

Take heart

Thriving in the
Emotional Wilderness

John Lim



Write Editions®

Copyright

For our children, who dream

My future seemed rosy. Graduating from an ‘elite’ school, life seemed mapped out. The day I got my A-Level results, my dreams popped. It was my first real experience of failure. It led me down a dark road of depression, binge eating, and anti-depressants. Living as a young person in Singapore’s ultra-competitive society means expectations, and a pressure to live up to those expectations. But in a society that prides external achievement, it also means what’s beneath, what’s internal, becomes a little harder to talk about.

Take Heart is the story of me finding my way through dark and scary emotions. But it’s also a story for *you*, as you grapple through the pains of growing up in a messy world, and perhaps start to see the dark side of your mind.

What’s in our mind? How do you handle your mental health? Why should you even bother?

Because ‘mental health’ isn’t just another buzzword. It’s our biggest blessing.

If we only take heart.

contents

Foreword	ix
1 Mental Health Is Not Mental	1
2 The Question	13
3 So What Is Mental Health?	49
4 Unlearning What Society and School Teaches You	71
5 Focus on the Relationship Within	91
6 Focus on the Relationships Between	117
7 Mould Your Relationship with the World	127
Epilogue	143

foreword

To write the foreword of this book *Take Heart* by John Lim is a real pleasure.

I have personally known John Lim for over five years now and have watched and observed the growth changes in him. The most significant change that I have witnessed is this: a shift from a life of desperation to profound hopefulness. He navigated his remaining university days with both internal and external struggles that he was at the point of giving up. But with a renewed sense of hope his life story did not end in self-destruction. He successfully finished the college degree that he had started. With enthusiasm and vigour, he even proceeded to finish his graduate degree in the helping profession. As of this writing, John is practising his profession in making a difference in the lives of many others.

What could account for such a major shift in John Lim's life? Let me share my observation through years of interacting with John.

A New Appreciation of Selfhood

Not unlike many peers of his youth, John used to struggle with a diminished sense of self-worth. He has such a strong

negative perspective of himself that he thought he was good for nothing. For some reason he entertained the idea that he had no potential. His posture was stooped and his outlook was down. He also tended to isolate himself from social interaction and wallowed in loneliness and self-pity. Consequently, his perspective of others was also negative.

But all this changed when John realised that he is truly significant, that he matters, and that he can make a difference in others. He started the journey of self-celebration and self-respect. This new sense of appreciation of his selfhood became a positive platform through which he related with others. And those who knew him started noticing the change.

A Willingness to Be Vulnerable

There is a common perception in civilised societies that interprets seeking help as a weakness. How far from the truth this is! This perception is fuelled by shame which thrives in secrecy and pretence. Consequently, many do not consider the idea of sharing openly their experiences for fear they will be judged.

It takes courage to share with someone our struggles. It takes double courage to be vulnerable in the process. But this vulnerability begins the journey towards integrity which in turn brings about the experience of wholeness.

John is that person of courage. He has demonstrated true courage by becoming vulnerable. He was willing to be known as he truly is, with both strengths and weaknesses. It has truly been a joy to see him bloom.

A Rekindling of His Personal Faith in Divine Providence

Although John has been exposed to religious life for quite some time, he did not really experience a true level of spirituality that integrates insight with both emotion and behaviour. Consequently, he struggled with a lot of emptiness within that even the language of religion could not alter. Until John embraced spirituality as a personal journey that starts from within himself, his religious life has been largely separate from his daily walk. He responded to the call for an honest self-examination and shed off the vestiges of religious talking and acting that served no purpose but to project an external persona of decency.

A Discovery of Innate Giftedness That Invigorates Potential

Through the process of personal reflection, John discovered his profound sense of giftedness. This process of reflection is preceded by intentionality in pausing so one could have seasons of silence. Reflection results in awareness that could trigger internal change.

The awareness that is derived from intentional reflection brings about a discovery of one's giftedness. Once this giftedness is discovered a dawning of personal potential begins. I declare that this is where the relevance of his book comes from.

John found that he is truly gifted in helping others. Thus, his potential to be a genuine helper has emerged. It invigorates him when he is able to extend help to those who are also struggling. He enjoys listening to others and he derives personal satisfaction when he observes others

making changes as well. For John, life indeed has become full of hope.

I am glad that John Lim has devoted his energy in writing this book which is a mirror of his own personal journey. It is a journey from that of entertaining the lure of suicidality due to intense despair to developing professional competence not only for his personal gain but to make a difference in others.

My tender encouragement is for you to read this book with openness of mind and humility of heart so that you will derive utmost personal benefit from it. Furthermore, I encourage you to participate in the exercises with fun. Let it be a journey of joyful discovery and learning. Personal changes that bring about growth do not have to be painful. It will not be a surprise, if upon reading the book, you will resonate with John's personal experiences which will provide assurance that you are not alone. May you indeed discover your personal giftedness in the process that will become the wellspring of attaining your greatest personal potential. After all, this is what we are all meant to be!

VAL GONZALES, ThD, MAC-LPC

Professional Educator and Licensed Professional Counsellor

mental health is not mental

It is the day of the A-Level result release. I'm hopeful. I shower, shave, and wash my (little) hair. It's going to be a good day. The day when my dream of entering medical school is fulfilled.

After all, I did the A-Levels with few issues. I came out of the examination halls feeling confident. What could go wrong?

In the hall that afternoon, the principal announced how well the cohort had done. It was the best cohort of results in the history of the school.

I smiled. This could only bode well for me.

Soon, it was my turn to collect my results. As I waited, I looked around me. The school hall was crammed with

people. You could see people crying, with friends putting their arms around their shoulders. You saw others laughing with joy. For those who had yet to receive their results, you saw the anxiety on their faces.

Then my name was called. My teacher said little.

She passed me my results. I looked down at the alphabets listed.

B

B

A

D

I could hardly believe my eyes. Surely this was a mistake? What happened to the straight row of A-s I had predicted?

I wanted to run from it all. The cheers, laughter and optimism in the air.

I turned to leave. Then my teacher called,

“Wait, John. You forgot something.”

She handed me a bag filled with scholarship materials.

For me, this felt like a slap in the face. After scoring so badly, how could I still think about scholarships?

Maybe this reads like your experience. You’ve tried very hard in your studies. But somehow, you never find yourself fulfilling your expectations of yourself. Or what your parents have expected of you.

You’re disappointed in yourself. And sometimes, you want to give up.

Wherever you are in your journey today, this book is for you.

For those who dream and keep dreaming, but have found those dreams crushed time and time again...for those who choose to create something out of nothing, for those who are searching for hope in the darkest places... this one's for you.

Because let's face it. It's difficult to hold onto hope that better is possible. Especially when all around you, people are shaking their heads and saying it's not possible.

This book is for the square pegs in the round holes, for those who find that no matter how hard they try, they never seem to fit.

This book is for those who dream. Those who create. Those who imagine.

Who find themselves in a world that's scared, worried and uncertain.

my story

My story doesn't end at the A-Levels. After the A-Levels, every Singaporean male goes on to serve two years in National Service. As the two years in National Service ticked away, I got more anxious. I wasn't sure what I was going to study.

After all, all I wanted to study was medicine. If I could no longer do that, what other options were available to me?

My worry stopped me from being able to sleep. As I heard my peers around me share their plans after army, my anxiety grew.

Then it started. I started contemplating suicide.

Yes, it sounds like a blot from the blue. But somehow, it was an attractive option in the face of few options. After all, what was the point of continuing with life if I could no longer follow my dreams?

In the days leading up to Christmas, as everyone was filled with festive cheer, I took a chair to the highest floor of my apartment block every morning.

I would stand on the chair, look over the ledge, and wonder if anyone would miss me if I flipped myself over.

I didn't know how to continue with this thing called life.

One evening, it struck me. If I was going to continue like this, I might actually die. I might lose my balance, and flip over.

That evening, I called an emergency hotline. The officer over the phone convinced me to see a doctor.

At midnight, I went to the doctor. When I walked in, the doctor sat across me, with his computer screen between us. Somehow, I saw his adjacent screen. On the screen was the page title 'How to make a mental health assessment'.

The source?

Wikipedia. Turns out that even the doctor didn't know what to do with me.

The doctor promptly referred me to the Institute of Mental Health (IMH). I was taken there in an ambulance.

Sitting in the ambulance, I wondered how my life was unravelling so quickly in front of me. I thought to myself,

“Wasn't IMH for crazy people?”

What would happen if I had an IMH record? Would people still want to take me into university?”

If you’ve never been into the Accident and Emergency department in IMH, you may not want to go there. When I arrived at 1am, the lights were off. There were no others in sight. It almost looked like a scene out of a horror movie.

Someone called my parents. When they came, their faces were etched with worry. The tiredness showed in their eyes. They sat beside me and asked,

“What happened?”

For all that had happened, being pulled out of bed at 1am in the morning, travelling down to IMH, and having no idea what was happening to their son, they were understanding. They didn’t blame me for coming here.

They sat patiently, as we awaited the doctor.

In the examination room, the doctor asked many questions... which my *parents* answered. They shared about my worries about the future, how disappointed I had been about not being a doctor, and how I was ‘okay’.

The doctor discharged me.

Walking out of the clinic that night, my father wrapped his hands around me, squeezed my shoulders, and said,

“John, straight A-s or no A-s, you’re still my son.”

why read this?

The mental health of young people is something that's close to my heart. As you can see from my personal experience of mental distress, the period during youth can be a time of great wandering. The sense of being lost, and not knowing where to go can be overbearing.

Let me first admit that I don't have all the answers to your struggles. I cannot promise that your life will be better after reading this book. But I know that the principles shared here have been helpful to many others.

I don't even have all the answers to my life. Even though I work as a writer now, I don't know if this is the long-term plan. But I've learnt that it's okay not to know.

It's okay for you too, not to know all the answers. All that's needed is an open attitude that's willing to find out.

I may not fully understand where you are in your journey. Still, I thank you for picking up this book. Thank you for allowing me to share in your journey.

It's not an easy time to be young today. Whilst that can be said for any generation that's been young before, there's a unique set of challenges that face you today that past generations have not grappled with before. These changes have weighed more heavily on your mental health.

There are two trends which are pertinent to talk about.

the two trends

The first is the rise of social media.

For all the advantages social media has brought in allowing us to connect anytime, anywhere, giving us the platform to share ideas, it has also brought disadvantages.

Of course. There's a flip side to every new technology. It's tempting to throw the baby out with the bathwater and say,

“You shouldn't use Facebook because it's evil! It has so much disinformation! It's made people more anxious!”

The dangerous thing about social media isn't the followers or the friends you make. It's how you compare yourself to the friends and the followers you make. Imagine this.

In the past, you may have had the television as points of reference for your own self-image. But today, you have access to the instant, intimate sharing of influencers and friends on your feed.

It can prompt you to look at their lives, and then at yours, and think,

“My life is a joke.”

It can fuel a sense of never measuring up, never being enough, always needing more.

The second is our growing disconnection.

Whilst we can connect more readily than ever today, it has also allowed us to disconnect more from the people around us. Walk into any restaurant, and you may see two people seated across each other, sharing a meal, but

not sharing a conversation. Instead, their eyes are on the screen, fingers tapping, flicking through their feed, their attention elsewhere.

We are more connected than ever before, but also more disconnected like never before.

Today, you can find your tribe anywhere online. Don't like something in real life? Find something that suits you online. We are fed the narrative that there's always something more exciting to be found online. Our minds are never at rest. They are used to the dopamine rush from pull to refresh, from the pings that come through from a like, comment, or reaction to something we've posted, or from the never-predictable nature of the next message. As such, real life seems like boring life.

This impacts your mental health.

Because today, whilst we chase the experience that comes from online connection, what we truly need is *relationships* that come from real conversation. What we truly need is deep, sincere, authentic relationships. But we are slowly replacing the yearning in our hearts for relationships with ephemeral *experiences*.

We chase the next Netflix serial. The next picture that will get us a hundred likes. Or a thousand followers.

These experiences will not last. When they end, you'll find yourself wondering,

“What next? Is this it?”

Was this what I worked so hard for?”

I hope this book serves as a vanguard against the forces that are shaping our world to become far more challenging for a young person like you today.

I hope it serves as a community shield, protecting you from the ravaging that happens in our world today.

I hope it serves as chicken soup on a rainy night, which you turn to on those days where you feel that you need someone to pick you up.

But I hope, most importantly, that you see that there's life after depression. That you may face some form of mental distress in your life, but it's okay.

I don't promise to give you answers in this book. Each person's journey is unique. You will find your own ways that work best for you.

There are some principles though, that help.

Before we go there though, I want to share with you how this book is structured.

1. Why we face mental distress
2. How to overcome mental distress
 - Within
 - Between
 - With
3. What to do to overcome mental distress

a note to parents

If you're a parent, or someone who works with young people, know this. Your role in your child's life cannot be understated.

You are your child's greatest role model. But as parents accustomed to a culture like Singapore's, it can be difficult to draw the balance between pushing your child to their greatest potential, and celebrating them for who they are. As psychotherapist Dr Val Gonzales observes, Singapore can be a society of shame-fuelled achievement. In other words, rather than targeting the behaviour of the child, you may criticise their being. Rather than saying 'you could have studied harder', you may say 'you are not good enough'. That can drive shame-fuelled achievement, as the child constantly pushes himself to be 'somebody' in your eyes.

Thus, the first duty for you, the parent, is to show love to your child, and not conditional love based on achievement.

Secondly, as parents, building the psychological safety where the child can safely speak about their emotions, is vital. That starts young. But it also begins with you modelling what that looks like. When you're vulnerably sharing 'Mummy felt disappointed by what a friend did today', it shows children that *even* their parents have emotions, and that emotions have their place in our lives.

How often have we heard (or perhaps said ourselves) 'Don't cry. Strong boys don't cry'? Such statements can position emotions as the enemy, rather than a friend that

allows us to tune into who we are. Lastly, it is giving the gift, of time. Nothing can replace the time spent with a child, through their good, and dark times. If you're not there with the child in their good times, why would they trust you with the bad times? We are busy. Sometimes, it can be easier to squeeze in a quick work email at the dinner table. But then we find ourselves asking why our children do the same when they eventually grow up.

They've learnt from us!

Asking ourselves what our priorities are and comparing that to how we are actually spending our time today helps us see whether the time spent and our said priorities are congruent.

ACT:

Draw two columns. On the right, put down
'My top three priorities'.

On the left, write 'How I'm spending
most of my time'.

who are you to write this?

Although I have lived through the experience of mental distress, I have also trained as a social worker. As a social worker, I counsel and help people in times of need.

Having helped other young people going through mental distress, their stories have inspired and encouraged me. They have shown me that better is possible, and taught me the practical handles they used to help themselves.

I hope their stories, my stories, and *our* collective story as you and I journey along these pages will give you the courage, strength and hope to grow through what you go through.

You aren't alone.

summary

- No one can take care of your mental health, but you. Until you're willing to give it the attention it deserves, you may not find yourself feeling better.
- If you're a parent, unconditional love based on giving quality time, and building safe spaces where your child can share, will help you support your child through difficult times.

2

the question

the questions

As you grow up, you will find yourself asked some version of three questions:

1. Who are you?
2. What do you do?
3. What do you want to be?

The problem

The problem starts...

Do you know the answers to these questions? Chances are, you may not.

That's okay.

Don't blame yourself for not knowing. It's not your fault. Schools and society didn't set you up to answer these questions. After all, when you're racing through a curriculum and trying to pass your exams, the *process* of finding answers to these existential questions take a step back.

You don't think about it until you deal with it. By the time you get there, it's probably too late.

These are not easy questions. Many people go through life not knowing the full answers to these questions. They may have some occasional insight. But they may not know the whole answer.

That's why it's vital to see the time during your youth as a chance to *understand* yourself, rather than answer yourself.

It's being comfortable with *not* knowing. I know, it's uncomfortable. After all, when Google can give you the answer to any question, it's discomfoting to know that it can't give you the answers to these three questions.

It's recognising that there may not be an answer.

You didn't read that wrong.

In a world of model answers, where our teachers teach us that every question has an answer, it's noting that sometimes, there may not be an answer to every question.

The problem compounds...

The problem compounds when your responses to these three questions shape your behaviour.

Some people are okay with not knowing.

Others need to know. They crave to know. Not knowing fills them with a sense of desperation, hopelessness and anxiety. Raw, palpating, pulsating anxiety. They wake up every morning thinking about these questions. And how they don't know the answers to these questions.

who are you?

Hiding who you are

I once counselled Gary, a young man who struggled with social relationships. He found himself struggling to form deep connections with people. Whenever he moved schools, he would delete his previous social media accounts, cut off ties with his ex-schoolmates, and move on.

As we explored more about his experiences growing up, he recounted a story of what happened when he was seven.

He was caught talking in class. To punish him, his teacher told him to walk around the school, flapping his arms like Big Bird. From that day on, his friends would always call him Big Bird.

As he moved on to secondary school, he was bullied. He was bullied so many times that he changed schools *thrice*.

He grew up running from who he was. He put on different masks to hide his identity.

You may have grown up with painful experiences and stories too that shaped who you are, and *how* you are now. Who you are matters so much that today, we spend much time, effort and money, to influence how people view us.

It comes through the social media profiles we curate. The pictures that you painstakingly edit, to show that you're having a great life.

It comes through the choices you make in buying things. Do you buy the cheap polo with no brand, or the one that splashes Adidas across the front? There's a reason why logos don't stay hidden. Logos are a stamp of our identity. They subtly make a statement.

This is who I am!

This is what I believe in!

Take time to answer these three questions.

1. Are you proud of who you are?
2. Do you fully own who you are as a person?
3. Are you running from who you are?

The labels others stick on you

Society may end up sticking labels about who you are without you realising it. Your school may tell you you're a high-achiever or that you've failed. They may say you're a 'disciplinary' case and someone who needs help. They may write you off with their labels. The dangerous thing is if you allow what they say to *determine* who you are.

When I was a social worker, I regularly worked with youths. Once, I worked with a 15-year-old girl who skipped school regularly. She might go to school twice a week. The rest was spent at home. When teachers came to visit her, she would not answer the door.

The time came for me to meet her form teachers and her vice-principal, together with her mother. In that air-conditioned meeting room, I was scared. As someone who had just graduated from university, sitting with all those teachers reminded me about all the times I had gotten into trouble myself.

The vice-principal pointed out all the effort that had gone into engaging the child at school.

"It looks like we have to consider 'Beyond Parental Control' (BPC), since nothing we are doing is working."

The BPC is an order that is applied in court that will place the child in a home, often for a period of three months. In this home, there are strict rules around what they can and cannot do. For example, they are required to return to the home by a certain time each day.

I wasn't sure what to say. Hearing the teachers' descriptions of what the student had failed to do, it was tempting for me to label her as another 'delinquent', 'truant' and someone who was beyond control.

It was tempting for me to find out about the problems she faced. And I did.

When I went to her home the next time, I asked her,

"Why don't you go to school?"

"It's very cold in the morning."

I laughed to myself, thinking,

"This is Singapore! How cold can it get?"

Then she added,

"I don't have hot water to bathe with in the morning."

Just then, her brother walked out.

"Where is he going?" I asked.

"Oh, to McDonald's to get free WIFI."

Hot water. WIFI. Things I took for granted, but that she didn't have. These stereotypes prevented me from seeing the desperate situation she was in, and how her physical environment affected her motivation to study.

Society will paste labels about who you are. The question is whether you choose to accept those labels, or reject them.

People can say all they want about you.

Who you are isn't about how you are seen by others.

It's how you see *yourself*.

The labels you stick on yourself

You may be putting your own labels about your identity without knowing it.

After graduating, I needed a job to support myself. Despite more than 20 applications, and five different interviews, I didn't get a job offer. Two months of consistent job-hunting had turned up nothing.

I started sticking labels on myself. I told myself,

- I'm not good enough.
- I'm not good at teamwork.
- I'm not wanted.
- I will always be the odd one out.
- I'm not a straightforward hire.

All these sticky labels I stuck on myself led me to see myself in poor light. Failing to love myself, I stuffed myself with food to fill the sense of inadequacy within me.

Within a month, I grew by eight kilograms.

This is similar to what we may sometimes do to distract ourselves from our problems, going out regularly, bingeing on Netflix, or spending much time surfing.

The reason you stay stuck is because you listen to the sticky labels you paste on yourself. You're reading them off. You're identifying with them.

What you believe in becomes your reality.

What I really want to say is this. I don't want this advice about listening to your sticky labels to sound like the

motivational videos on YouTube, which make you feel good, but ultimately, change little you do.

What you say about yourself matters. Imagine if you were beating yourself up all day, telling yourself that:

- You're good for nothing!
- You're lousy!
- You're stupid!
- You can't do this!

Imagine how that would affect your actions daily. You would hardly be motivated to get out of bed, because there's no point... is there?

After all, what's the point of trying when you know you're going to fail?

You're more than your failures.

You *can* be more, if you're willing to treat yourself with some love. You wouldn't say what you say to yourself to your friend, right?

Why are you saying that to yourself? Why are you sticking these pointless labels on yourself?

This matters. Because if you take nothing away from this book, I want you to take this.

It's what you stick on yourself, that keeps you stuck, or helps you succeed.

When I climbed up the chair every morning leading up to Christmas, it was because I listened to those labels I had stuck on myself.

I'm hopeless.

I'm good for nothing.

I'm never going to amount to anything.

I'm just another failure.

I'll never be anyone great.

These labels led me down a valley of hopelessness, despair, and desperation that I struggled to climb out of.

Guard the labels you stick on yourself. Let each one be inspiring, encouraging and motivating. If it's not, remove it.

what do you do?

The trap of the treadmill

Growing up in school was pressurising. Everyone around me seemed to be accomplishing great things. Each day, during assembly, I would hear of the competitions people had won.

Then I would look at myself, and think,

“What a joke. I'm barely able to pass my exams.”

Hearing these stories of success prompted me to want to do more to prove my worth. To show that I was *enough*.

As a 17-year-old studying, there would be lessons from 8am to 3pm. After that, I would start my first co-curricular activity (CCA), tchoukball. Training happened on Monday, Wednesday, and Friday, from 4pm to 7pm. By the time I finished training and reached home, it would be 8pm.

I would quickly grab whatever I could eat, before (trying to) study. But it would be too tiring. I would end up sleeping at 10, and then setting the alarm at 4am so that I could finish my homework.

That was not all. To add to my CV, and get a coveted place in medical school, I took on another CCA. It was called the Model United Nations Society. This time, I attended conferences during term time, researched into global issues, and prepared talking points.

Weekends were equally exhausting. Every Sunday afternoon, I volunteered with the MINDS Youth Group, a charity serving the intellectually disabled.

To prepare for the national examinations, my treadmill went into overdrive. I became a monk.

Hear me out. To focus, I gave my phone to my mother. No one could contact me unless they saw me in person.

Every day, in the last four months of school, I would disappear quickly. I learnt the ways of the ninja. One moment, you saw me, the next moment, POOF! I was gone.

The moment the teacher finished her lesson, my bags were packed, and my legs were on their way out of school.

Then revision would start. The average number of past years' papers my friends did was four. I did 20. For four different subjects.

You do the maths. It was 80 papers in all. My treadmill was in overdrive.

For the record, I didn't enjoy this at all. You may think I enjoyed studying, and that I loved what I was doing. I didn't. I hated it. With a vengeance. I wanted to get this over and done with.

Thus, when my results came out, I spent many months crying over spilt milk. Surely this couldn't be! People did four papers, I did eighty! People spent time playing basketball after school, whilst I spent it playing with more papers! How could this be?

I fell into the trap of thinking that if I did more, I *was* more. I thought my self-worth came from what I did, rather than who I was as a human being.

In a culture built around tuition, enrichment and achievement, we encourage filling our schedules (even when you're a baby) chock-full with activities.

You're a human being. Not a human *doing*.

Why does this happen? Why do you put yourself on the treadmill, even though you know that it's tiring?

The trap of the treadmill happens because you *compare* yourself to what people around you are doing. As a student, you may fall into an endless treadmill of doing, because you are scared you will lag behind if you don't follow what people are doing.

Why is the treadmill dangerous?

Because you will never be satisfied. Even if you get what you want. This concept, known as the hedonic treadmill, argues that humans get used to a new experience, so that over time, what may initially have excited us, no longer preserves the same sense of novelty.

You may connect with this, as you wonder what's next in your journey. After finishing your education, you're at crossroads. Questions surface:

- Where do I go from here?
- Why is it so hard to say goodbye?
- What happens if I don't know what to do with my life?

When I took the plane to return to Singapore for good on the first of September 2019, it was the saddest day of my life. I had moved to the United Kingdom for university in September 2016, and now, it was over. In the span of a 14-hour flight, I lost everything I knew.

The people I called family. The peace I had come to enjoy. The place I called home.

Stepping out into the humidity of Singapore's weather, with a luggage full of trinkets, and a CV full of achievements, I thought I was ready to conquer the world.

But I wasn't.

I felt empty. Lost. And hopeless. I was still searching for a job.

To fill the emptiness within, I turned to food. I stuffed myself with cakes, cookies and chocolates. It didn't matter that I was already full. I only wanted to stuff the anxiety within me. What was happening?

As you transit between school and work, you may find anxiety becoming your companion. You aren't too sure what kind of job you're looking for. Or employers are persistently

rejecting you. Or you may struggle to sell yourself in a job interview.

All these can weigh heavily on your mental health.

I remember the day I realised that my struggles weren't simply to do with the situation of being without a job.

I had finally found a job.

But in my first week of work, during my lunch-break, a break became a full-blown binge.

I finished the biscuits in the tin, before going to the freezer to find more food. I found chocolates that had been left behind by previous colleagues, and proceeded to finish them.

I then moved onto the other packets of food I found lying around. I opened the drawer my colleague showed me as the 'sharing cupboard', where colleagues would put food they wanted to share with others. I went through packet after packet of snacks there.

Then my colleagues came back from their lunch break.

I stopped. I couldn't be caught eating so much, or they might sack me!

These negative actions were not because I had no job. It was because of grief. As my psychotherapist Dr Val Gonzeles, once explained, we often think grief is the loss of a cherished person. But grief can also be caused by the loss of a cherished experience. As you move from school to adulthood, to your first full-time job, the loss of the freedom and flexibility you had as a student, or the absence of responsibilities, may leave you sad and stuck.

Throughout this time, despite the advice of my therapist who told me to consult a psychiatrist, I refused. In my mind, all I needed was another self-help book, technique and therapy session.

I didn't need medication.

But I eventually saw the wisdom of his words when the self-help techniques I tried failed to stop the overeating. I realised I could die from overeating.

Finally, I walked into the psychiatrist's clinic. Let me paint you the scene.

There's a sulky receptionist sitting behind the counter. There are limp flowers sitting in a vase.

There's a stack of dusty magazines placed on a table in the corner. The clinic is quiet. Other patients are either looking at their phone, or at the doctor's door. No one is talking. It almost seems like people are trying to hide their identities. Maybe this is a shrink's clinic. It's embarrassing to be here.

Walking into the clinic brought me to my depths. I saw how far I'd fallen from grace. From being a former board director of a \$14 million charity between 2017 and 2019, and top student, I was now seated, facing a psychiatrist. It was an admission to myself that there was 'something wrong in my mind'. It was evidence that I couldn't do it any longer on my own. I needed professional help.

But when the psychiatrist saw me and recommended the use of antidepressants, I refused.

"I will try your advice without medication for now."

But still, I went back to food. I didn't feel better about myself.

The next time I saw my therapist, I told him how I didn't want to depend on the chemicals in medication to be happy.

“But John, you haven't even tried! Let me give you an example. I use insulin for my diabetes. Am I going to say that I don't want to depend on chemicals to support my health?”

Depression is as much a physical and a mental condition!

It took a telling off from my therapist before I was willing to try the antidepressants.

The day I took antidepressants, was the day I gave up control. It was the day I stopped trying to keep up an image. It was the day self-reliance stopped.

As Jen Lee shared in her own experience of bipolar disorder, taking medications may sometimes seem like a step back. “But if progress means accepting that there are these polarised aspects of who I am, the extreme highs and lows,” then it is a step forward. Managing mental distress calls for the ‘triple As of acceptance, adaptation and appreciation.’

Sometimes, moving forward may be first accepting one's powerlessness over their emotional distress, and then, as former Mediacorp actress Jacelyn Tay observes, ‘allow(ing) yourself to receive help and love.’

Throughout my life, I had believed that if I raced harder, faster and better on the treadmill, I would be happy. If I got what I wanted, I would be content.

But it didn't work that way.

As a university student, I had reached the pinnacle of my academic career.

But I reached the top... and found that there was *nothing*.

Looking back, that was why I used food to stuff the nothingness within me. I was searching for the next 'hit' to remind me that there was something to life. Because all those achievements, however great they felt at that moment, counted for nothing.

They meant nothing.

Please don't get me wrong. I'm not saying you shouldn't work hard.

But basing your self-worth on what you do on that treadmill, is a recipe for disaster. If you're looking for transient joy, keep racing.

There can be more to life than running on the hamster wheel.

This book is about that. It's how you can keep your mind, whilst all about you, people seem to be losing theirs.

It's about why caring for your mental health matters, when people may say,

"It's all in the mind."

"You're imagining things."

"Just snap out of it."

It's what mental health is about, because the push for mental health awareness and prevention can miss out on what you should do when facing negative emotions.

where are you going?

Throughout life, you've probably had a reasonable idea of where you were going.

Kindergarten. Primary school. Secondary school. Then College. Throughout life, it's been laid out for you, like a train track.

Suddenly it's not too clear. You're faced with difficult questions like "what do I want to do with my life? What do I want to study? What do I want to be?"

You're tempted to scream,
"I don't know! Stop asking me!
Please!"

School is great at teaching you *how* to do well. And find answers.

But it's not that great at teaching *why* you are even bothering to do well in the first place. To ask the right questions.

Figuring out good questions to even ask myself took me seven months of mental anguish and lost sleep. I hope you don't have to go through that too. It is my hope that sharing my story of mental anguish saves you from more anguish.

The story of how I got lost

It started on the internet. I went onto forums to search for people who had managed to get into medicine with less than perfect scores.

I found one person. He got in through a magical gate called discretionary admissions.

For the next nine months in the army, I did everything I could to make my CV good enough to qualify for discretionary admissions. I volunteered to organise large scale events. It started with a camp. Then I organised a Family Day that brought together 320 different beneficiaries, caregivers and volunteers.

I thought this was enough.

In September, I made the call to check with medical school. I thought they would be excited to receive me. After all, I had done so much for the community! I would do even more for medical school!

They told me that grades were still the basic entry requirement. My grades, simply didn't make the cut.

I got off the phone. I looked around my room. I saw the chapters of medical textbooks that I had read, highlighted and been so excited to study.

How do you describe lost hope? Yes, there's deflation. But the overriding feeling was one of *disappointment*. I remembered how I skipped friend meetups to organise these events. Or nights when I scrolled through Instagram, imagining myself with the white coat.

Maybe a dream of yours today has gone in a flash. You may not have gotten into the university course of your choice. Seeing the rejection letter, you wonder what next? Where do you go from here? You had put so much hope on this. And now that it's gone, what can you do?

What is there to even do? How do you even find the motivation to do anything? How do you stop yourself from falling into a funk?

Before going into the how-tos, it's critical to look at the whys. Understanding why helps you understand where your approach to this question "Where am I going" may not have worked.

Lesson 1: The motives matter as much as the actions

Throughout this time, I never thought about why medicine even mattered to me. All I thought about was how to get in. Why bother to sacrifice so much time and effort to get in? What did medicine mean to me, that other courses couldn't fulfil?

Despite taking on large-scale volunteer projects, and climbing the ladder quickly, my ladder was leaning against the wrong wall. At the end of those projects, I was tired. I reached a point where I wondered if I had wasted all this effort for nothing. After all, I didn't get into what I wanted.

Was all this work for nothing?

It goes to show one thing.

The *why*, matters as much as the *how*. You may find yourself running, and running. But do you know why you are even running?

Checking my motivations seems like a waste of time

Checking your motivations seems like a waste of time. You may say,

“There’s no need to think so much about everything. Some things just need doing!

I’m so busy anyway. There’s no time to think through the answers to big questions like ‘why am I here on earth? Or what am I doing? Or where I’m headed.’ ”

Yes, that’s true. But that’s for things that don’t need great commitments. Like brushing your teeth. There are other things that need a longer time horizon in terms of commitment. Like your studies. Or your job.

Some people don’t bother thinking through these things, because there’s not enough time.

There is time. It’s where you’re choosing to spend that time. Each time you choose to do something, you are making a conscious (or unconscious) choice *not* to do something else.

If you flip quickly to the Screen Time app on your iPhone, you will find a report on how much time you’re spending on your phone. That’s an indication of the time you’re spending *not* reflecting on where you’re going, and why.

When I first moved to the UK to study, the first week was spent on orientation. Unlike Singapore, where there are orientation camps and activities, the UK universities are less organised. They are more free flowing. There are little events here and there, but nothing as large-scale as a combined camp. One afternoon, there was a picnic outside on the lawns.

I was in my room, lying on my bed, chatting on WhatsApp. Tapping my screen, it struck me. Did I come all this way, 10,000 miles away from home, to spend more time tapping on my screen? Was this how I wanted to spend the rest of my three years here?

Pausing, and asking ‘Why’, set a better direction for the rest of my three years in university.

Why make myself so uncomfortable?

Checking your motivation may seem a recipe for discomfort. After all, asking ‘why’ may only lead to more unease, rather than satisfaction. Is there even a good way to answer why? Why put yourself through all the stress? Why would you deliberately put yourself in an existential crisis? It might even seem like self-torture!

By now, you may have figured out that any journey that matters, will draw from your *motivation*. If you’re not bothered about the why, you wouldn’t bother to complete the journey. It’s why people drop off their resolutions, after New Year. Because whilst they were initially motivated, they failed to remind themselves persistently about their

motivations for starting. It's not starting that matters. It's *staying* the course that moves you to where you want to be.

That involves clarity about your motivations.

How did I go from being suicidal to eventually getting a scholarship?

In March 2016, I binged on everything I could get my hands on... and in April 2016, I got scholarships. I'm not saying getting scholarships is the prize people will get if they have clear motivations.

But this example is evidence of the transformation that can happen when you better understand 'why'. In April 2016, I met Daniel Wong. He handed me a book, titled 'The Happy Student'. That book shared his journey of how he moved from being a straight-A, but *sad* student, to a happy student.

Within, he shared a framework to better think through your motivations through these four questions:

1. What do I want to be remembered for?
2. What is my definition of success?
3. What are my values?
4. What is my purpose in life?

It helped me to see that I did not want to be remembered for being a famed inventor. Or a rich investor. All I wanted was to be remembered for making that personal impact in each person's life.

Checking your motivations may keep you uncomfortable, but it ensures that you *stay* the course, and not just start it. You can check whether you're headed to where you want to be, rather than being pushed to where you do not wish to be.

If you do not know your motivation, someone else will do that *for* you. You just may not know it.

Over the past years, we have heard more about the dangers of persuasive technology. The documentary, *The Social Dilemma* shared how technology companies like Google and Facebook are shaping our behaviours, pixel by pixel. You have seen it in action.

You search for some coffee beans on a shopping site like Lazada. Soon, you see advertisements on coffee machines on the YouTube videos you watch. Or coffeeshops on your Instagram feed.

If you don't know your motivations, technology will find that out for you. And maybe, just maybe... they will start to shape your motivations in ways that serve *them*. You may say,

“Come on! It's just coffee!”

But if you're not clear about your motivations, you may find the road to where you want to go filled with the potholes and rabbit holes that technology has created. Find yourself going down the rabbit hole of video after video on YouTube? Or binge-watching serials on Netflix? Or scrolling through Instagram, never able to stop? It's like scratching an itch that never goes away. All the time you're spending there, is time *not* spent on where you want to go.

But I'm not reflective

You might think: “There are certain types of people who are more comfortable with reflecting. The introspective ones. Those who like journaling. That’s not me. I’m more extroverted. I spend less time thinking about myself.”

You can. But you do that in a different way, reflecting through conversations with others, rather than alone. Finding good conversation partners, or mentors, who force you to think through their questioning, may move you to be more intentional about what you’re doing. It’s whether you want to.

*Lesson 2: you don't have to
know the endpoint*

Over the course of your life, you will be in situations where you don’t have a complete answer. You may not know what the whole journey looks like, from start to finish. But you only need to know the *next* point, not the end-point.

Sometimes, you may be tempted to compare yourself to your peers and say,

“But it looks like Cindy knows where she’s going!”

It may seem like everyone knows where they are going... but you.

Your friend may communicate his 10-year plan, complete with the accompanying milestones for each month to you. He’s doing it without knowing a key variable though.

Your friend doesn't know what tomorrow will bring.

None of us knows what tomorrow will bring. You've lived to see the effects of Covid-19. Before December 2019, few expected that we would be spending years unable to travel, wearing a mask everywhere, and gathering in small groups.

When you're searching for your course of study, you may want to know what the course eventually leads to. What job would it involve? Would you love the job? That's why courses more vocational in nature, such as law, medicine, and accounting seem more attractive.

It seems like there is a clear career path after graduating.

However, you've inevitably heard about the doctors who quitted. You won't always know the end.

All you need is the next point, the next step.

Trying to extrapolate to the end point will leave you feeling anxious. There are too many unknown variables in between that leave you feeling a lack of control.

Instead, invite yourself to simply take the next step. Remember - *take* the next step. Don't simply think about the next step.

*Lesson 3: everything is possible,
but not everything is ideal*

If you search hard enough on the internet, you will find the answers you want. It's called the confirmation bias. We search for answers that fit with what we're looking for. We don't search for the answers that go against our beliefs.

That's why the internet can be a dangerous place. Rather than seeking to expand your knowledge, it may keep it in a bubble.

In my search for a university course that fulfilled what *I wanted*, I discovered courses in places like Malaysia and Australia that would allow me to study medicine and law. I discovered a course at the International Medical University in Malaysia that allowed me to study three years in Malaysia, before moving to a reputable university abroad to study.

I found another course in Australia offering me a place to study law. They even threw in a 'scholarship' to cover 25 percent of my fees! But that university in Malaysia would cost my family \$500,000, whilst the course in Australia would cost \$160,000.

I remember the day I spoke to my dad about it over dinner on Saturday. As we sat in the hawker centre, sharing a humble meal of chicken rice, I pitched to him the idea of going abroad to study.

When I told him the costs involved, his face fell.

"John, growing up, I never had such opportunities. But if you want to do it, I will try to make it happen."

Later that night, my sister messaged me.

"What did you say to daddy? He came home very sad that he couldn't make your dreams happen."

That was when I realised that yes, I could do anything I wanted. The internet had opened a world of opportunities to me. But it was no guarantee that these options were even feasible.

Doing research online can be helpful. But at some point, fence up the options and know where the limits lie. This ensures that you're not building yourself *meaningless hope*. This is hope that is unfeasible.

“Yes, you can” is a slogan that brings hope. But hope needs boundaries.

Lesson 4: finding more information, without execution

Any decision you make *may* benefit from more information. Note the operative word here.

MAY.

It is not a guarantee that your decision will work out. Often, we search for more information without eventually converging on the decision. You may be procrastinating on the decision by telling yourself that you need more research.

By finding more information, you're giving yourself more space to diverge, rather than converging on a single point of decision. There's some point where thinking stops, and acting on your decision starts.

In Barry Schwartz's book, *The Paradox of Choice*, he argues how more choices make us *less* happy, rather than happier.

This can weigh heavily on your mental health. Your mind is constantly thinking,

“What if I chose... what if I did that instead?”

It's filled with 'what ifs'. You're at a point where you are persistently shifting ground. You're considering multiple opportunities. It's like being in quicksand.

The ground around you is always changing. Despite trying your best to lift yourself up, struggling, pushing, you're sinking deeper and deeper.

That's what you're doing when you're searching for more information. You're perseverating. You're ruminating. You're scratching an itch that will never go away. Soon, that itch will turn into a sore. Then the sore will turn into a scab. Then the scab will turn into a serious injury.

There's wisdom in deciding, and then making it work out.

Think of it this way. What's the worst that could happen if you chose wrongly? You may do something you don't like for four years. Well, you can always apply for a change. Or you may learn to *do* it, without liking it, the same way you did your primary school, secondary school and college. You didn't love everything you did. But you found a way to do it anyway.

You can do this too.

Trust yourself.

The craving for more information, more education, more input, rather than output, will leave you stuck. Give yourself a dateline and decide.

Lesson 5: you don't have to commit all your life

When you think about what you're going to be, you may fall into the trap of thinking that it's a commitment you're making for all of life.

It's *not*. It's a commitment you're making for this moment, however long it may be. Rarely do decisions lock you away for life.

Decisions can be changed along the way.

Lesson 6: choose early and often, and adjust along the way

Michael Port, a former actor and today the CEO of Heroic Public Speaking, loves advising the speakers he coaches,

“Choose early, and often.”

Make bold decisions early and often, and adjust your decisions along the way. You aren't perfect. You won't make perfect decisions. But you can adjust along the way.

I confess. When I took on the scholarship to study social work, I had no idea what social work was.

All I knew was that I enjoyed volunteering with people with learning disabilities. I enjoyed helping people. The scholarship came with a six-year bond. I was making a significant commitment to give three years of university,

followed by six years in the social service sector. By the time I was done with my bond, I would be *thirty*. Thirty!

Being 21, I was scared. Remember, I was so anxious about choosing my university course of study that I binged on food, growing by eight kilograms in a month. Now, I could have chosen to remain stuck with fear that I would not like what I did in between the bond period. Or I could choose to move ahead with courage.

I chose courage.

When you choose early and often, you give yourself time to adjust. Rather than limiting yourself to analysis paralysis, thinking about the countless ‘what-ifs’ that could happen, you commit.

You move forward with your decisions, rather than perseverating. You’re not taking one tiny step forward, and then two tiny steps back. You’re stepping forward boldly with courage.

Is that scary? Of course. But one way to think about it is to realise that fear keeps you stuck. Choosing, is a commitment to make things work out. When you make a choice, you commit to making things work out, whatever the cost.

You may remember your own experience, sitting in the classroom on your first day. You look around you, and you know no one. You hear the lecturers talk, and you wonder,

“What are they talking about?”

Why does it sound so boring? Have I made a wrong decision?”

Your commitment will come with challenges along the way. My first graded assignment scared me. Being the first assignment I did in three years, I put in a lot of effort. I asked professors. I asked a friend to review the assignment for me. I burnt the midnight oil.

When I got it back, I took the envelope to the toilet. I closed the door and tore the seal. I was excited. How high would my score be? Would it be an A or an A+?

It was neither.

I got 35 out of 100.

You didn't read wrongly.

I walked to the pool that afternoon, hoping that I wouldn't be deported for failing my assignment. I could see the headlines.

Overseas scholar flunks out of first year of university.

I had taken this huge risk to come here, flying 10,000 miles away from Singapore, and I had failed...

Can you imagine the shame? Can you imagine the pressure?

What if I had to go back to Singapore?

How would I explain to my parents, and sponsor, that I had failed?

That's a painful place to be in, isn't it? You may have experienced it yourself. You declare to your parents that you want to study this. You finally manage to convince them to give you their support.

You're finally studying your passion, and you put in all your effort to do the best you can. You want to show your

friends and family what can happen if you study something you're excited about.

Then you fail. Or you don't perform to *your* expectations. You wonder,

“Have I chosen wrongly? Maybe this is *not* my passion?”

But because you've chosen, you've made a commitment to make it work out. Look back at the course of your own life. You've probably remembered the numerous times when you've gritted your teeth, and persevered against all odds. You've taken a big bet.

The bet has paid off.

When I failed my first assignment, I realised things had to change. I spent less time travelling, doing CCAs, and multitasking during class. From that point, I moved from failing my first assignment to getting an eventual first-class honours.

I'm not boasting. But sticking to the choices you make, for the length of time you've committed to, helps you to grit your teeth and finish the process.

It's not what you start. It's what you finish. You finish by staying the course. It's how you finish. You finish by adjusting *with* failures.

Choosing not to decide, is a decision. Your mental health is affected because you are constantly switching, rather than staying the course. Being stuck in indecisiveness can affect your mental health. This is because you lack certainty and clarity about what you're doing. Rather than throwing yourself into it, you're dipping in and out. That's not ideal. It won't help in the long term. You need to choose.

Choosing accelerates your forward momentum in life. Being stuck in the process of choosing is what is often more difficult. Rather than taking more time to think, focus on action. I'm not saying that there's no place for making wise, considered decisions. But I'm saying that much of your anguish can come from the *process* of considering, reconsidering, and re-reconsidering your decision. It doesn't come from the decision itself.

There are no perfect decisions. If you approach it from one angle, it will look good. Approach it from another, and it won't look that good. If you take a persistently different angle each day, that's a recipe for making yourself depressed, anxious and scared.

Having an action bias gives you *more* freedom. Not less.

As you grow up in school, you've heard how you should consider your answers carefully. There's a cost to answering too quickly. In class, you probably got laughed at when you gave a 'stupid' answer. That experience of being shamed when giving the 'wrong' answer may affect you in your journey of seeking answers. It may have prompted you to restrict your answers. It hasn't given you the freedom to answer however you would like to.

Rather than committing to the journey of the question, you've learnt that you need to be certain of your answers before you embark on your journey.

Life isn't a test paper. You don't get slapped for getting the 'wrong answer'. In fact, there are no wrong answers. There's only the journey, and the commitment to finishing the journey.

Your journey is going to be different. You won't get the same answers as everyone else.

You may want quick answers to your questions. There are no quick answers.

When I work with clients, they often come for advice. They ask me if they should try X or Y. When we trained as social workers, we were taught not to bring our agendas and be non-directive. This means that when clients ask, "What should I do?" our response is to be a poker face. We are not supposed to tell them what to do.

I know. This can be frustrating. My own therapist does this to me.

And once he told me,

"John, you're very Singaporean, you know? You're always coming here expecting the how-tos.

But I can't give you that. You need to make your own decisions and take your own actions."

You may tell me,

"What if I make the wrong decision?"

Trust yourself to adjust to it.

Try:

Reflect on the worst decisions you have made and how they have turned out.

What have you done to make these decisions work?

Take it as a lesson. There's the cliché that goes - you learn from failure. I beg to differ. You don't learn from failure. You learn from the *actions* you take *after* failure. Actions are what bring *thought* to life. They bring ideas to life. Too often, we are stuck in our heads, rather than bringing what's in our heads to the world around us.

Why do I say that you learn from the actions you take after failure, rather than failure itself? I used to think that I learn from failure.

In hindsight, I saw how I was making the same persistent failures over and over again. I wasn't learning from failure. Failure may not cause you to fail less.

As Leslie Berlin observed in his New York Times article "Try, Try Again, Or Maybe Not", founders whose companies failed the first time had almost the same follow-on success rate as people starting a company for the first time, at 23 percent. People who failed before have the same amount of success as people who have never tried at all. Instead, learning from what's worked can help you sustain the flywheel of success.

Here's another perspective that may help. Each time you fear deciding, ask yourself,

"What's the worst that could happen?"

Can I deal with that 'worst outcome'?"

You start to see that the catastrophe you were thinking of... is something that you can deal with. It's not insurmountable.

Try:

Next time you're stuck with a decision, ask yourself:
"what's the worst that could happen?"

summary

- Often in life, three questions appear: Who are you? What do you do? Where are you going?
- When you are figuring out who you are, you may have labels stuck on you, or you may stick labels on yourself. Know the labels being stuck on you, and ensure that they inspire you.
- Doing can lead us to be on a never-ending treadmill. Doing can be balanced with being.
- If you don't know where to go, it doesn't matter where you go. Where you go next doesn't matter so much as having decided that you want to go somewhere. Recognising that no choice is perfect, committing to your decision, and seeing out the choice helps in decision-making.