vital in order to feel that you’re growing and getting better. You don’t need to literally treat yourself chocolate every time. *Slowing down to say “Good job” and feel happy and proud you’re working on your recovery is enough.*

You need all the motivation you can get, and this book is just part of it. Reminding yourself you’re doing great and you’re growing stronger is a game-changer. You deserve kudos both when you show up and when you miss but get back to exercising.
VISUALIZATION

The key to your recovery is to have your subconscious calm down. And to do that, you need to speak its language, first.
Why it works

You’ve already read the long article but my advice is to go through it once more.

To sum things up, your brain is a universe of its own that has undergone hundreds of thousands of years of evolution. Most of what rules your emotions, your mood and thus, your behaviour is comes from the older part of the brain - the subconscious. And your subconscious takes everything literally. It makes no difference between real danger and too much stress over a long period. Too much stress causes abnormalities in conscious behaviour too - anxiety, depression, OCD, etc.

But your subconscious being in charge is a good thing too, because it’s easy to manipulate if you know how to do it. The same way excessive stress and self-criticism can lead to depression, telling your subconscious the right things can take you out of it. If you can make your subconscious feel you’re getting better, you’ll start getting better. Fast. And that’s not so hard to do.

Your subconscious is the far faster and more powerful part of your brain. So powerful that it has healed people from cancer, let alone depression. Humans haven’t been conscious for most of their evolution and our reasoning is still finding hard to grasp the power of our subconscious but you can think of it this way: as a pool of knowledge that contains everything you’ve ever seen, heard and learned is stored in your brain; your instincts and intuition. You just rarely have access to it, as you normally don’t listen to it. Or, to be more correct, you don’t understand it because they’re in a different language. Read on and I’ll explain.
How it works

Your subconscious (and what it believe to be reality) is the main key to recovering. It speaks to you 24/7 - through your dreams, emotions, intuition. And what it believes determines how you feel and what you do every day. If it believes you’re a failure and life is unfair, this is what you will see around you on a regular basis.

But there’s good news - it works the other way around as well. You can tell it how you feel and it will start believing it. The trick is to communicate with it in its own language. Because it doesn’t speak English. It speaks through our intuition (emotions, pictures, dreams). And it doesn’t understand English. It understands emotions, feelings and vivid images. If you intentionally project a different reality to it though visualizing things differently, it quickly starts believing it and seeking proof for those new beliefs.

As you’re already guessing, the way to positively impact your subconscious is to visualize very vividly that you’re improving and feeling better. This will make it feel things are OK and what it feels, it believes.
Step-by-step plan

Step 1: Imagine your life with no sign of depression.

Visualizations were the tipping point that lead to my recovering. I built over stress-reduction and exercise but my brain was hyper-sensitive and stressed and the only way to calm it down is to persuade it everything was going to be OK.

Visualizations are counterintuitive, I admit. But they work like crazy. All that time, I thought that something will magically make me recover and then I’ll start feeling better. Turned out it worked the other way around. I started visualizing I was feeling better and it started happening really quickly.

To do it, imagine in full detail your life going back to normal. You waking up rested and positive, ready to kick ass, being happy and self-confident. Picture yourself walking, talking, exercising, doing meaningful work, interacting with others, relaxing - all of that free of any negative thoughts and anxiety.

This is what you’re trying to visualize (skip any part you don’t consider important):

- What does your life feel without a trace of depression? Of all your problems? Of the fog in your mind?
- How much energy do you have? What do you use it for?
- What kinds of thoughts are you thinking? How are they different from what you’re thinking now?
- How do you feel physically. What do you look like now that you’re in better shape?
- What are the relationships between you and your friends and family, between you and your colleagues?
- What is your work life like? Do you work something new and different or are you perhaps a new person at work? How much money are you making now, if you will?
- What’s your spiritual life like? Do you feel in harmony with God / the universe / other living creatures?
- What hobbies do you have? How do you spend your free time? What does
Step 2: Write it down.

Your imagination works a lot faster than you can internalize. Research says it processes about 120 bits of information every second where you’re only consciously aware of several bits at any given moment, as your brain focuses on them.

To really get the feeling, start with writing your visualizations down at first. This intentionally slows things down so you can fully engage in visualizing and not miss any important details that will make the picture full and persuasive.

In any case, don’t try to imagine it from scratch every time. It takes too much time and efforts, that had better go in the creative phase of imagining things rather than in recalling what you did right last time.

My advice is to write it down, then edit and re-write it for several days until it feels complete and really engaging - enough to keep you smiling while reading and imagining what it says. From then on, you can start reading it - again, slowly enough that you feel what you’re saying. Going through it is not a goal in its own - instead, you need to be actually feeling different.

Step 3: Go into details. Engage all 5 senses.

When you experience something real, you can feel it with all your senses. Imagine eating a wonderful croissant at a small local cafe in downtown Paris for instance. Can you feel the delicious crunchy crust filling your mouth as you’re taking a bite? The smell of fresh coffee in the air, just baked. The beautiful light coming through the big French windows, you sitting in a comfortable armchair at a small table in the corner. You’re reading a book and enjoying your well deserved rest while the charming waitress cleans the table next to you, humming and smiling to herself.

If you’re finding it hard to imagine something vividly, try to answer those questions:
- Where am I? Am I in or outside? What is the light like?
- Who else is there with me? (could be someone you know or new people)
- What are you doing?
- How does it feel inside and / or on my body? (taking a swim in the crystal clear sea for example)
- What furniture is there around?
- What does my breath and heartbeat feel like?
- Am I eating or drinking something? What does it taste like?
- Are there any specific smells around?
- What are the sounds from the street?
- Am I happy and enthusiastic, or just calm?

**Step 4: Repeat it twice a day.**

Waiting for a miracle to come and fix things was the biggest mistake I made the first 4-5 months of being in a major depression. To do anything lasting, your brain and body need time to understand and internalize it and make your new way of feeling and thinking a habit.

*Therefore, stick with the habit of doing those visualizations until those images have become reality. They will, soon enough, I promise you.*
The best time of the day to do them is after you get out of bed and before you go to bed. At those specific times, you’re most sleepy and relaxed, making your subconscious resist less the new reality you’re trying to introduce it to. It’s a skeptic by default, so it’s always looking for cracks in your visualizations to say “Ha! You’re trying to trick me, I won’t fall for that”.

But repeating it enough times to make it stick and doing it in the appropriate time (mornings and late evenings) will fortify the new beliefs which will start changing your attitude and emotions towards yourself and the world.
KEEPING YOURSELF BUSY

You can only focus on one thing at a time. Switch focus away from your problems and they start fading away.
How it works

Your mind is a multi-function device, we both know that. But what we often miss is that it’s a **single-focus device, much like cameras**. Try to use the camera on your phone to focus on two things at the same time and you will find it impossible. You can just (relatively) quickly change focus between two points.

Our mind works the same way. We can’t focus on two things at the same time. We can do one thing and kind of register another thing in the background but our focus is always on one of those two. Our brains are more powerful than HD cameras, so the switching between tasks is much quicker, therefore leaving us with the wrong impression we can actually multitask.

The reason I’m bringing the impossibility of multitasking up is that you can use it in your own favor, much like the way we use the way the subconscious works to beat it at its own game.

Let me explain. One of the main things (if not the main) that triggers and fuels depression is focusing on your problems. Sounds too simple, but that’s often all to it. You’re probably depressed because you’re predominantly thinking about your problems and the things you’re unhappy about. **I.e. you’re focused on the wrong things.**
Why it works

You read that right. It’s a problem of focus, much than anything else.

To change how you feel, one of the most effective ways to do it is to simply change your focus. This means to move it to something else. Something that will keep you busy not thinking unhappy thoughts.

As in physics, an object in motion tends to stay in motion. Action provokes more action. Once you start focusing on something else, you will feel less and less need to turn to depressing thoughts and it will become more and more easy to just switch your thoughts to something else.

At first it will be hard (friction is strongest when the object is at rest). Actually, thinking positively is easier said than done. But that’s the beauty of our challenge here. You’re not supposed to think happy thoughts.

*Instead, fill in your schedule with as much useful stuff as possible. Not necessarily useful to yourself, but useful to someone (your family, friends, organization, some charity, animals, elderly people, music, an NGO, etc.).*

*It’s important not to push yourself too much with commitments and big expectations. Avoid any such stress. Just do what you can to help in order to keep yourself busy and don’t promise anything you’re not comfortable with. Better yet, make it clear that you’re just doing it to help.*

*You may not even feel positive by doing it but your mind will be occupied with something new and different and the tension in your mind will start fading away.*

Back when I was feeling my worst, I couldn’t work and didn’t go out, I just sat at home and thought about how to get out of depression. You know what I did to keep myself busy? I first joined
a gospel choir and that occupied three of my evenings every week. I felt like crap but I kept going - at least it was a little break from constantly obsessing over something unproductive. Then I started following my girlfriend around at her job - she’s a tour-guide and I just joined her tours, listening to her and chatting with tourists. Then I started writing for my fashion blog even though I didn’t feel competent, at all. I felt like a fraud but it kept me busy.

Staying busy is all that matters. Just doing something different activates some processes in your brain that makes you feel energetic, so that’s another positive side effect
Step-by-step plan

Step 1: Add new activities to your daily routine.

Let’s get back to you now. How do you start filling your program with useful things to keep your mind busy until it relaxes from reducing stress, exercising and visualizing?

*Here are a few tricks:*

- If you’re working, try to engage in additional projects and activities.
- If you’re not, find a friend or an acquaintance that has a business of their own and offer to help them for free. You’re not trying to find a job (stress) but to stay busy (distraction).
- Pick a new hobby or renew one of your old ones. Try to be curious about how things work, not pushing yourself to become particularly good at it.
- When you’re home, watch [www.ted.com](http://www.ted.com), [Crash Course](https://www.crashcourse.org) or anything other educational.

**Step 2: Look for new hobbies.**

A hobby is a great way to fill up your schedule.

I play the guitar, for example. I didn’t even want to look at it when I felt depressed but I tried to pick it up and play just one song, every once in a while. I tried to figure out how the chords were build, why they sounded sad (minor) or positive (major). I imagined what the artist must have thought when they were writing or recording the song. *You know what this did? It kept me busy.* Nothing more. But that was well enough.

Use my example to apply to any hobby you want to start. Here are a few ideas:

- *Trying to learn a new language.*
- *Learning to play an instrument.*
- *Writing 500 words every day. They can build a book together or form separate stories / articles about something interesting.*
- *Joining a dance class. You surely have a favourite dance to watch - go try it.*
Step 3: Be patient.

Remember, you’re not focusing on the quality but on staying busy. And you’re not pushing yourself - very small, steady progress over time is better than diving deep and losing interest quickly. Set an upper limit if you have to. Like: “I will play the piano for at least 10 minutes today but no more than 20 minutes”. Do things you can sustain.

Here’s a glimpse on how small, tiny gains add up:
BUILDING SELF-ESTEEM

Recovery begins with faith you're capable of doing it. Which relies on your reputation with yourself.
Why it works

We’re moving on to the last decisive habit to master in order to get out of depression rapidly.

If you’re suffering from depression, chances are your self-image isn’t too good. Depression is a lot about not seeing any hope for a brighter future and for change. And this, on its own turn, is a result of your trust in yourself and your skills deteriorating.

When you think about it, it’s impossible to feel trust, respect and love for yourself and be in depression at the same time, right? But somehow we keep overlooking the way we treat and view our own selves as something peripheral. In fact, it is central to how well we deal with tough periods in life, like depression.

We rarely consider how our self-image affects our emotions but they are 100% correlated. We do it not out of ignorance but out of disbelief we can do anything about it. Why bother think about self-image if we can’t control it?

Except we can. Slowly, but surely, we can turn it around so that it never allows us to lose our way like this again. A person who has the confidence, respect and love for themselves is immune to feeling hopeless and desperate, because they know it’s causing pain and suffering to themselves (and they love themselves).
How it works

I’ve always found it hard to discern between self-esteem, self-image, self-confidence. But I recently ran into a person explaining it perfectly and making the logical connection between them that I was missing.

How you feel in your skin and how hopeful you are is usually a function of what your self-image is. If you think you’re capable, generous and worthy of respect, you will feel that way.

Self-image is almost identical to self-esteem. **Self-esteem is basically your reputation with yourself.** It’s the kind of person you think you are and how this person reacts when times are hard, when decisions have to be made, when tradeoffs are necessary.

The better your reputation with yourself (self-esteem), the bigger your self-confidence. And when you’re confident in yourself, it’s so much easier to deal with struggles in life, including the way you feel now.

Now we know we have to build a good reputation with ourselves - a good self-esteem. And to do that, we start by building trust. You can’t have a positive relationship with someone you don’t trust.

How do you gain trust in anyone? Step by step. By having them make small promises and keeping them, again and again. By having them show up when we need them. By always picking the phone up when we call. By showing us they care for us and love us, even if we flop.

The same way we learn to trust someone else, we learn to trust ourselves.
Step-by-step plan

Step 1: Make a small promise and keep it.

Small steps will take you a long way, quicker than you think. Keeping them small at first is important (as with exercise) to avoid disappointment and discouragement.

Here are a few small trust-building habits that will surely improve your self-image:

- Being on time (give yourself kudos when you do, others don’t matter)
- Avoiding distractions (keep score of every time you succeed and give yourself a self-five)
- Speaking up (whether if pays off is not important)
- Taking the initiative (proposing a place to eat or a movie to watch will do)
- Going out or meeting friends (it can be really hard now and you deserve respect)

When you start trusting yourself on keeping small promises, start promising things that are slightly more complex and require more responsibility. But let it happen really slowly and effortlessly.

Step 2: Focus on showing up.

Results always come when you show up enough times. Don’t worry if you don’t see them at first. In fact, it would be strange and it’s not how life works.

Nothing worth having comes easy, the old saying goes. In this case, the hard thing is showing up even when you don’t see progress or hope. But nevertheless, show up. Think of all the people you admire - they’re out there working and struggling when things are tough. Anyone can sweat or do the work when things are going great but only those that keep showing up when they feel stuck really deserve our respect.

And remember to celebrate every time you gain that trust - every time you meet your small goal, slow down and tell yourself “Good job”
Once you get into the habit of showing up, you unleash the domino effect of good habits and behaviours that further support your recovery.

*graphic: James Clear (I'm a big fan, you must have noticed)*

**Step 3: Mind the way you speak about yourself.**

You’re constantly speaking about yourself: sometimes to others but mostly to ourselves. What you’re saying matters. It will either fortify or undermine the trust you’re building with yourself.

*And because negative self-talk is usually automatic, we can’t control it as much as we want. Therefore, we’ll only focus on two things we can control:*

1) **Noticing when it happens**

*Just be there when it happens and don’t judge it. It’s an automatic response of your lizard brain, the amygdala. It’s seeking security. When you’re not judging it, you will realize it’s just a thought, not reality.*
2) **Repeating a positive self-talk mantra**

Now that you know it’s not real and you shouldn’t believe everything that you think, try this out:

When you hear yourself speak poorly of yourself, it helps a lot to have an emergency mantra that will lift you up and neutralize the negative self-talk.

Here’s my mantra - feel free to borrow it if you like it:

“I’m trying hard and I keep showing up and this alone makes me trust myself more and more every day. This negative-self talk is just a suggestion my brain makes, not the truth. I choose to be kind and loving to myself because I deserve it for trying hard.”
YOUR TURN

That’s it.

5 habits, 5 step-by-step plans to integrate each in your life.

5 steps that WILL take you out of depression, all you need to do is show up.

Start with the first habit and add the next in 2-3 days until you’ve added all 5 habits.

5 weeks of practicing those 5 habits should be enough to get you back on your feet. Imagine that? Your life, your smile, your carefreeness, your health, your clear mind back in a matter of weeks? It even took much less in my case and I was a complete wreck.

I know it doesn’t sound sexy, because it sounds like work. But I can promise you it's easier than you think. It's simple human psychology. And that it works like magic.

Now you know WHY it works and HOW it works. As well as WHAT exactly to do to implement it.

If it didn't work, you wouldn’t be reading this :)

Stay strong!

Yours,

J.