

Anxiety is a real pain in the ass...

But it's still better than death.

I've always been a bit anxious. Growing up, I had a lot of stomach troubles (now diagnosed as Crohn's disease). It didn't take much to make me nervous. But I didn't experience full-blown anxiety until I was in my early 20s, and when it came, it was like a bolt of lightning.

Tell me if this sounds familiar. You're standing in line at the grocery store, or the bank, or a flipping buffet line on a cruise ship gathering you felt obligated to attend (let's call it a family reunion). And suddenly your fight or flight response goes ape-shit and all you want to do is flee or disappear, and if you cannot do either, you are certain you will die... right then and there.

Ah, what a wonderful feeling that is. I haven't experienced death yet, as you might have imagined. But when that nasty brand of anxiety or panic attack wraps its chokehold arms around me, I swear to you that the premise of death feels like a sweet release. Just an avenue to disappear down. Another way to flee.

I'll be honest with you, and you might hate me for saying this. The one sure-fire way I've been able to manage these attacks in the past is through self-medication. Not by prescription, mind you. I'm talking about popping a few pills in countries where prescriptions are optional. Indulging in a bit of cannabis. Or having a few cocktails. On good days, I don't overindulge; on bad days, I give in to my self-destructive tendencies.

*Isn't substance abuse just another mental health issue?
Isn't it all tied together?*

Up till now, that's been my quick fix (see: Lazy). But at 53 years of age, those kinds of quick fixes begin to wear on you, especially when you know that all you're doing is managing symptoms. Rather than treating whatever the hell is causing the anxiety.

I understand that diet and nutrition play an important role in our emotional health. I know that exercise and meditation are fantastic ways to improve one's mental health. I know I know I know. But if knowing was enough, we'd all be healthy, wealthy, and wise. Would we not?

More times than not, it's the doing that trips us up (though not always), because finding the motivation or the tools often feels bleak or at least unlikely.

However, even when I know what I should do, and even when I do those things, there still lurks this hidden anxiousness in good times or bad, in sickness and in health, till death do I part this human existence. What am I saying?

Up till now, even when doing everything right, my anxiety follows me anyway; just not as closely. Like a shadow that's always a few paces behind you. And when I'm not doing everything right, and believe me, I'm no saint, it's a crapshoot. Sometimes I go out into the world on an even keel. And other times I feel my anxiety beginning to peak at the mere thought of being around people. Peril, peril, everywhere peril.

So, what's the answer?

After all of that, you think I have an answer? I have clues and suspicions and theories. Now it's about putting all those clues and suspicions and theories into practice; to give them power and energy and allow them time to lift me up.

This isn't the end of my anxiety journey. This is just the beginning. But it's a journey I intend to complete. And I'd be thrilled if you came along for the ride.

In the weeks and months that follow, I will write on many mental health topics because this is an area that interests me and makes my curious mind more curious. But I will always return my attention to my personal kryptonite – that pesky anxiety that only comes out when I go out into the world.

What is your mental health kryptonite? Share it in the comments below.

(Let's not call it social anxiety just yet, because I despise labels and I give zero fucks what the other eight billion people on this planet think of me; it's bigger and nastier than that. And yet, altogether rooted in social settings.)

For now, I'm going to begin using a Japanese philosophy that helped build Toyota – Kaizen, which means small, continuous improvements, as a means of achieving great things. Why? Because habits aren't built quickly. It takes many weeks to several months to form good new habits or break bad old habits. Too much too quickly can often feel overwhelming and lead to some backsliding.

One small change every day; that is do-able.