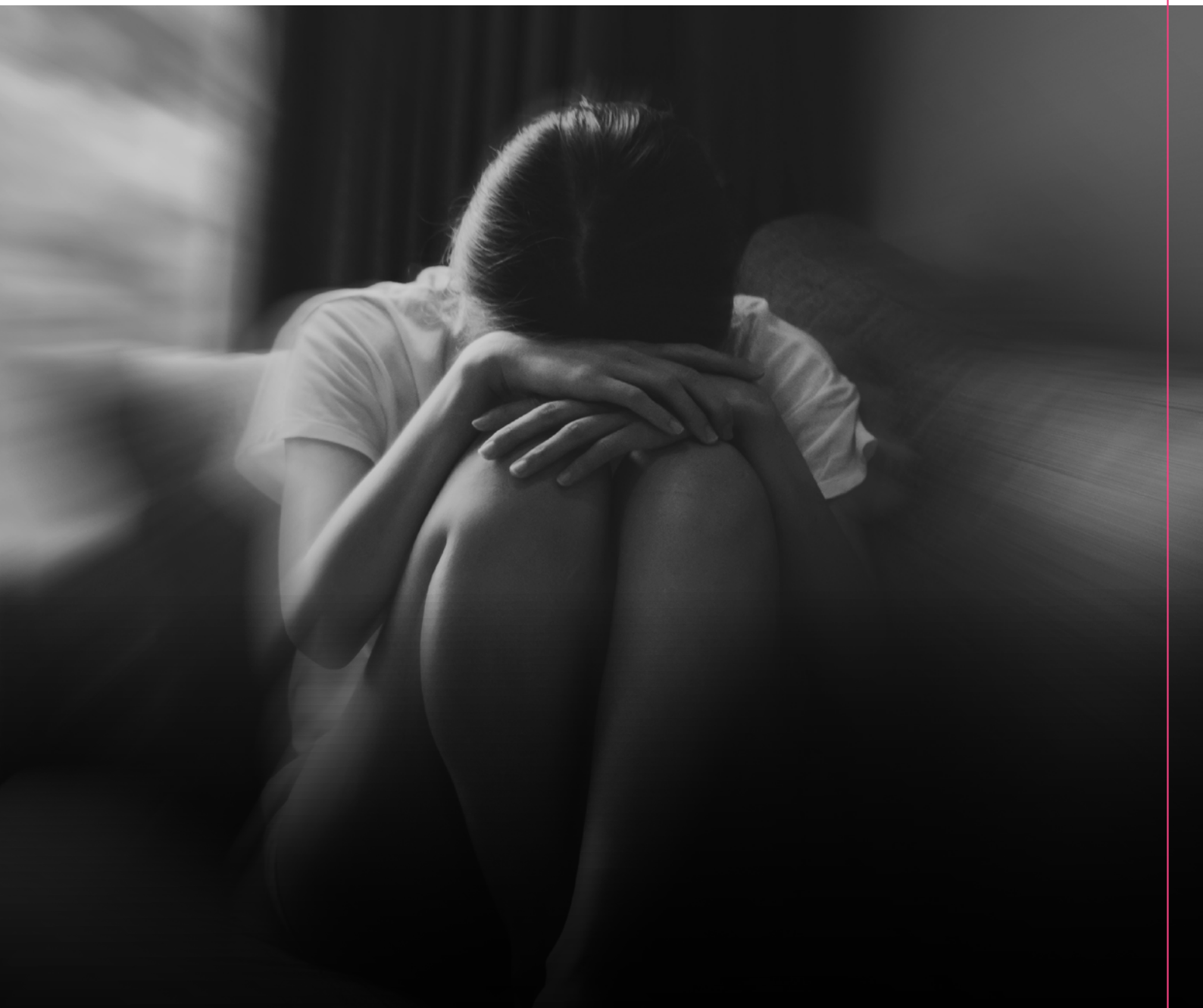


THE MASTER Series

**BEYOND MEDICATION:
UNDERSTANDING ANXIETY AND
DEPRESSION'S UNMET NEEDS**

Johann Hari



Johann Eduard Hari is a British-Swiss writer and journalist. He has written for publications including The Independent and The Huffington Post, and has written books on the topics of depression, the war on drugs, and the British monarchy.

Hari graduated from King's College, Cambridge in 2001 with a double first in social and political sciences. In January 2015, Hari published Chasing the Scream: The First and Last Days of the War on Drugs. He proposes the idea that most addictions are functional responses to experiences and a lack of healthy supportive relationships, rather than a simple biological need for a particular substance.

In January 2018, Hari's book Lost Connections, which deals with depression and anxiety, was published, with Hari citing his childhood issues, career crisis, and experiences with antidepressants and psychotherapy as fuelling his curiosity in the subject.



GETTING STUCK

I went to my doctor when I was a teenager and I explained that I felt like pain was leaking out of me. I couldn't control it or regulate it, but I was very embarrassed by it. My doctor told me an entirely biological story about why I felt the way I did. He said: people's brains have a chemical that makes us feel good called serotonin. Some people are naturally lacking in it, you're clearly one of them. We'll give you some drugs to boost your serotonin levels and you'll feel better.'

At first, I felt great. When I started taking the drugs, I underwent an immediate

and huge boost that lasted for a couple of months. Then this feeling of pain started to bleed back through. I went back to the doctor, who said clearly I didn't give you a high enough dose. I received a higher dose and again, I felt better.

By that time, I was experiencing some quite potent side effects. I was putting on a huge amount of weight but I did feel better. However, once again, the pain bled back into my life. I got caught in the cycle of being given higher and higher doses for relatively brief reprieves until 13 years later I was taking the maximum dose that was legally allowed - and still, the pain caught up again.



GETTING OUT

I wanted to understand what was going on here. I was doing what I was told to do: taking my medication, speaking with a therapist. I had put my trust in the accepted medical process for over a decade and yet still felt very much like I had at the start. At the same time, there are so many other people like me. For almost every year I've been alive depression and anxiety have increased across the western world.

Until I met with a doctor as a teenager, I thought my depression was all in my head.

I felt I was just being weak, that I needed to man up, pull myself together. After seeing a doctor, I spent the next thirteen years thinking it was all in my head in a very different way. That actually, it was a chemical imbalance in my brain, it was a malfunction in my skull.

Quite early on I began to doubt that I was just experiencing the symptoms of a chemical imbalance. If that were true, why did it keep rising to meet my higher doses of medication? It didn't seem intuitively right.



One of my teenage nephew's best friends recently went to the doctor for help with depression and anxiety and was told he was lacking dopamine in his brain. Serotonin or dopamine, I was dumbstruck to think that in two decades the only change in our two cases was what chemical the GPS said was out of balance. We still need to do a much better job in telling more complex and truthful stories about depression, to acknowledge and address the many factors that contribute to it. There's a whole range of ways we can do that.

According to the World Health Organisation, the causes of conditions like anxiety and depression are for the most part, not in our heads. They come primarily from the way we live. There's scientific evidence for nine causes of depression and anxiety. Of these, only two are biological: specific genes are contributing factors, as are later brain changes that occur after the development of depression that make it more difficult to escape.

The rest are social and psychological causes that are rooted in the meeting of non-biological needs.

Simply, you need to feel you belong, that your life has meaning, that you are seen and valued by others, and able to anticipate a future that makes sense. Our culture is good at many things, but one thing we have gotten progressively worse at is meeting these deep psychological needs.

Understanding that opens up a very different kind of solution to these conditions. There's more than one path to recovering your mental health, and many can be offered alongside chemical antidepressants.

CAUSE ONE: THE LONELY THREAT

We're one of the loneliest societies that has ever existed. There's an American study that asked participants how many close friends do you have who could be called on in a crisis? Now, when they started doing these studies years ago, the most common answer was five. Today the most common answer - which is thankfully not the same thing as an average - is none.

Loneliness was spiking well before the internet became widely available, but once it appeared, it seemed to be offering all these things we felt we'd lost. People report having fewer supportive friends than ever before, but along comes Facebook friends.

Perhaps no one is checking in with us in the meaningful way they used to, but now we can post status updates. Likes, groups, communities - the internet offers a parody, a hologram of the thing we've lost.

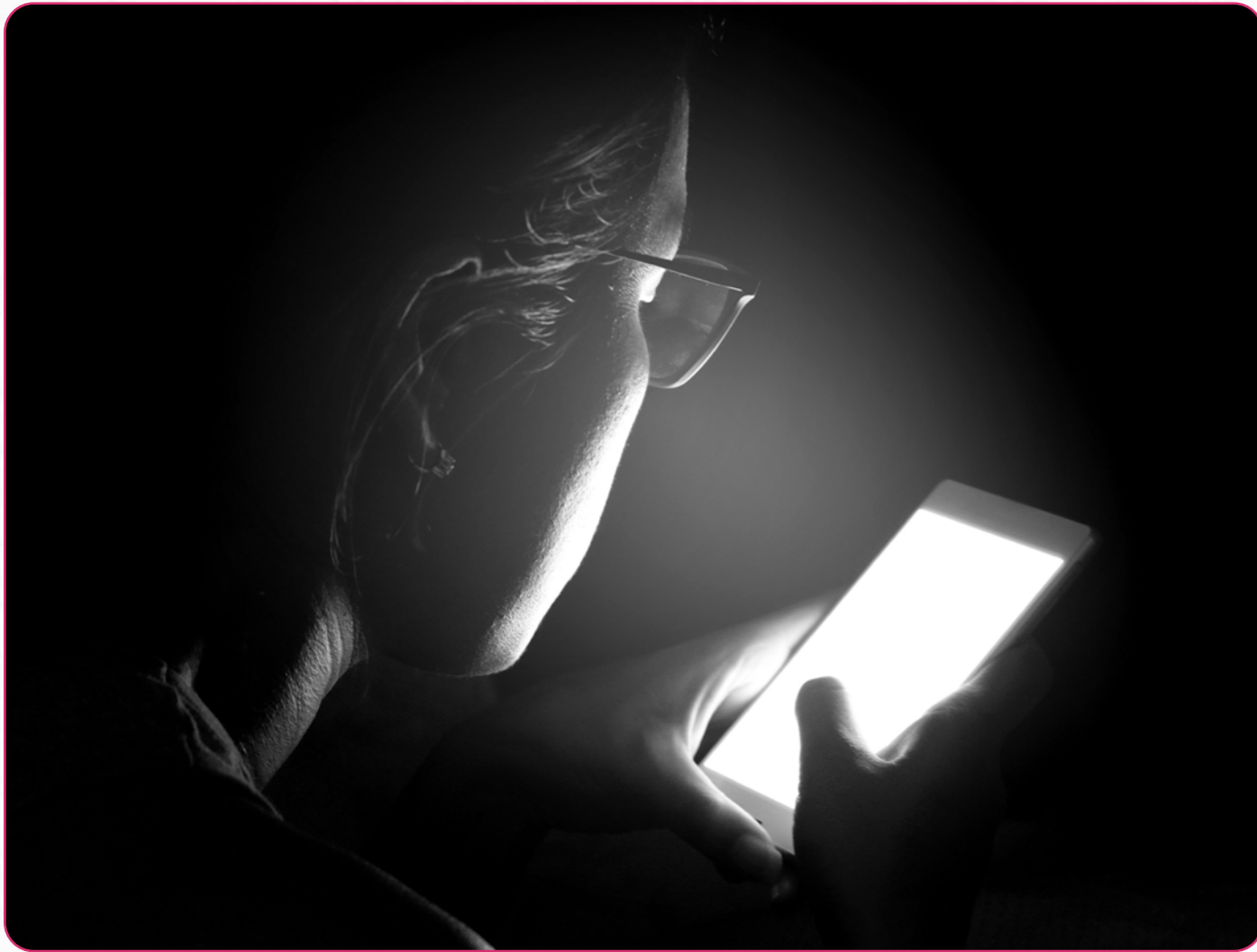
This is not to say that the internet has no purpose or value. I know as well as anyone that it is immensely valuable in some ways. But at the same time, I think the relationship between social media and social life is reminiscent of the relationship between porn and sex. No one spends an hour looking at porn and at the end of it, it feels satisfied and valued and held the way they can after sex. If the online world takes up too much of your social life, it's simply not going to meet your deeper needs for connection.



AGAINST OUR NATURE

It was Professor John Cacioppo at the University of Chicago, a leading expert on loneliness in the world, who really helped me to understand this. He made incredible scientific breakthroughs demonstrating, for example, that being acutely lonely releases as much of our stress hormone cortisol as being punched in the face by a stranger. This is how terrible the experience of loneliness is for human beings, this is how it drives anxiety and loneliness.

Professor Cacioppo once explained to me that one of the reasons we each exist is because our ancestors on the savannahs of Africa were really good at one thing. They may not have been bigger or stronger than the animals they took down, but they were much better at banding together. They were brilliant at cooperating. As their descendants, it is in our instincts to do the same. Just like bees evolved to need a hive, humans evolved to need a tribe. And yet we live in an age when for the first time, we as human beings are trying to disband our tribes, to live alone, and tell ourselves we can do it all without others.



In the circumstances where human beings evolved, if you were separated from the tribe you were depressed and anxious for a really good reason: you were in terrible danger. There are two important things there. On one hand, Professor Cacioppo has proven that loneliness causes conditions like depression and anxiety, and on the

other, there's overwhelming social science evidence that loneliness has increased significantly. While I don't wish to simplify a complex problem, this clearly outlines a key contributor to our deteriorating mental health and the crisis-like rise in depression and anxiety.

TREATING LONELINESS

There are people who've tried to build different ways of responding to depression around these insights. One of the heroes in the field of lost connections is a wonderful man called Dr Sam Everington. Sam is a General Practitioner, and like me, he's not opposed to chemical antidepressants - he uses them sometimes. The trouble was that he had loads of people coming to him with depression and anxiety and he could see they were really lonely. He could see that while antidepressants gave some people some relief, they were not solving the social causes behind the problem that was present for a lot of them. He decided to pioneer a different approach.



LISA'S STORY

One day, a woman called Lisa Cunningham came to see Sam. Lisa had been shut away in her home with crippling depression and anxiety for seven years. Sam assured her that he was going to carry on prescribing her medication, but told her he was going to add something new as well. He told her 'I'm going to prescribe you to take part in a group.'

He asked her to start attending a center nearby that offered meetings twice a week to people with extreme anxiety and depression. The objective of these meetings was not to discuss misery but instead to find a new way for participants to connect and find something meaningful - something to fight off their loneliness. A little stretch of scrubland behind the center where people would come to walk their dogs caught the participants' eyes, and a plan was formed to turn it into a garden.

In her first meeting, Lisa was nauseated and shaking, literally physically sick with anxiety. However, over time, several things began to happen. It began rapidly easier as it became clear that they had something to talk about - a purpose driving them together that wasn't how bad they felt. They had something to engage with and with one another as they checked out books from the library, watched YouTube clips and learned together. At the same time, they started to put their fingers in the soil, cultivate these other lives, and learn the rhythms of the seasons. There's a huge amount of evidence that suggests exposure to the natural world is a very powerful antidepressant.

With time, they did exactly what all human beings do when they form tribes and groups: they started to solve each other's problems. In one extreme example, it was brought to light that one of the people in the group had been sleeping on the bus. When they heard about this, the others in the group began lobbying the local council to get him housed - and it worked. It was the first time most of them had done something for someone else in years, and it felt good. Lisa said it simply: 'as the garden began to bloom, we began to bloom.'



This approach is called social prescribing, and there is a small but growing body of evidence that it can produce meaningful improvements in depression and anxiety. There was a study of a very similar programme in Norway that found it was more than twice as effective as chemical antidepressants. This programme was also dealing with some of the deep, underlying reasons why they were depressed in the

first place - disconnection from other people and disconnection from the natural world. No, it doesn't handle all nine causes of depression or anxiety but addressing disconnection centers on two crucial ones with strong backing evidence. For something as complex as depression and anxiety, it would be absurd to say there's one solution.

CAUSE TWO: JUNK FOOD VALUES

The second factor that needs more attention when we talk about mental health was best explained to me by Professor Tim Kasser at Knox College. His research has come to two key conclusions. First, the more you believe that you can buy and display your way out of sadness and into a good life, the more likely you are to become depressed and anxious. Second, as a society, we have become more driven by these beliefs, as we can see in the way that advertising, social, and popular media tell stories.

We are being trained to look for happiness in all the wrong places, and just as junk food doesn't meet your nutritional needs,

junk values don't meet your psychological needs. Ultimately they drag us further away from happiness.

Reflecting on my own life, there are many times when I have done exactly what I shouldn't and turned to extravagant spending to fill a void or right a wrong. However, on the other hand, isn't there some banal notion that consumption can't replace meaning and connection? It is almost like a cliché to say aloud.

Professor Kasser concurs that on some level we all know these things and yet we don't live by them. This tension drives our unhappiness, and when I asked him why we experience it, he put it very simply as: "we live in a machine that is designed to get us to neglect what is important about life."



There's a study in Britain that found the average British child now spends less time outdoors than the average maximum-security prisoner. By law, a maximum security prisoner has to have 70 minutes - most British children don't get that.



DISRUPT THE MACHINE

Together with a man called Nathan Dungan, Professor Kasser wanted to help people find a way to disrupt this machine and attend to what matters. They started a group. Teenagers and adults came together over a series of sessions and were asked to think about a moment in their life when they had done something and found purpose. Their responses differed but matched a predictable set of themes, playing music, writing, helping someone else - a long catalog of the activities people tend to mourn losing time for.

In these meetings, participants were asked to reflect on how they could dedicate more of their lives towards what gave them meaning and purpose. The program encouraged them to make plans and follow through. They found that simply by involving themselves in this group and thinking about these questions, the participants began to change. They shed the self-destructive values that were contributing to their depression and began to place more importance on things that subtly lifted them out.

CONNECTING OUR NEEDS

You have a natural physical need for food, water, clean air, shelter. If I took those things away from you, you would be in real trouble fast, right? There's equally strong evidence that we have psychological needs that are as important for our health.

You need to feel you belong. You need to feel your life has meaning and purpose in this field that people see and value you. You need to feel you've got a future that makes sense.

Our culture is great at many things - I'm glad to be alive today - but we can and should be happier, more content. Lying beneath most causes of depression is the loss of connection.

Addressing our mental health as a culture is going to need to start with changing our understanding of why we feel the way we do. If we allow biology to take up the whole picture, we are implicitly saying to people that their pain is just a meaningless malfunction. It's not - it's a signal. We feel these ways for a reason. We have to stop insulting these signals, for as long as we dismiss the possibility that they may mean something, we can't hear what they are there to tell us.



JOHANN HARI

The Master Series



www.themasterseries.com



THE MASTER Series