

austin monthly



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How to Improve Mental Health the Natural Way

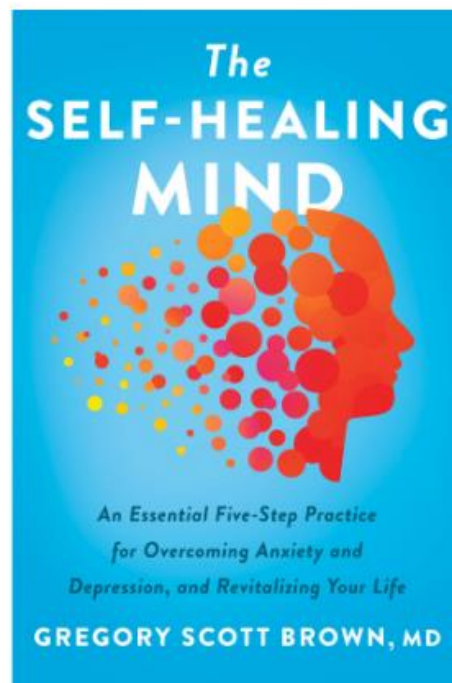
In his new book, Austin-based psychiatrist Dr. Gregory Scott Brown writes about evidence-backed ways to alleviate depression and anxiety.

BY Madeline Hollern

Published: [July 19, 2022](#)

Blame the pandemic, inflation, social media, the Supreme Court, or just the chaotic state of the world. For whatever reason, people seem to be struggling with mental health right now. In fact, within the last six months, nearly all my close friends have mentioned to me that they have been suffering with depression or anxiety as of late. So, it felt almost serendipitous to receive an invitation from Miraval Austin to visit its property and meet with Dr. Gregory Scott Brown. The local psychiatrist and author recently published *The Self-Healing Mind: An Essential Five-Step Practice for Overcoming Anxiety and Depression, and Revitalizing Your Life*.

In the book, Dr. Brown, who is vocal about his own past struggles with depression, details five evidence-backed methods of self-care that have been proven to boost mental health in a natural, holistic way. “So often, when people think about mental health treatment, they think about two things: meds and therapy. And the self-care part is often what goes out the window at first,” Dr. Brown says. “What I try to advocate in my work is that all three are important.”



When the psychiatrist mentions self-care, he isn't referring to pampering practices like massages and pedicures. Instead, he names five components: sleep, spirituality, breathwork, nutrition, and movement. Having been to Miraval before, I knew that the wellness resort had elements of all five things. During my time there, I took yoga and cycling classes, sipped green smoothies, slept in one of the resort's famously feather-soft beds, and focused on meditation through its Manifestation Meditation and Meet Your Spirit Guide classes. But it's one thing to follow these steps—it's another thing to understand *why* they can be effective. When I got the chance to speak to Dr. Brown on-site, he broke down the science behind his five pillars of self-care:

Sleep

When it comes to sleep and mental health, there is a bi-directional relationship at play, Dr. Brown says: "If we're not sleeping well, our mental health is going to suffer, and if we're struggling with depression, anxiety, or burnout, then that's going to affect our sleep." To combat this vicious cycle, he suggests sleep hygiene habits including avoiding naps during the daytime, limiting exposure to blue and green lights emitted from smartphones and tablets at nighttime, and making sure to sleep in very cool temperatures. How cold? According to research, he says, "the ideal room temperature is between 65 and 68 degrees."

Spirituality

Although people assume spirituality is synonymous with religion, religion is just one of its many forms. “It’s all about connection: connecting with your inner self through meditation, connecting through your external environment, through volunteering your time, self, and service through altruism, or, if you are religious, connecting yourself to a higher power through prayer,” he says. The psychiatrist notes that studies have shown that people who are able to tap into that spiritual self can reduce activity in an area of the brain called the default mode network, which tends to be overly active in people who are anxious, stressed out, or overworked.

Breathwork

Humans take between 20,000 to 30,000 breaths a day. But it’s the *way* we breathe that can have a huge effect on mental health, Dr. Brown says: “There are specific ways that we can manipulate our breath. One is resistance breathing—Ujjayi pranayama breath is commonly taught in yoga. We create gentle resistance in our neck, we are applying pressure on the vagus nerves that run down the sides of our neck, and that compression can actually help reduce heart rate, lower blood pressure, and reduce the amount of GABA in our brain. And these are all physiological markers of rest and relaxation.”

Nutrition

The psychiatrist cites a study called the Smiles Trial published several years ago that showed that patients who are depressed that incorporated more of a Mediterranean-type diet along with their treatment had better outcomes. “Some of the reasons behind this is the Mediterranean diet is more anti-inflammatory, and we’re learning more about the fact that mental illnesses like bipolar disorder, depression, anxiety, and ADHD are as much related to inflammation as other lifestyle illnesses like hypertension and Type 2 diabetes,” he says.

He recommends research-backed nutrients that include omega fatty acids, found in fish like salmon, mackerel, and tuna; leafy greens, which help build some of the precursors for neurotransmitters like serotonin, dopamine, and norepinephrine that are important for mental health; and calming L-theanine, which is found naturally in green tea, black tea, and matcha green tea and has been found to help mitigate mild forms of anxiety.

Movement

Dr. Brown notes a study published in the *American Journal of Psychiatry* that showed that people who moved their body had a lower risk for developing depression regardless of their age or geographic region. The European Psychiatric Association recommends that we move our body about 150 minutes (or two-and-a-half hours) a week, which aligns with what the American Heart Association suggests. “The thing that we need to focus on is starting where we can, whether that means stretching in your chair or walking to the mailbox,” he says. “I’m not telling everyone you have to go out and buy a Peloton, but just find ways to incorporate more movement. All of these things have tons of evidence to support their role in mental health.”

The Self-Healing Mind: An Essential Five-Step Practice for Overcoming Anxiety and Depression, and Revitalizing Your Life *was published June 7 by HarperCollins Publishers.*

Gregory Scott Brown, M.D., is an integrative psychiatrist, writer, and wellness advocate. He is founder and director of the Center for Green Psychiatry, an Austin-based outpatient practice; an affiliate faculty member at Dell Medical School at The University of Texas at Austin; and a mental health advisor and regular contributor for Men's Health Magazine.