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The Cure for Pharma

Because Truth is Low-Hanging Fruit

By Cory Gardener

Preface

This book is not medical advice.
I am not a doctor, psychiatrist, or clinician of any kind. Nothing in these pages should be taken as diagnosis, treatment, or instruction. What follows is a record of what happened to me.

Medication can be necessary.
In my case, it likely saved my life.
I am not anti-medicine, anti-psychiatry, or anti-treatment. Modern medicine does real good for real people, and there are moments—crises—where pharmaceutical intervention is not just helpful, but essential.

This book exists for a narrower reason.

It is about what happens when medication stops being a bridge and becomes a substitute for examining the life it is meant to support.

For years, I tried to chemically manage problems that were structural, behavioral, and environmental. I trusted diagnoses more than direct observation. I trusted systems more than my own lived experience. I accepted relief where clarity was required, numbness where change was necessary, and stability where responsibility should have been rebuilt.

I was not lied to.
I was not forced.
I participated.

What I misunderstood was the role medication was meant to play. I treated it as a foundation when it was only ever designed to buy time. And in doing so, I delayed the work that could not be outsourced: building a life that did not require constant chemical compensation to be tolerable.

Had I understood earlier what medication can and cannot do, I might not have lost fifteen years learning it the hard way.

Personal experience is used here as data—not as proof, and not as prescription. I am not telling you what to take, what to stop taking, or how to live. I am describing the consequences of treating awareness itself as the problem, and chemistry as the permanent solution.

Medication can stabilize a crisis.
Medication can reduce suffering.
Medication can keep someone alive long enough to build something better.

Medication cannot eat for you.
It cannot sleep for you.
It cannot move your body, build discipline, create meaning, or live your life for you.

This book is not here to comfort you.
It is not here to reassure you.
It is not here to sell you anything.

It is here to make something clear.

If chemistry is doing all the work, something underneath is being ignored.

Dedication

This book is dedicated to my childhood friend, Erik,
and to everyone else who didn't survive long enough to find clarity.

To those who died too early.
To those who were caught in the wrong combinations, the wrong timing, the wrong systems.
To those who never got the extra chance, the safety net, or the quiet window of stability that makes reflection possible.

We carry you with us every day.
We know your spirit—your atoms, your energy—are still out there somewhere in the vastness of space. You are part of this world even now. You shaped us. You taught us. You mattered.

You didn't fail.
You ran out of time.

We honor you by surviving.
By telling the truth.
By living carefully, deliberately, and honestly.

We love you.
Thank you.

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Chapter One: Why We Bury Our Heads in the Sand

I've always been a smart kid.

I come from an intelligent family. I'm one of four children—an older brother, an older sister, and a younger brother. Education, professional success, and competence were normal where I grew up. My grandfather worked at Skunk Works at Lockheed Martin. My dad was a lawyer. His cousins were lawyers. We were a well-off Orange County family—what most people would think of as typical one-percenters.

In elementary school, I was placed in the GATE program—Gifted and Talented Education. Academically, things came easily. I picked up concepts quickly. I didn't struggle in school. From the outside, there was no obvious reason to think anything was wrong.

Then my parents got divorced when I was in fourth grade.

It wasn't quiet or clean. My older brother had already moved out after a fight with my dad. What followed was years of instability—custody battles, child support disputes, and constant movement between houses. For a long stretch, it was me, my sister, my younger brother, and my mom, going back and forth between homes, never fully settled anywhere.

Up until that point, life had been stable. Safe. Predictable. I hadn't really known loss, fear, or uncertainty. The divorce changed that. The effects rippled outward—

relationships shifted, routines disappeared, and a sense of safety I hadn't realized I relied on quietly eroded.

When I was thirteen, I made the decision to live with my dad full time.

That decision brought structure back into my life, but it didn't undo what had already been set in motion. I had been exposed to adult conflict, instability, and emotional complexity long before I had the tools to process it.

This isn't a pity party.
It's context.

Not long after, I found escape.

For me, that escape was video games—specifically *EverQuest*. It was the first thing my brain could fully immerse itself in. A world with rules. Progression. Clear objectives. Predictable rewards. More importantly, it gave me a way to disappear from emotions I didn't know how to deal with.

By the time I turned seventeen, my brain already knew how to escape. So when drugs entered the picture, the transition was easy.

It started with weed. I'll say this honestly—I was lucky in one respect. My older brother, who had already left home, came back around that time. He introduced me slowly and carefully. He wasn't reckless. He wasn't trying to drag me into anything. He showed me how to be cautious and avoid unnecessary trouble. He saw what was coming.

That slow introduction probably kept me from making even worse decisions early on. I still made plenty of dumb ones. But I want to be clear—he wasn't the reason for what followed. Once I started, the momentum took over on its own.

Alcohol followed close behind. Small house parties. Kickbacks. Drinking games. Music. Nothing wild on the surface. But substances quietly became the center of social life.

From there, experimentation expanded. I don't need to catalog every substance or experience. What matters is the pattern. From seventeen into my early twenties, I treated my life like an open-ended experiment.

During that time, I lived at home with my dad in Orange, California. I didn't have a full-time job. I delivered pizza. I was a part-time community college student at Santiago Canyon College, enrolled since I was nineteen with no clear direction. I took classes that interested me—psychology, philosophy, astronomy, mathematics, film history, music history, biology. If a class didn't move me toward an actual major, I took it.

I had no interest in moving on to the next phase of life. The idea of joining the workforce and spending the next forty years in a cubicle, working inside a system I already believed was broken, felt like a prison sentence. So I avoided it.

To support that avoidance, I partied constantly. I drank daily. I smoked heavily. I used drugs regularly. I didn't eat consistently. I didn't sleep consistently. I didn't exercise. My entire nervous system was regulated chemically.

Eventually, I chose a major.

I landed on philosophy.

On paper, it made sense. I wanted to be a lawyer like my dad. Take over the family business. Follow the script that had been laid out for generations. Philosophy felt like the intellectual on-ramp to that future—a way to learn how to think, argue, reason, and understand the world.

In practice, it became fuel.

Philosophy opened doors to ideas about meaning, reality, identity, consciousness, religion, suffering, and freedom. Big questions with no clean answers. Questions that don't resolve themselves just because you understand them intellectually.

And for me, understanding was never enough. I needed to *feel* the ideas. To live inside them. To explore them fully.

So the experimentation expanded.

I went to class, absorbed new concepts, then used drugs to think about those concepts more deeply—or at least that's how I framed it at the time. I told myself I was doing what philosophers had always done. Exploring the nature of reality. Pushing boundaries. Seeking truth through experience.

From my late teens into my early twenties, I tried just about everything that crossed my path—marijuana, mushrooms, acid, cocaine, ecstasy, prescription pills, tranquilizers, painkillers, stimulants, even opium once. I'm not proud of it. I'm not listing this to shock anyone. I'm listing it because all of it matters.

This wasn't casual experimentation.
It was immersion. I didn't go looking for it—it arrived naturally, as part of the world I was already in. No one pushed me. This was just the environment I inhabited.

I treated my mind like a laboratory and my life like it had no consequences. I believed I was exploring reality. What I was really doing was overwhelming my nervous system while pretending it was enlightenment.

At the same time, the fundamentals of health were completely absent. I wasn't eating regularly. I wasn't sleeping regularly. I wasn't exercising. I wasn't grounded in routine or responsibility. Every internal state—energy, mood, anxiety, boredom—was regulated chemically.

For a while, it still worked. Then it started piling up.

The real breaking point came with mushrooms.

Those experiences weren't recreational. They weren't fun. They weren't something I looked forward to. In retrospect, almost every trip was bad. Disturbing. Disorienting. Terrifying in ways I didn't yet have words for.

And yet, I kept doing them.

Up until that point, I had been a smart kid—but I was also arrogant. I didn't respect life. I didn't fear it. I didn't believe consequences really applied to me. I treated intelligence like armor and curiosity like justification.

Mushrooms dismantled that illusion.

They forced confrontations I hadn't chosen and wasn't prepared for. They stripped away certainty. They exposed how little I actually understood—about myself, about reality, about existence at all. They showed me how truly insignificant I really was, in an infinite universe, with infinite possibilities. I didn't come out of those experiences feeling enlightened. I came out shaken.

But I also came out changed.

I had so much unresolved chaos in my mind, my body, and my life that those experiences acted less like exploration and more like redirection. They didn't give me answers. They gave me humility.

Some of the foundations I still live by came from that period:
A respect for life. A fear of life.
And a deep respect for the fact that I do not know the answers.

That part mattered.

What didn't matter was the cost.

Those experiences—along with ecstasy and everything else layered on top—overloaded my emotional system. My perception fractured. My nervous system stayed stuck in a state of hyper-alert confusion.

Eventually, I couldn't manage it anymore.

Panic attacks started appearing out of nowhere. Downward spirals followed. I couldn't smoke weed without triggering anxiety. I couldn't relax around other

people. Silence became unbearable. My internal world felt hostile and unstable.

I had an enormous amount of work to do. I just didn't know it yet.

Chapter Two: Googling Symptoms

By the time I sat down in front of a computer looking for answers, things were already falling apart.

The insights that once felt profound had turned chaotic. My thoughts raced uncontrollably. My emotions swung hard and fast. Anxiety appeared without warning. Panic attacks followed. I had social outbursts I couldn't explain or control. I behaved unpredictably, even by my own standards.

People noticed.

Then they adjusted.

Invitations stopped coming. Calls stopped getting returned. The social buffer that had once normalized my behavior quietly dissolved. What had once been framed as "intense," "deep," or "interesting" started to look unstable.

My mind was no longer manageable.
My life was no longer manageable.

At the time, I thought this was happening *to* me.

What I couldn't see was how completely unequipped I was to take care of myself at even the most basic biological level.

I had no understanding of nutrition. I ate when other people ate, or when someone reminded me to. I didn't know how to cook. Most of what I consumed was fast food, junk, or whatever happened to be available in the pantry or fridge. Eating wasn't intentional. It was incidental.

I didn't exercise. I didn't lift weights. I didn't understand how physical training worked or why it mattered. When I was seventeen, I had lost around eighty pounds through running, but even then it had been sporadic. Once partying became the center of my life, movement nearly disappeared. I might run twenty times a year, if that.

Sleep was just as dysfunctional. I had no schedule and no consistency. I used whatever was available to force myself unconscious at night and jump-start myself in the morning. Tylenol PM to sleep. Coffee to wake up. Alcohol to take the edge off. Every day. This was before even accounting for the recreational drug use layered on top.

I was burning the candle at both ends.

Every basic biological input—sleep, food, movement, recovery—was either missing or chemically overridden.

But none of that registered as relevant to me.

I didn't see my lifestyle as the problem.
I didn't see avoidance as the problem.
I didn't see neglect as the problem.

What I saw were symptoms.

And I wanted an explanation.

Around this time, language began to appear for what I was experiencing.

Terms like *depression*, *anxiety disorder*, and *bipolar disorder* were entering mainstream culture. Mental health conversations were becoming more common. And Google was now something you could actually use.

You could type in your symptoms.

So I did.

Racing thoughts.
Mood swings.
Panic attacks.
Social withdrawal.
Fear without a clear cause.

The results came back quickly. Cleanly. Convincingly.

Page after page told the same story. Depression. Anxiety. Bipolar disorder. The descriptions felt uncomfortably accurate. The language fit. The checklists lined up. The symptoms mapped neatly onto what I was experiencing.

There were online quizzes too. Alcohol use. Depression. Anxiety. Mood disorders. I took all of them. I failed every one—or passed, depending on how you want to look at it.

Either way, the conclusion was the same.

I had finally found an explanation.

Something I could point to.
Something I could name.
Something I could blame.

The problem wasn't my life.
It wasn't my habits.
It wasn't the way I was living.

The problem was my condition.

A chemical imbalance.
A malfunction.
A diagnosis.

That idea was profoundly relieving.

It meant the chaos wasn't my fault. It meant the years of instability, fear, and confusion weren't the result of choices or circumstances I needed to examine. They were symptoms of an illness.

Diagnosis reframed everything.

I didn't need to dismantle my life.
I didn't need to change how I lived.
I didn't need to rebuild the foundation.

I just needed treatment.

Medication felt like the logical next step. The humane step. The responsible step. The modern answer to an old problem.

Diagnosis felt like freedom.
Medication felt like the solution.
A cure-all. A panacea.

Once I accepted that framing, the path forward no longer felt frightening.

It felt obvious.

Chapter Three: The First Psychiatrist

By the time I decided to see a professional, I wasn't looking for insight.

I was looking for confirmation.

The first person I went to wasn't a psychiatrist. It was my primary care doctor. At the time, I told myself I was going for something simple. I had it in my head that maybe I could get a medical marijuana recommendation. Marijuana felt familiar. Contained. Safer than whatever was happening inside my head.

But when I actually sat in the office, I froze.

I didn't ask for it.

I was scared of everything back then—authority, judgment, saying the wrong thing, opening a door I couldn't close. The irony wasn't lost on me: I was comfortable experimenting with drugs in uncontrolled settings, but terrified of saying the word *marijuana* to a doctor.

So instead, I did what I had learned to do.

I described symptoms.

Anxiety.
Mood swings.
Racing thoughts.
Panic attacks.
Difficulty sleeping.
Trouble focusing.

I didn't talk about how I lived.
I didn't talk about how I ate.
I didn't talk about alcohol.
I didn't talk about drugs.

Not because I was lying, exactly—but because none of that felt relevant to me. It didn't register as causal. It felt secondary. Background noise.

What felt important were the symptoms.

My primary care doctor listened. Asked a few questions. Looked concerned. Then did what primary care doctors are trained to do in situations like this.

He referred me to a psychiatrist.

That referral felt validating.

It meant this wasn't just stress. It meant this wasn't imagination or weakness. It meant something real was happening—something serious enough to require a specialist.

By the time I walked into the psychiatrist's office, I wasn't nervous.

I was relieved.

I had never met her before.

She was clearly intelligent. Clearly experienced. Reserved in a way that felt professional, distant, and unreadable. The office itself was lined with pharmaceutical advertisements—posters, pamphlets, drug names everywhere. It felt clinical. Corporate. Impersonal.

She didn't ease me in.

Why are you here?
How do you sleep?
How do you feel?
What's the problem?

I answered the way I had learned to answer. I gave her the language Google had given me. The same symptoms. The same phrasing. The same framing.

She listened. Asked a few more questions. Typed. Paused. Then said something that landed—but didn't stick.

You should stop drinking.
You should join a support group.

That advice barely registered.

It didn't fit into the narrative I had already accepted. I didn't see alcohol as relevant. I didn't see my lifestyle as negotiable. I saw those things as constants—parts of who I was, not variables to be examined.

What I do remember clearly is leaving with a prescription.

Celexa. An anti-depressant. Hope.

She told me not to drink while taking it.

I drank anyway.

She told me I was bipolar.

That diagnosis mattered more than the medication at first.

Suddenly, everything had a name. A category. A clinical explanation. The chaos I had been living with was no longer personal—it was medical.

I finally had something I could tell people.

A reason for my behavior that didn't sound like failure or recklessness. A label that made my instability sound legitimate instead of irresponsible.

I told my friends.

Nothing really changed.

No one was shocked. No one rallied. No one re-evaluated me. Everyone was wrapped up in their own lives, their own problems, their own chaos.

I wasn't suddenly understood.
I wasn't suddenly redeemed.

I was still the same weirdo.

The difference was that now I had medication.

And once medication entered the picture, the rules changed.

Chapter Four: The Guinea Pig Stage

Every beer felt like four.

At the time, we were really into karaoke. We'd go down to a local dive bar, Chasers Lounge, get drunk, and sing. My younger brother was a legend there. The kind of regular people remember. The older ladies would flirt. The crowd would cheer. It was that rare, small-town bar atmosphere where everyone knows your name by the second visit.

On the surface, it was harmless fun.

In reality, I was blacking out constantly.

Night after night.

Not because I was drinking more than before—but because the combination of medication and alcohol erased my memory and flattened my judgment. I didn't feel drunk the way I used to. I just disappeared.

And at the time, I didn't see that as a warning sign.

I saw it as collateral damage.

The disconnection from reality crept in quickly.

At first, it was subtle—hard to pin down, easy to rationalize. Then it wasn't.

I started doing things that didn't feel strange *while I was doing them*, but were deeply strange in retrospect. My sense of proportion disappeared. Ordinary impulses inflated into urgent missions.

One day, I started reading the Bible. It didn't feel like reading. It felt like something was speaking directly to me. Not metaphorically. Literally. I remember walking around the front yard with it, convinced I was on the edge of some kind of divine experience—waiting for whatever was supposed to happen next.

Other days, the energy went somewhere else.

I would clean the house obsessively. Not normal cleaning—compulsive, exhaustive cleaning. I'd vacuum corners no one ever looks at. Crawl around with attachments, convinced every speck of dirt mattered. It felt important. Necessary. Like if I stopped, something would be unfinished in a way I couldn't tolerate.

I started projects constantly. I'd move all my belongings into the garage with some vague idea of "reorganizing my life," give up halfway through, then move everything back. I rebuilt the carport that covered the car. I'd have elaborate thoughts about

meaning and purpose while doing it, like each task was part of something larger I couldn't quite articulate.

At the time, none of this registered as a problem.

Looking back, it's painfully obvious what was missing.

I didn't need insight.
I didn't need revelation.
I didn't need intensity.

I needed a job.
I needed physical exhaustion.
I needed regular food.
I needed real sleep.
I needed purpose.

Instead, I had Celexa.

I woke up every day feeling like a mental patient—not because anyone told me I was one, but because that's how my mind felt. Disconnected. Artificial. Slightly unreal. I'd head out to the garage, play drums, drink beer, smoke cigarettes, smoke weed, and repeat the cycle.

To make sense of it, I went looking for reassurance.

I spent hours reading other people's stories online—trying to understand what was happening to me by comparison. What this medication felt like for others. What combinations were "safe." What reactions were "normal."

I wasn't trying to get high anymore.

I was trying to feel *normal*.

And without realizing it, I was using the same logic that had gotten me there in the first place:
if other people are doing this, if there's language for it, if it's documented somewhere—then it must be okay.

The deeper I went, the more disconnected I became.

And no one was watching closely enough to stop it.

After Celexa, other medications followed. One by one, we tried new solutions.

There was Risperidone, an antipsychotic originally designed for schizophrenia and acute psychosis. It wasn't meant to help someone understand their life better—it was meant to quiet the mind by suppressing dopamine. In practice, it flattened emotion,

slowed thought, and made everything feel distant and unreal. It also came with a long list of potential side effects, including tardive dyskinesia and sexual dysfunction—permanent risks I didn't fully understand at the time.

Then came Depakote, a mood stabilizer and anti-seizure medication. Its job wasn't to fix anything so much as to contain it. Highs were capped. Lows were blunted. Emotional range narrowed until everything stayed inside a manageable band. I wasn't spiraling—but I also wasn't really alive. Stability came at the cost of sharpness, urgency, and depth. Plus the pills were enormous, swallowing them took real courage.

After that was Trazodone, an antidepressant often prescribed less for mood and more as a sedative. It was supposed to help me sleep. What it really did was knock me out. Sleep became something chemically enforced instead of something my body earned. Rest wasn't restorative—it was artificial.

At one point, I was put on Wellbutrin, an antidepressant that works differently than SSRIs. Instead of calming the system, it stimulates it—boosting dopamine and norepinephrine to increase energy, focus, and motivation. On paper, it was supposed to counter depression and fatigue. In reality, it added another layer of tension to a nervous system that was already overwhelmed. More energy didn't mean more clarity—it just meant more fuel without direction.

There was also Lexapro, another SSRI, often prescribed for anxiety and social anxiety in particular. It was meant to make interaction easier, reduce self-consciousness, and smooth out fear responses. What it really did was make social situations tolerable by dulling the emotional stakes. I could show up—but I wasn't fully present. Comfort replaced engagement.

Each medication was meant to fix something, or offset something, or fine-tune something. One pill to counteract the side effects of the last. One adjustment layered on top of another. The goal was never to understand what was happening underneath—only to keep the system from breaking down completely.

The insanity of all of this is that no one forced these on me—I was asking for help, looking for a chemical way to feel better without facing what was actually wrong. I wanted a shortcut to happiness, the same way I had always looked for shortcuts to enlightenment and everything else.

The other part of this is that no one was monitoring my behavior, my symptoms, or whether any of these drugs were actually helping. I was my own advocate—at a point in my life when I was the least responsible person I knew. I was, in effect, a guinea pig, treating pharmaceutical drugs the same way I had treated recreational

ones.

I would see my psychiatrist for fifteen minutes every three months. She'd ask how I was doing, I'd say I was fine, and I'd leave with a new prescription or a dosage change. There was no explanation I understood—no clear rationale—just the sense that it was time to try something else.

If I was a test subject, I never saw any payment.

But the drug that truly changed the trajectory was Clonazepam—Klonopin.

Klonopin was a benzodiazepine—what people casually describe as something "to take the edge off." Benzodiazepines work by enhancing GABA, the brain's primary inhibitory neurotransmitter. In plain terms, they slow everything down. Fear quiets. Tension drops. The alarm system shuts off. For someone living in a constant state of anxiety, that relief can feel immediate and profound.

In reality, it removed more than the edge—it removed my memory. It was like flipping a switch. When I started taking it, things felt easier—until I had no idea what I was doing. Entire stretches of time disappeared. Decisions were made without deliberation. Actions happened without recall. I was still moving through the world, but no longer fully present in it.

Benzodiazepines are also highly addictive, both psychologically and physically. The brain adapts quickly. What starts as relief becomes baseline. Miss a dose and anxiety doesn't just return—it rebounds, amplified. The nervous system, having learned to rely on chemical braking, panics when that brake is removed.

Coming off benzodiazepines isn't just uncomfortable—it can be dangerous. Withdrawal can involve severe anxiety, insomnia, tremors, panic, hallucinations, seizures, and in some cases, death. Unlike many other drugs, you can't simply stop taking them. The exit has to be slow, careful, and closely monitored. By the time I understood that, I was already in deeper than I realized.

And yet this drug was prescribed casually. Handed to me in brief appointments, with little explanation, no meaningful warning, and no discussion of long-term risk. I was told to take it and sent on my way, unaware that stopping it later could be far more dangerous than starting it.

Klonopin didn't just numb anxiety. It erased consequence. And once consequence is gone, everything else follows.

I became addicted. I'd run out of my prescription early and ask for more. She would warn me that she couldn't legally give me unlimited refills—and then she'd give them to me anyway.

Some of this is blurry. That's part of the problem. I don't remember running out of the pills. I do remember taking far more than the recommended dose.

It didn't take long for my life to go completely off the rails. And even that phrase doesn't quite fit. I was living like someone with no brakes.

Case in point: the Vegas trip. We drove out because my buddy had gotten us a suite at Caesars. On the drive, I took what I now believe was an obscene amount of Klonopin—something like ten pills.

We went to a strip club. After that, my memory fractures. My brother later told me that I repeatedly announced, "I'm going to the boom boom room," before disappearing. I maxed out a credit card. I blacked out completely. I don't know what happened after that, or how I got back to the room.

The rest of the weekend exists only in fragments. We went to a UFC fight—I only know this because there's some pictures. I have a wild, vacant look in my eye.

While walking down the Strip, my jeans caught on fire. Apparently, I had been playing with a lighter in my pocket and ignited them from the inside. I don't remember it happening. I didn't even notice until my friends yelled, "Dude, your pants are on fire."

I vaguely remember being up about eight hundred dollars at a blackjack table at the Bellagio, then losing it. I remember ending up broke. I remember calling my dad from a Bob's Big Boy. He put money back on the card so we could get gas and drive home.

That's it. That's the weekend. A few photos. A few stories from other people. Almost no memory of my own.

Klonopin didn't just erase anxiety. It erased continuity. It erased consequence. Entire days and weekends vanished, replaced by secondhand accounts and damaged relationships. I wasn't making decisions anymore—I was disappearing while things happened around me.

Eventually—and I don't even fully remember how—I either ran out or decided to stop. I quit seeing the psychiatrist for a while. I realized that whatever depression or anxiety I had walked in with, the life I was now living was far worse.

The pills hadn't stabilized me. They had taken me somewhere far darker.

Chapter Five: The Gaps Between the Drugs

At some point, I realized the medication wasn't solving my life. It wasn't helping. The darkness I found while on it scared me straight—not into health, but back into partying without pharmaceuticals. I was more cautious. More afraid. I wasn't better. I was just trying to avoid going somewhere even darker.
I wasn't failing in isolation. I was surrounded.

Friends would show up unannounced—drugs, booze, cigarettes in hand. They were friends of my brother, and they'd been friends of mine before I went off the rails, but things were different now. We were still part of the same orbit, the same house, the same constant flow. Even when I wanted distance, I didn't really have it. Everything I was trying to get away from kept walking through the front door.

I'd quit smoking, then start again. I'd quit drinking, then start again. Over and over. Sometimes it lasted a month. Sometimes a week. Sometimes a day. It felt endless.

As my behavior became more erratic, invitations stopped coming. People were afraid I'd do something weird or unpredictable. My vibe was off.

Once, at a friend's house, my emotional state was so strange that their large dog came up to me and then peed itself. That wasn't funny. It was unsettling. Even animals could sense that something wasn't right.

By that point, I'd ruined too many parties and been banned from too many houses. I wasn't just unwelcome—I was becoming a liability. I wasn't invited anymore. I wasn't trusted. I was, in practical terms, a social outcast.

So I disappeared into World of Warcraft, living like a hermit. I told myself I was still in college, still learning, still thinking—but really, I was hiding.

The strange part is that I was still around people all the time. Our house was where people hung out. There was always noise, movement, substances, conversation. But I don't think anyone particularly wanted to hang out *with me*. I was just there. A bystander. An observer. It was all happening around me, and I didn't belong to it. I wasn't part of it—I was at its mercy.

I'm not blaming anyone. I take responsibility for everything I did. But looking back, I honestly don't know what tools I was supposed to use.

Most nights, I'd take long drives through the canyon—an hour out, an hour back—just to get away from everything. Once, when I quit smoking, I replaced the urge with chugging water. I'd fill the passenger seat with empty bottles. It was crude, but I was trying.

That was the pattern. I was trying—but I had no structure, no direction, no understanding of what sobriety even meant. It wasn't presented as a real option back then. AA existed, technically, but in my mind it was for people who'd gotten DUIs. And somehow—by luck more than judgment—I never did.

So the cycle continued.

This lasted for a long stretch. I stopped seeing a psychiatrist around 20 or 21 and didn't go back until I was 23 when I met a girl who would become my girlfriend and move in with me a week later, who was also diagnosed bipolar.

Before I met her, I actually had my longest stretch of sobriety since I'd started drinking.

I remember counting the days. I swore off hanging out with anyone. I ran almost every day—something like fifty-eight days in a row. I was in shape. I was eating oatmeal every morning, sandwiches for lunch, and some kind of Flame Broiler bowl for dinner. For the first time in years, I was sleeping, moving, eating, and thinking like a functional human being.

I was healthy. Or at least healthier than I'd ever been. I was capable—more capable than I'd ever been.

I even started talking in World of Warcraft. Up to that point, I was too afraid to use voice chat unless I was completely hammered. Now I could speak sober. That alone felt like proof that something real was happening. My confidence was coming back.

And then, about a week before I met her, I started drinking again.

I still remember the moment.

I was sitting on the back steps, mixing a Sprite with Jack Daniel's. Across the way, my neighbor was doing that thing people do with horses—standing in the center while the horse runs freely around them, responding to subtle cues, responding to trust. The communication. The control without force. It was beautiful. It felt almost sacred. I still think about that moment.

A week later, a friend told me a wild story about a bipolar girl I *had* to meet.

I called her one night, drunk. We talked for hours. On the phone, she promised she'd kiss me the first time we met. We met at a farmer's market. A week later, she moved in with me.

The drinking and drugs that followed changed the course of my life.

She had a prescription for lithium. I had admitted to her that I'd been diagnosed but was unmedicated. I was curious. Without her permission, I sneaked some pills to see how I felt.

Honestly, I felt more controllable. More regulated. Safer—especially since I'd already started drinking again.

That summer, we did a lot of ecstasy. We smoked every day. We did acid on Christmas. We saw *Avatar* in the theater in 3D while coming down. It felt cinematic. Surreal. Like a movie you don't realize is dangerous until you're already inside it.

It didn't fix me. But it stabilized me enough to keep functioning.
At least on paper.

The relationship itself was volatile. We fought constantly. I thought she was cheating on me. I'm still pretty sure she was. And I don't mean normal fighting—I mean suicidal threats, police calls, family members rushing over to talk me down.

She'd call my siblings. They'd show up in a panic. This happened more than once.

Eventually, a kind of group consensus formed. For the first time, the people around me wanted me back on medication. Whether it was ever stated explicitly or not, the message was clear: get back on pills, or lose the relationship.

The relationship was drug-based. Highs and lows. Chaos. Intensity. Either way, I ended up back in the same psychiatrist's office.

It turned out she was seeing the same doctor.

She seemed more severely bipolar than I was—at least that was my perception. She'd been hospitalized before. I hadn't. She was more outspoken, more confident, more certain in her beliefs. I was more cautious. More reserved. More afraid of consequences. I treaded lightly, even when I saw the same things she saw and thought many of the same thoughts.

When I left that office, I had my own prescriptions. Lithium. Risperidone. I had a new identity. A new hope.

For the first time in my life, I was moving out of my dad's house. We moved to Long Beach, California. I enrolled at Long Beach City College to finish up, then planned to transfer and graduate from CSUDH with a philosophy degree. I wanted to become a lawyer. I was starting my adult life.

And the drugs were the key.

They regulated me just enough to make everything else possible—the drinking, the smoking, the other drugs. As long as I was compliant, as long as I did what I was told and followed the path in front of me, things seemed okay.

That was the illusion.

In some strange way, the timing was perfect.

Inside, something else was happening.

I had somehow landed on a medication that actually *worked*—at least in the narrowest sense of the word. It didn't fix my life. It didn't make me healthy. But it dulled my brain and flattened my emotions enough that I could keep going without collapsing.

It was a crutch.

And for a while, I needed it.

The medication smoothed out the extremes. It took the sharp edges off my thoughts. It reduced the panic, the intensity, the constant internal noise. It allowed me to continue living the same life I had been living—partying, drifting, avoiding—without immediate emotional or psychological consequences.

I could function.

But that functioning came at a cost.

Looking back, I wasn't really *there* anymore.

As the drugs settled in, I started to feel less like an active participant in my life and more like an object being carried by it. Like a boat on a river. The current decided the direction. I just floated along.

I made fewer decisions. I asked fewer questions.
I resisted less.

I was compliant in a way I'd never been before.

Dull enough not to challenge anything. Disconnected enough not to care. Life pushed me where it needed me to go, and I let it. School. Relationships. Daily routines. It all happened, but it didn't feel like it was happening *to me*.

I was still part of it—but at a distance.

I was disconnected from my girlfriend. Disconnected from my dad. Disconnected from myself. I showed up physically, but emotionally I felt removed, like I was watching my life unfold from the sidelines.

Things happened around me. Decisions were made. Time passed.

And I let it all happen.

At the time, I thought this was stability.

I thought this was what “working medication” felt like.

Only later would I realize that what I had gained in functionality, I had lost in agency.

Up until that point, this was simply how I understood adulthood.

This was what people did. They partied. They drank. They did dumb things. They took drugs. They didn’t eat particularly well. They slept when they could. They complained about stress and kept going. From where I stood, I wasn’t failing to grow up—I was following the script.

Nothing about my life felt abnormal in context. It felt ordinary. Familiar. Shared. The behaviors that should have stood out to me blended into what I thought adulthood looked like.

I wasn’t rebelling against responsibility.
I thought this *was* responsibility.

So when medication dulled the edges enough to let me keep functioning inside that model, it didn’t feel like avoidance. It felt like adaptation. Like I was finally doing what everyone else already knew how to do.

I didn’t question the script.
I didn’t question the tools I was using to survive inside it.

At the time, it all seemed reasonable. Normal. I told myself I wasn’t different in any meaningful way—just bipolar—and that the only real difference was that I needed pills to maintain the same lifestyle everyone else around me appeared to have.

Maybe that wasn’t true. Maybe I was wrong about how others were living. Maybe they weren’t drinking as much, or using as many drugs. Or maybe I was seeing only the surface and filling in the rest with my own assumptions.

Chapter Six: The Reality of Pharma

In this chapter, I'm not trying to argue a position or offer a solution. I'm documenting what it was like to live inside these drugs—as the guinea pig, as the reckless kid—and what actually happened as I moved from one prescription to the next.

This is my experience with the medical system. And while that system likely kept me alive, it also failed me in quieter ways. It isolated me from the root causes of my distress. It rarely asked me to examine my life, my habits, or my environment. Instead, it treated symptoms in isolation and sent me back out into the world with whatever medications I was willing to try, with little oversight and even less curiosity about how I was actually living.

I don't believe medication is the reason I survived. I believe I survived because of my upbringing, my family, my friends, strangers who intervened at the right moments, and maybe God. I survived because, even at my worst, I was cautious. I was reckless, but not careless. I had a healthy fear of police, prison, laws, and consequences, and I respected those boundaries as best I could while I was searching for answers.

Honestly, what I wish—more than anything—is that someone had taken the time to ask *why* I was feeling the way I was, and had actually been equipped to deal with the answer. My family tried. My dad tried. He cared deeply. But he wasn't trained for this. And once the bipolar label entered the picture, it felt like the problem was officially out of his hands. That, to me, is the real failure. Responsibility gets transferred to the medical system, and then the system either can't—or won't—do the work required. There isn't time. There aren't resources. There isn't patience. So the deeper questions never get asked.

What that left was me—on my own—experimenting with powerful psychiatric drugs, one after another, with no meaningful oversight, no long-term plan, and no one stepping in to slow the process down. I was testing chemicals on my own nervous system with unknown consequences, and no one stopped me. Not because it was safe—but because it was easier. If I showed up with symptoms and asked for a prescription, I got one. The threshold wasn't understanding or care. It was compliance.

And I want to be clear: I was responsible at the root. My behavior put me in those offices. I was the one drinking. The one smoking. The one making reckless choices. I'm not denying that, and I never have.

But responsibility doesn't exist in a vacuum. Society played a role too. As I've written elsewhere, cultural norms matter—especially when the brain isn't even fully developed. I started drinking and using drugs as a teenager, in an environment

where it was framed as normal, expected, even traditional. By the time consequences showed up, the habits were already entrenched. And I'm not the only one.

So I'm not asking to be absolved. I'm asking a different question: *why* was this treated as normal in the first place? Why was a young person, clearly struggling, told—implicitly and explicitly—that this was just part of growing up, while the response on the other end was to medicate the fallout without ever addressing the cause?

That's the question that never got answered.

What follows isn't a condemnation of medicine. It's an account of what these drugs actually did to me, as opposed to what they were supposed to do—because there's a difference between a treatment plan on paper and the reality of being a human being living inside it.

Part 1: Anti Depressants

I'll start with antidepressants. Since that's how I started.

My experience with Depression

Before going any further, I need to explain what depression actually felt like to me.

My experience of depression was this: my friends didn't like me anymore. Or at least, that's what it felt like. Everything I did, I didn't enjoy. I woke up sad. I went to bed sad. I was convinced no one wanted to hear what I had to say, that no one cared, that I had nothing to offer.

I had intrusive, negative thoughts that never shut off. I thought about suicide often. Not in a concrete, planned way—but I fantasized about it. About not being here anymore. About disappearing. I second-guessed everything I said. I replayed conversations over and over in my head, picking them apart, convincing myself I sounded stupid, embarrassing, or annoying.

Social anxiety became constant. I couldn't look people in the eye. I felt exposed when I spoke. I was convinced I was boring, unwanted, and fundamentally unlikable.

So I hid online.

I played World of Warcraft all day and lived in Trade chat—talking shit, philosophizing, and saying absurd things just to get a reaction. Barrens chat felt like

the last truly lawless place on the internet. I used to joke with my mom that I was basically Socrates, corrupting the youth.

I drank constantly. I smoked cigarettes. I took Tylenol PM every night to knock myself out. I listened to Elliott Smith and other dark, emo music on repeat. I felt every lyric like it was written for me.

At the root of it, I wasn't sleeping. I convinced myself I had insomnia. I even thought it made me interesting—deep, mysterious. In reality, I didn't feel like I had anything real to offer, so I tried to dress up my suffering as personality. As depth. As something that might make me attractive.

Because I was twenty. And what does any twenty- or twenty-one-year-old guy want? To get laid. That's not profound. It's just true.

I wanted to be a writer. I wrote things—cringy things. Worse than this. I was trying to find a voice, but I didn't have a foundation.

Eventually, I couldn't even smoke weed anymore. When I did, I'd shut down completely. I'd go silent. I couldn't laugh. I couldn't look at anyone. I was convinced everyone hated me, didn't want me there, didn't want me to exist at all.

I'd leave and drive home, and my thoughts would spiral—down, down, down. It felt like something dark was speaking inside my head, feeding me certainty that I was worthless.

I took mushrooms with friends once, out in the woods. I went silent. I became convinced they hated me. Then I became convinced they'd brought me out there to kill me. That wasn't real—but it was real in my head. I felt it completely.

That's what depression was for me.

At some point, I started trying to feel *anything* at all. I burned myself on my hands and wrists with cigarettes because I'd watched *Fight Club* every night on repeat and absorbed the idea that pain could bring clarity, enlightenment, even freedom.

I wasn't trying to die. I wasn't trying to be dramatic. I was completely lost, and I believed that if I felt enough—if I felt *something*—I might finally understand who I was or why I felt the way I did. I was trying to prove I was still there.

Looking back, that wasn't just despair—it was identity. Once I had the bipolar label, I leaned into it hard. Just like I Googled my symptoms, I read about what bipolar people were supposed to be like, and then I acted that way. I wasn't just depressed anymore—I was performing the diagnosis.

That sounds absurd now, but inside that headspace it felt coherent. The label didn't just describe my behavior; it began to shape it.

When you decide something is part of your identity—when you decide *this is what you are*—it isn't a big leap to start acting like what you believe that identity entails. That isn't pathology. It's human nature.

My Experience with Anti-Depressants

Now that we understand what depression felt like for me, we can talk about how I responded to the drugs.

What I hoped for was happiness. Or at least something that felt like relief. What I got instead was something else.

The chaos stopped. The spikes flattened. The constant panic quieted. For the first time in a long time, my internal world felt contained. That mattered—because before that, I was completely out of control.

But what replaced the chaos wasn't peace. It was absence.

The pain softened. Fear morphed. Emotional extremes collapsed inward. What came next wasn't contentment—it was a hollow middle ground that didn't feel alive. I wasn't sad the way I had been before. But I wasn't happy. I wasn't even okay in a way that felt real.

I became detached. From people. From reality. From myself. I was patient zero.

I didn't feel connected to what was happening around me. Conversations felt distant, like I was watching them instead of participating in them. Emotional reactions were delayed or muted. Things that should have mattered didn't land. Things that should have brought joy barely registered at all.

When people say antidepressants "worked," what they usually mean is that the extremes became manageable. What they don't always say is what disappeared along with them.

Color and depth went first.
Pleasure became muted.
Curiosity faded.

I wasn't suffering loudly anymore.
I was just… there. Empty.

At the time, I accepted this as improvement. Compared to panic and chaos, emptiness felt like progress. Compared to instability, emotional flatness felt responsible.

But it wasn't happiness.
It was an attempt at chemical containment.

And that containment came with its own set of problems.

Alcohol hit differently. One drink felt like four. I blacked out constantly. Judgment disappeared even faster. I lost sexual function—desire was still there, but my body didn't respond. It shut down in ways I didn't understand or expect. That kind of disconnection creates its own anxiety, its own shame, its own isolation.

The longer I stayed there, the more uncomfortable it became. A constant sense of impending doom set in. I could feel myself running out of road.

Eventually, it got bad enough that I was willing to go back to what life had felt like before. Back to the anxiety. Back to the chaos. Back to the fear. At least those feelings were real. At least I could feel *something*.

That's the part people rarely talk about.

Control isn't the same thing as health.
Stability isn't the same thing as being alive.

Antidepressants didn't give me a better life. They gave me the ability to tolerate a life I wasn't actually fixing. They made it easier to remain disconnected from the things that were still wrong.

It was like everything was on fire—my life, my body, my future—and I was sitting there calmly thinking, *this is fine*.

When medication removes discomfort without restoring meaning, it doesn't solve the underlying problem. It delays it.

For me, antidepressants weren't the answer. If anything, they taught me something closer to the story of the boy who cried wolf. I thought I knew what sadness was. I thought I knew what depression was. Then I tried antidepressants—and realized how wrong I'd been.

And for a long time, I cycled through them. Thinking *this one would be different*. *That one would be different*. I heard one helped people quit smoking. Another promised focus. Another promised calm. On and on it went.

The result was always the same.

A little safer.
A little more controlled.
And each time, a little farther away from actually feeling alive.

Another quiet illusion antidepressants gave me was the belief that I would finally be able to live the way everyone else seemed to be living—that I'd be able to cope, to handle the lifestyle.

That was the unspoken promise.

I wasn't expecting euphoria. I wasn't expecting constant joy. I just thought I'd be able to participate. To party like everyone else. To drink like everyone else. To live the same life and be okay in the way everyone else appeared to be.

What I didn't understand at the time was how little information I actually had.

I couldn't see how other people felt when they went home.
I couldn't see how much they were really drinking.
I couldn't see what drugs they were using, how often, or why.
I couldn't see what gave them purpose, structure, or meaning outside the moments I shared with them.

All I ever saw were highlights.
Short windows.
Social snapshots.

Antidepressants didn't give me the ability to enjoy life the way others were enjoying it. They gave me the illusion that I could enjoy life the way I *imagined* others were enjoying it.

Part 2: Mood Stabilizers

I ended up staying on Lithium and Risperidone for fifteen years.

Fifteen years.

Eleven of those years, I was sober. I got sober in May of 2014—but I stayed on the medication. Not because everything was fixed, but because I was still afraid. Afraid of what life would feel like without them. Afraid of who I'd be without the chemical buffer after so long.

I remembered what life had been like before. I remembered the chaos, the instability, the fear. And after fifteen years on these drugs, I wasn't sure I knew how to exist without them anymore.

I bring that up because I've experienced these drugs in both states: while still drinking and using, and later in a sober body. I know how they react when chaos is still present, and how they behave when everything else is stripped away. In both cases, they dulled my wits, numbed my emotions, and slowed my thoughts. They reduced my ability to connect with other people in a way that felt genuine. Over time, they nurtured dependence—not just chemically, but psychologically—and quietly encouraged a victim's posture toward life, where difficulty felt medicalized instead of addressable.

And the worst part—the part I only understood much later—is that there was never a plan to stop taking them.

No one looked at my foundation. No one examined the root causes, the underlying problems, or the *reason* these drugs were being prescribed in the first place. The diagnosis arrived, the label stuck, and the conversation effectively ended.

I was told it was a "chemical imbalance."
No one ever tested my chemicals.

That phrase carried enormous authority, despite being entirely abstract. It sounded scientific. It sounded final. And once it was applied, the implied solution was permanent medication—indefinitely. Not as a bridge. Not as a temporary support. As a lifelong condition.

That's how it felt, at least. Like a life sentence.

Not because I was hopeless—but because I was difficult. Because I was unstable. Because I was inconvenient for the people around me to manage. Medication became the way to make me tolerable, functional, not the way to make me well.

I don't say that lightly. And I don't say it flippantly. But looking back, it's hard not to see the pattern: when the work required to actually help someone is too complex, too time-consuming, or too uncomfortable, chemistry becomes the shortcut.

I suppose it beats the alternatives history has offered. Lobotomies come to mind. But that's a low bar.

What makes that comparison harder to ignore is that it wasn't something I invented. My primary care doctor said it to me directly. He told me that this was how people like me used to be handled—locked away, forgotten, subjected to electroshock therapy, lobotomized. He wasn't being cruel. He was being matter-of-fact. This, he explained, was progress.

I remember sitting there, hearing that, and realizing how low the standard still was. Not *are you well*, or *why are you suffering*, but *at least we aren't doing that anymore*. That was the bar. And once you see it that way, it's hard to unsee.

I didn't take his word for it at first. Later, I looked it up and confirmed it for myself. This wasn't hyperbole, and it wasn't ancient history. People with behavioral or cognitive differences were routinely institutionalized, subjected to electroshock therapy, or lobotomized—not as treatment, but as containment.

If that sounds exaggerated, you can look up Rosemary Kennedy. Her story isn't obscure. It's documented. It's recent enough to be uncomfortable. And it makes clear what "progress" has often meant in practice: fewer overtly brutal methods, but the same underlying goal of making difficult people easier to manage.

How Mood Stabilizers Actually Feel

Mood stabilizers don't erase emotion. They cap it.

They slow your brain down just enough that nothing ever gets too big. Highs don't climb too high. Lows don't crash too low. Everything stays inside a narrow, manageable band.

How that plays out in real life is exactly what it sounds like, but you experience it through ordinary, everyday moments. Something good happens—you start to feel better. Then something slightly less good happens, and you settle back to the middle. Something bad happens—you dip. Then something slightly less bad happens, and you drift back up again.

Everything returns to baseline.

Maybe it changes what you notice. Maybe it changes how you interpret what's happening. Either way, the effect is constant. If I started feeling good around five in the evening—*too* good—I'd take my pills, and back down I'd go.

Day in.
Day out.

From a distance, this looks like stability. A functioning, reliable human being. Someone you can set your watch by. Rarely late. Shows up to work. Gives notice before taking vacation. Boring. Predictable. A welcome relief compared to the person who used to cause worry and headaches.

In reality, it feels like compliance.

I wasn't incapacitated. I wasn't sedated. I could function. I could show up. I could complete tasks and meet responsibilities. From the outside, I probably looked calmer. More reasonable. Easier to deal with.

Inside, something else was happening.

My reactions lagged. My thinking slowed. It felt like there was a governor on my thoughts, emotions, and creativity. Conversations were slightly delayed, like I was always a step behind the moment. When someone told me something painful or upsetting, it took a second—or two—for it to register. Then I'd respond with what felt like a pre-approved answer. The correct one. The acceptable one.

Not the honest one.

Emotions still existed, but they were filtered. I didn't experience them directly. It was like information being passed through layers—someone died, and the message came to me thirdhand. I understood it intellectually, but it didn't land. It didn't move me. I wasn't invested.

I wasn't participating. I was observing.

I felt dulled. Flattened. Less urgent. Less alive. Joy didn't rise very high. Pain didn't sink very deep. Everything stayed muted enough to be tolerable.

I'd describe it as living slightly outside of life.

Not fully detached—but not fully connected either. Like watching things happen rather than participating in them. Like being present in body, but distant in spirit.

In that state, you become hard to disturb.

Unphased.
Accepting.
Docile.

That's not entirely a bad thing. For some people, at certain times, that level of containment is necessary. It can prevent real harm. It can buy time. It can keep chaos from spilling over.

But it comes with a cost.

Over long periods, mood stabilizers didn't help me build a life. They helped me tolerate one. They made it easier to accept circumstances I might otherwise have questioned. Easier to comply. Easier to keep moving without asking whether the direction made sense.

It was a functional way to live.

But it wasn't a fully human one.

And the longer I stayed there, the harder it became to tell the difference.

I didn't notice the shift right away, but it showed up in the choices I started making. I went from being a philosopher to an accountant. I'd always been good at math—I'm

not saying math is dull, or that accounting is empty work. It isn't. But the move itself was telling. I drifted from asking open-ended questions about meaning and existence to working inside systems with clear rules, clear answers, and defined outcomes.

One girl put it perfectly. She told me I was moving from "clouds to concrete."

At the time, that felt like progress. Structure. Stability. Something solid to stand on. And in some ways, it was. But it also mirrored what the medication was doing internally—narrowing my range, reducing ambiguity, trading curiosity for certainty. I wasn't choosing that direction so much as settling into it, following the path of least emotional resistance.

It made life easier to manage.
It also made it smaller.

Lithium, Risperidone, and Drug Interactions — A Note

There was another strange thing about lithium that took me a long time to understand.

If I drank enough, or smoked enough weed, or used other drugs, it could override the stabilizing effect. The emotions would come back. The anxiety. The intensity. The sense of connection. I could feel again.

And if it went too far, I always had a way back.

It felt like having a brake pedal.

I wasn't just numbing myself anymore—I was managing the range of my experience. Pushing past the limits when I wanted to feel something, then pulling back when it became overwhelming. I could dial things up and down. I could contain the chaos.

In that sense, lithium became a kind of panic button. A safety net I could fall back into whenever emotions got too real or too uncomfortable.

That illusion of control was powerful.

It meant I could step into intense situations without fully risking myself. I could chase feeling—connection, emotion, closeness—knowing there was always something there to blunt the edge afterward.

And I wanted to feel.

By that point, it wasn't really about excess anymore. It wasn't about partying for its own sake. It was about trying to feel alive. To feel connected to the people around

me. To understand and be understood. To experience something that felt real instead of flattened and distant.

I drank to feel alive.
I smoked to feel alive.

And lithium sat quietly in the background, like a security blanket—something I could clutch whenever things got uncomfortable. It didn't give me warmth, but it gave me reassurance. Like Linus's blanket from *Peanuts*, always there, always familiar.

That combination kept me stuck.

I could touch life without fully entering it. I could flirt with intensity without committing to change. I could feel just enough to keep going, then retreat back into safety.

For a long time, that felt like balance.

Looking back, it was just another way of avoiding the deeper work—the work of building a life that didn't require chemical controls to be tolerable.

Part 3: Anti-Anxiety

If antidepressants flattened emotion and mood stabilizers capped it, anti-anxiety medications did something different.

They shut the alarm off.

I was prescribed anti-anxiety meds—Klonopin first, then Xanax. Xanax came later, around the time I got my first corporate job, and it was prescribed specifically for flying. Flying sober, without alcohol, while on Lithium and Risperidone, is something I wouldn't wish on anyone.

It's a special kind of hell.

It feels like this: You're fully aware of mortality while being too afraid to actually live. Your body is convinced you're about to die, and your mind is trapped inside that conviction with no exit. You can't distract yourself out of it. You can't reason your way through it. You're just stuck there—hyper-aware, hyper-fragile, and terrified.

Around that same time, I was also coming to grips with something else: how different my expectations of "professional adults" were from reality. I had grown up believing that corporate environments were staffed by composed, disciplined people who had everything under control. What I encountered instead was much more human. People were tired. Distracted. Hungover. Going through the motions. Doing

the best they could inside systems that demanded competence but rarely produced calm.

That realization didn't make me feel safer. It made me more anxious. I suddenly understood how much of the world runs not on perfection, but on momentum—on people showing up imperfectly and hoping nothing goes wrong. The illusion that "someone else has this handled" dissolved, and with it went a layer of psychological protection I didn't realize I'd been relying on.

Medication became a tool in the way I learned to tolerate that awareness. Not because anything specific was wrong, but because once the myth of flawless professionalism fell apart, the weight of responsibility felt heavier. Anxiety wasn't abstract anymore. It had context.

That first dose of Xanax cuts straight through everything.

And that's how dependence starts.
The fear drops.
The tension releases.
Your body unclenches.

Suddenly you can breathe again. Talk again. Sit still. Inhibitions lower. Social interaction smooths out. A sense of ease appears that feels almost miraculous when you've been living inside constant fear.

That relief is real.

But the second dose doesn't work the same way.
And the third works even less.
So you take more. Or you take it more often.

And that's exactly why these drugs are dangerous.

They don't solve anxiety—they silence it. They don't teach regulation or build resilience. They don't address the underlying cause. They override the system. And the brain adapts quickly.

When you try to remove that override, everything comes back louder.
Much louder.

The anxiety doesn't return to baseline. It rebounds—sharper, more insistent, more panicked than before. What started as relief quietly turns into dependence, and what you're left with isn't the original problem—it's a worse version of it.

That's the trap. You don't end up where you started.
You end up further behind.

And this isn't just uncomfortable. It's extremely dangerous.

If you don't come off these types of medications carefully, the consequences can be severe. In extreme cases, people can die. That's not hyperbole. That's reality.

I was lucky.

I was only on anti-anxiety meds for a few months. Three or four, maybe. Long enough to feel how effective they were—and long enough to understand that I never wanted to touch them again.

Getting off them was awful.

But it ended.

And once it did, I knew something with absolute clarity:

Whatever anxiety was trying to tell me, silencing it chemically was not the answer.

No more.

Part 4: Stimulants

A Fifteen-Minute Solution

I got an Adderall prescription the same way I got most of the others.

A friend had a prescription. I tried it. I liked it.

So I Googled the symptoms.

I walked into a doctor's office with a theory. I said I was having trouble concentrating in class. That my energy was low. That I was struggling to complete assignments. I said I thought it might help. I said I was willing to try it.

That was enough.

Looking back, what's hard to ignore isn't that it happened — it's how little resistance there was. No deep assessment. No real attempt to understand my life, my habits, my sleep, or my drug use. No discussion of context. No long-term plan.

Just a fifteen-minute conversation and a prescription.

That's worth sitting with.

Not because stimulants never help anyone — they clearly do — but because the threshold for powerful medication wasn't understanding or care. It was plausibility. If you could describe the symptoms convincingly and signal compliance, the system moved forward.

That's not a conspiracy.
It's a process.

And once you see how easily that process works, it becomes hard not to wonder how often actual care is quietly replaced by quick diagnosis and chemical solutions — not out of malice, but out of momentum.

Adderall – Chemical Clarity

Adderall is a strange one, because it works — sometimes extraordinarily well.

For me, it flipped a switch I didn't know existed. While I was on it, I became a completely different kind of student. I could sit down, read entire chapters, absorb the material, and execute without resistance. Homework that would have taken days happened in an afternoon. Concepts clicked. Numbers made sense. I was getting straight A's in my accounting classes.

It felt like a transformation.

I honestly believe it helped lay the groundwork for my success in my accounting career. I went from a drifting philosophy student to someone who could build financial statements, understand systems, and perform at a high level. On paper, this looked like growth. Progress. Proof that the right medication could unlock potential.

And for a while, I believed that.

To be clear, Adderall didn't make me intelligent.
I already was.

I'd always been good at math. Numbers and systems made sense to me long before stimulants entered the picture. What the drug did wasn't create ability — it removed resistance. It lowered the friction between effort and execution.

That distinction matters. Because stimulants don't create potential. They amplify what's already there — and they aren't limitless. They borrow against the system. And like anything borrowed, there's a cost.

But stimulants don't just give you focus. They take it from somewhere else.

Sleep went first.

I stopped shutting down properly. Nights blurred into mornings. Once, I stayed awake for days. I remember walking with a girl I was seeing and admitting — out loud — that I was afraid to fall asleep because I wasn't sure I'd wake up.

I did.

Another time, after being awake all night, I called my dad completely energized, convinced I'd invented something revolutionary — a solution to prevent cords from ever tangling again. At the time, it felt brilliant. Looking back, it was obvious I wasn't grounded in reality.

Stimulants didn't just sharpen my mind. They narrowed it.

Everything became urgent. Everything felt important. Thoughts raced faster than judgment could keep up. The confidence they produced wasn't earned — it was chemically inflated.

Socially, the effect was just as pronounced. Conversations stretched endlessly. Ideas piled on ideas. I could talk for hours, connecting dots, chasing theories, pulling people into momentum whether they wanted to be there or not.

It felt like connection.

It wasn't.

It was stimulation masquerading as insight.

Like the other drugs before it, Adderall gave me something real — but only temporarily, and only by borrowing from the future. Focus came at the expense of rest. Productivity came at the expense of balance. Confidence came without grounding.

Once again, the pattern repeated.

The drug didn't build a life.
It helped me perform inside one.

And as long as the medication was doing the work, I didn't have to ask whether the structure I was performing inside was actually sustainable.

Part 5: What Was Ignored the Entire Time

Across antidepressants, mood stabilizers, anti-anxiety meds, and stimulants, a pattern emerged.

Each drug solved a specific problem in isolation — at first.

Each one reduced friction — for a while.

Each one made it easier to keep going, until it didn't.

And in that narrow sense, many of them worked.
I could tolerate my life.
I could perform inside it.
I could adapt — without ever fixing it.

What none of them did was ask the obvious question.

Why did my system require this much chemical intervention just to function?

Where, exactly, was my “chemical imbalance”?
What did that phrase actually mean?

Which chemical was missing?
How was that determined?
And why was I never given that chemical directly?

Was I truly *lithium deficient*?
If so, deficient compared to what baseline?

What was actually happening inside my body — and why wasn’t anyone asking these questions with me?

And more importantly, why wasn’t I asking them?

At the time, I didn’t know how. I didn’t have the language, the confidence, or the clarity to challenge authority. I assumed the questions had already been asked somewhere else — by someone smarter, more qualified, more responsible than me.

So I complied.

At the root of all of it, looking back, if I’m being honest, I wasn’t a victim of mystery or misfortune.

I was failing.

I had derailed my life with drugs and alcohol. I had made impulsive decisions. I had ignored people who cared about me. I had chosen short-term relief over long-term stability, again and again. And I was living with the consequences of that.

There’s nothing chemical about that.

The way out of that situation was never going to be solved by labeling my behavior a “chemical imbalance” and layering medications on top of it. It required something much less dramatic and much more difficult: recognizing what I was actually doing, stopping the behaviors that were destroying me, and slowly rebuilding a life that didn’t require escape.

The real work was dropping the shovel.
Stopping the digging.
And climbing out, one day at a time — the same way I eventually did in sobriety.

I wish someone had said that to me back then.

Not gently. Not euphemistically. Just honestly.

I would have saved years.

If someone had told me plainly that getting better meant stopping the drugs, stopping the drinking, eating real food, sleeping regularly, moving my body, getting a job — any job — and building some form of purpose or usefulness, I would have understood. That path would have led to confidence, connection, and self-respect far faster than any prescription ever did.

That's the point of this book.

Not that I was "broken."
Not that my brain was defective.
But that my life was out of alignment — and alignment is something you can rebuild.

What I needed wasn't a diagnosis that excused my behavior.
I needed the truth about it.

Every medication adjusted a dial — mood, fear, focus, energy — but none of them addressed the foundation underneath.

None of them asked how I slept.
How I ate.
How I moved.
What structure I lived inside.
What responsibility, purpose, or routine my life actually contained.

They treated symptoms.

Fifteen-minute visits.
Fifteen-minute diagnoses.
"See you in three months."

For years, I accepted that framing. I thought health was something you managed chemically. I thought stability meant controlling outputs instead of fixing inputs at the source. I assumed this was just how adulthood worked.

It never occurred to me that the problem wasn't my brain.

It was the absence of anything solid underneath it.

That realization didn't arrive all at once.

It arrived slowly — through exhaustion, dissatisfaction, and the quiet sense that something essential was missing. Through the feeling that I was surviving, but not actually living.

Only much later did I understand what had been ignored the entire time.

The basics.

Today, this information feels obvious. We talk openly about sleep, nutrition, movement, recovery, and routine as foundational to mental health. We understand that food is fuel, movement is how that fuel is used, sleep is how the system repairs itself, and rest is how it recovers.

That understanding wasn't available to me then — at least not in any practical, accessible way. And I paid for that ignorance with years of confusion and unnecessary suffering.

Not for you.
For me.

But you don't need to repeat it.

You don't need to relearn this the hard way. You don't need to run your body and mind into the ground and then wonder why the system starts throwing errors. The information exists now. The patterns are visible. The fundamentals are no longer hidden.

Medication was designed to help people survive crises. And often, it does. But when it becomes the *first* response instead of a *temporary* one — when foundations are ignored and chemistry is asked to compensate indefinitely — something breaks.

That's not malice.
That's incentives.

Money changes behavior.
Reimbursement shapes decisions.
Time pressure narrows options.

When prevention isn't profitable and prescriptions are efficient, systems drift. Not because anyone wakes up intending harm — but because incentives reward speed, compliance, and repeat treatment more reliably than slow, foundational care.

You don't need a conspiracy for that.
It's just economics.

And to be clear — this isn't ignorance.

The effects are known.
The data exists.
The tradeoffs are understood.

When systems continue operating the same way year after year, despite predictable outcomes, that's no longer accidental. It's accepted. It's tolerated. It's built in.

People don't need to intend harm for harm to persist. They only need to benefit from the way things work — and choose not to change them.

That's how systems fail quietly.
Not through malice, but through willful indifference.

And if you're wondering whether the latest wave of pharmaceutical solutions — GLP-1s included — are truly designed to make you your best, most capable self, I won't tell you what to think.

I'll just ask you to consider everything you've just read.

Consider how often the answer offered to complex human problems has been chemical intervention first, foundation second — if at all. Consider how many times relief was framed as resolution. How often tolerance was mistaken for health. How many years can pass before anyone asks what's actually missing underneath.

GLP-1s may help some people. Just like antidepressants helped me. Just like mood stabilizers helped me. Just like stimulants helped me. In the short term, many of these tools work.

The question isn't whether they reduce symptoms.

The question is whether they build a life — or simply make it easier to remain inside one that still isn't working.

If you ever feel unsure, don't look at the marketing.
Look at the incentives.
And look at the history.

I am that history.

Chapter Seven: The Foundation of Health

This is the chapter everything else was pointing toward.

I'm aware it took a long time to get here. That wasn't an accident.

Before talking about foundations, I needed to show the scale of dysfunction they were supporting. The degree of recklessness. The amount of chemical intervention required just to keep me upright. The sheer madness of how I lived.

Because without that context, what comes next sounds simplistic. Or moralistic. Or like a wellness checklist.

It isn't.

What I've learned over the last 40 years of life and 11 1/2 years of sobriety didn't come from theory. It came from running out of options. From discovering—slowly and painfully—that even after alcohol was gone, even after drugs were gone, even after cigarettes were gone, something was still wrong.

Sobriety helped.
But it wasn't enough.

That was the uncomfortable truth.

The problem went deeper than substances. It went deeper than diagnosis. It went deeper than medication. What I was dealing with wasn't a chemical imbalance—it was a system failure.

And systems can be rebuilt.

What follows isn't a program. It isn't advice. It's a sequence of discoveries—each one addressing a layer of the problem that medication never touched.

Part I — Removing the Obvious Poisons Wasn't the Cure

After I got sober, things improved.

That matters.

Alcohol had been a major accelerant in my life. It fueled impulsive decisions, lowered inhibitions, and made every other bad choice easier to justify. Removing it reduced chaos. Reduced volatility. Reduced the frequency of disaster.

Recognizing alcohol for what it actually is — a poison — helped clarify that much.

But it didn't fix everything.

Anger remained.
Anxiety remained.
Depression remained.

They were quieter—but still present. Still waiting. Still capable of hijacking my day.

That was my first real clue.

If alcohol had been *the* problem, removing it should have resolved the symptoms. It didn't. Which meant I was still missing something fundamental.

Part II — Movement Changed Everything

That's when I started moving again

For me, that began with running.

Running helped. Immediately.

It burned off excess energy. It regulated sleep. It gave my body something physical to do with emotions that had nowhere to go. I felt clearer after runs. Calmer. Less volatile.

But running wasn't the complete answer.

It mitigated symptoms — it didn't resolve them. The anger still surfaced. The anxiety still found its way in. Depression still hovered at the edges. I was improving, but I wasn't stable.

So I kept looking.

Weightlifting was the turning point.

Not conceptually. Practically.

Unlike running, lifting didn't just burn energy — it contained it. It required focus, structure, progression, and recovery. It demanded presence. You couldn't dissociate under a loaded bar.

Within weeks, something unexpected happened.

Anxiety collapsed.

Not reduced. Not managed. Collapsed.

The constant background noise disappeared. The edge was gone. My body felt grounded in a way it never had before. For the first time in my life, I understood what people meant when they said they felt "solid."

Anger diminished.
Depression softened.
Emotional volatility lost its grip.

This wasn't mindset. It wasn't belief. It was physiology.

Weightlifting forced my nervous system into a pattern it had never experienced before: stress followed by recovery, repeated predictably, under my control.

That pattern mattered more than anything else I'd tried.

And it raised a terrifying question:

If something this basic could do what fifteen years of medication couldn't…
what else had I missed?

Weightlifting also introduced something I'd been missing for most of my life: visible, trackable progress.

I could lift a certain amount one week, and lift more the next. The feedback was immediate. Objective. Unarguable. Effort in produced results out. That mattered more than I realized at the time.

Human brains need progress.
They need evidence that effort leads somewhere.
They need a reason to show up again tomorrow.

Without that, hope fades. Discipline feels pointless.

My dad used to quote his father all the time on the key to happiness: "*you need something to do, something to look forward to, and someone to love*."

Weightlifting gave me two of those immediately.

It gave me something to do — every day, with structure and purpose.
And it gave me something to look forward to — the next session, the next increase, the next small win.

Progress became tangible. Measurable. Earned.

That did something medication never did. It restored trust between my effort and my outcomes. It taught my nervous system that action mattered — that showing up changed things.

Once that connection came back online, everything else became easier to build.

Part III — Meditation Isn't About Calm, It's About Awareness

Meditation came next, and it wasn't what I expected.

I didn't find peace.
I didn't find bliss.
I didn't "quiet my mind."

What I found was awareness.

Meditation didn't remove thoughts or emotions—it exposed them. It slowed things down just enough for me to actually see what was happening inside my own head instead of reacting to it automatically.

For the first time, I could notice anger *before* it turned into an outburst. Anxiety *before* it hijacked my body. Sadness *before* it collapsed into despair. That gap mattered.

Meditation didn't make emotions go away. It made them legible.

I stopped treating feelings like enemies that needed to be suppressed or numbed. I started treating them like signals—information about something that needed attention.

That alone changed everything.

Up until that point, every solution I had tried—drugs, alcohol, distraction—had been about silencing internal experience. Meditation did the opposite. It forced me to sit with it.

Uncomfortably. Honestly. Without escape.

And slowly, something shifted.

Emotions moved *through* me instead of getting stuck. Thoughts lost some of their authority. I wasn't my feelings anymore—I was the one observing them.

That distinction is subtle.

It's also the difference between managing symptoms and actually healing.

One of my meditation teachers put it in a way that finally made sense to me.

When something uncomfortable shows up, don't fight it.
Don't suppress it.
Don't try to fix it.

Invite it in.
Offer it a seat.
Be curious.

Treat it like a guest.

That idea changed everything. Instead of bracing against anger, fear, or sadness, I started meeting them with equanimity — not approval, not indulgence, just openness. *You can be here. Let's see what you are.*

Thoughts stopped feeling like emergencies. They became events.

I learned to watch them the way you watch clouds move across the sky — appearing, shifting shape, dissolving on their own. Or like little mushrooms popping up in a field: sudden, strange, temporary.

Hi, mushroom.

That posture — curiosity instead of resistance — gave me space. And in that space, reactions lost their grip. I didn't have to obey every thought or feeling just because it appeared.

Part IV — Discipline Changed the Rules Entirely

Fifteen months ago, everything finally clicked.

Not because I found a new trick—but because I found discipline in a way I never had before.

Not discipline as punishment.
Not discipline as self-hatred.
But discipline as alignment with reality.

The idea came from a simple but brutal concept: *carry your cross and walk uphill.*

Accept the inevitability of suffering.
Accept mortality.
Accept responsibility.
Stop negotiating with discomfort.

At the same time, I was confronting two unavoidable realities: my own eventual death, and the inevitability of AI reshaping the world whether I liked it or not.

Strangely, embracing both freed me.

Once I stopped pretending I could avoid discomfort, avoid change, or avoid responsibility, fear lost its leverage. I stopped waiting for permission to take care of myself properly.

Discipline became non-negotiable.

Sleep became scheduled.
Training became daily.
Food became intentional.
Sobriety became enforced.
Avoidance became visible.

I stopped asking how I *felt* about doing the right thing and started doing it because it was necessary.

That's when anxiety truly died.

Not because life got easier—but because I stopped lying to myself about what was required to survive it.

Part V — Mortality Makes Things Simple

Exactly fifty-eight days ago, I had a near-death experience.

I wrote the date down afterward because I didn't want to forget it.

I was pitching in a slow-pitch softball game when a line drive came straight back at me. The hitter was about fifty feet away. The ball was moving close to a hundred miles per hour. There was no time to react—no thought, no calculation.

It missed my face by inches. I didn't even consciously dodge it. My instinct did.

Maybe I wouldn't have died. Maybe I would have just been badly injured. There's no way to know, and that's not the point.

What matters is how it felt in the moment.

For a fraction of a second, everything collapsed into the present moment. No past. No future. No plans. No stories. Just the raw understanding that this could end *right now*.

And then it was over.

I walked off the field physically unharmed. But something fundamental changed.

That moment stripped away every remaining illusion I had about time. About "later." About getting around to things eventually. About waiting to speak honestly or waiting to act until I felt more ready.

There is no ready.

Life doesn't give warnings. It doesn't negotiate. It doesn't care how much potential you think you have or how much progress you've made. It just happens.

That near miss didn't make me reckless. It made me precise.

It clarified what mattered and what didn't. Excuses felt absurd. Half-measures felt dishonest. The idea of staying quiet about things I knew to be true suddenly felt irresponsible.

That's when urgency entered my discipline.

Not panic.
Not anxiety.
Urgency.

I stopped asking whether I *should* move forward with my life the way I knew I needed to. I stopped waiting for permission to take care of myself properly. I stopped postponing the work that mattered.

And I stopped hiding my experience.

If what I've lived through can help someone shorten their suffering—or avoid years of unnecessary confusion—then staying silent makes no sense. I'm not interested in convincing anyone. I'm not interested in being right.

I'm interested in being useful.

That moment on the field didn't feel symbolic. It felt practical.

You don't get infinite attempts.
You don't get infinite drafts.
And you don't get infinite time to live honestly.

Once that landed, there was no going back.

Part VI — Systems Reduce Suffering

What finally made all of this sustainable wasn't motivation.
It was systems.

As I started learning to code and working more deeply with AI, something unexpected clicked. I began to see the human mind less as a mystery to be managed and more as a system with requirements — inputs that must be satisfied daily for things to run cleanly.

When you build software, you're really building a world. You define rules, constraints, dependencies, and processes. Those processes run on loops until their conditions are met, and only then do they resolve. What you see on the screen is just the visible output of invisible logic working underneath.

At some point, I realized the same thing is true of human experience.

Our bodies and minds operate under rules whether we acknowledge them or not. Those rules govern how we feel, how we think, and how we function. Ignore them, and the system doesn't break dramatically — it degrades. The output becomes noisy, unstable, unreliable.

That's when I stopped thinking in abstractions and started thinking in checklists.

Not metaphorical ones.
Literal ones.

Every day, there are basic requirements your body and mind expect to be met. When they are, things feel clearer. Lighter. More stable. When they aren't, friction builds — mentally, emotionally, physically.

That friction doesn't announce itself politely.

It shows up as anxiety.
As irritability.
As depression.
As confusion.
As fatigue.

What we often label "mental illness" is frequently the accumulated effect of unmet requirements.

Sleep.
Movement.
Nutrition.
Sunlight.
Hydration.
Meaningful effort.
Progress toward something that matters.

Miss enough of those for long enough, and the system starts throwing errors.

I jokingly started calling it "God's checklist" — not because it's religious, but because it feels non-negotiable. These aren't preferences. They're constraints. Ignore them and something breaks.

For most of my life, I tried to treat those errors chemically.

Instead of fixing missing inputs, I muted warning signals. Instead of changing the system, I suppressed symptoms.

What discipline finally gave me was the willingness to stop negotiating with those requirements.

I stopped asking, *Do I feel like doing this today?*
I started asking, *What does the system require today?*

The answer was boring.
Predictable.
Repetitive.

And it worked.

When the checklist is satisfied, mental noise drops. Decision fatigue drops. Emotional volatility drops — not because life becomes easy, but because the system is no longer running in deficit.

This was the first time in my life that mental clarity felt earned, not borrowed.

And once I saw it this way, something else became obvious:

Medication had been compensating for missing systems.
Once the systems were in place, the need for compensation began to disappear.

Part VII — Food Is Fuel

Food was the last piece of the foundation I really understood.

For most of my life, eating had been chaotic. Reactive. Emotional. Convenience-driven. When I thought about food at all, it was through the lens everyone else seemed to use—calories, restriction, willpower, guilt.

That framing never worked for me.

Once I started thinking in systems, food stopped being about discipline and started being about inputs. Your brain doesn't run on motivation. It runs on fuel. Bad fuel produces bad signal. Inconsistent fuel produces inconsistent output.

I wasn't depressed because I lacked willpower.
I was dysregulated because I was underfed, overprocessed, and inconsistent.

What changed everything was removing friction.

Using AI, I started building simple diet plans, basic recipes, and grocery lists that required almost no decision-making. No optimization. No macros obsession. Just real

food, eaten consistently, with enough protein, enough carbs, enough fat, and enough micronutrients to let my nervous system calm down.

Once food stopped being a daily negotiation, something unexpected happened.

Mental fatigue dropped.
Irritability dropped.
Brain fog lifted.

Not dramatically. Quietly.

I realized that what people call “discipline” around food is often just environment design. If the food you need is already available, already planned, already easy to make, you don’t have to fight yourself every day.

Quality mattered more than quantity.

Not eating less.
Eating *better*.
Eating *consistently*.

And once that stabilized, everything else became easier to maintain—training, sleep, focus, emotional regulation.

This was another place where medication had filled a gap.

When the fuel problem was solved, the signal improved on its own.

Part VIII — From External Authority to Internal Trust

The biggest change wasn’t physical.

It was where authority lived.

For most of my life, I outsourced trust. To systems. To experts. To diagnoses. To prescriptions. To frameworks that promised answers if I followed them closely enough.

That wasn’t stupidity. It was survival.

When your internal world feels chaotic, you look outward for structure. When you don’t trust your own signals, you rely on someone else’s interpretation of them. That’s what I had been doing—again and again—through doctors, medications, rules, and labels.

At some point, that shifted.

Not suddenly. Not dramatically. Quietly.

As the foundations came online—sleep, training, food, discipline, systems—I started noticing something unfamiliar: my internal signals were becoming reliable.

Hunger meant hunger.
Fatigue meant rest.
Anxiety meant something needed attention.
Motivation meant alignment.

For the first time, my body and mind weren't lying to me.

That was huge.

I stopped asking, *What should I do?*
I started asking, *What do I already know?*

The answers weren't loud. They weren't mystical. They weren't complicated. They were obvious in a way I hadn't been able to hear before.

I don't mean "God" in a religious sense when I talk about this. I mean something more practical and more demanding: the part of you that already knows what's true, what's necessary, and what you're avoiding.

The subconscious isn't some poetic abstraction. It's the system that's been tracking every input, every pattern, every consequence your conscious mind has tried to negotiate away.

When you stop numbing it, suppressing it, or overriding it chemically, it starts speaking clearly.

And it doesn't bargain.

That realization changed everything.

I stopped looking for permission to live differently. I stopped needing validation for decisions I already knew were right. I stopped asking whether something was allowed and started asking whether it was *honest*.

This was the shift from compliance to authorship.

From following scripts to writing one.

From managing symptoms to trusting signal.

And once that trust was restored, the final step became unavoidable.

This didn't mean I stopped listening to other people, or the world.

If anything, I listen more often, and more carefully now than I ever did before.

The difference is how I listen.

I don't outsource judgment anymore. I don't accept things automatically because they come from authority, credentials, or confidence. I think about what's being said. Where it's coming from. What it actually means in the context of my life.

I ask simple questions:

Is this useful?
Is it beneficial?
Is it honest?
Is it true?

And then a few more that matter just as much:

Is someone selling me something?
What are their incentives?
Who benefits if I adopt this belief — and who benefits if I don't?

I follow those answers to their inevitable conclusion.

Does this move me toward alignment, responsibility, and long-term health — or does it pull me toward dependence, avoidance, or short-term relief?

Once I've done that evaluation, the process is straightforward. I take what's good. I leave what isn't. And I move on.

That's it.

Not rebellion.
Not arrogance.
Just responsibility.

Part IX — Letting Go of the Crutch

Letting go didn't happen in rebellion, and it didn't happen all at once.

It happened in cooperation.

By the time I worked with my therapist to begin tapering off lithium and risperidone, I wasn't trying to prove anything. I wasn't chasing purity. I wasn't rejecting medicine.

I was responding to evidence. I was responding to experience.

The foundations were in place.
The systems were working.
My signals were clear.

And most importantly, I wasn't afraid anymore.

That part mattered more than anything else.

For the first time in my adult life, I wasn't using medication to survive my own mind. I wasn't suppressing emotions I couldn't tolerate. I wasn't compensating for missing structure with chemistry.

I was *showing up* for my life—consistently, deliberately, honestly.

So we moved slowly. Carefully. Responsibly.

There was no drama in the process. No grand moment. Just gradual reductions, close observation, and constant honesty about what I was experiencing. Some days were uncomfortable. Some days were emotional. But nothing felt unmanageable.

Because this time, I wasn't alone inside it.

I had sleep.
I had training.
I had food.
I had discipline.
I had systems.
I had awareness.

And I trusted myself.

Four months later, I was fully off both medications.

Not euphoric. Not invincible. Not "cured."

Just present.

And that presence felt more stable than anything medication had ever given me.

I still feel fear sometimes.
I still feel sadness.
I still feel anger.

But they move through me now. They don't trap me. They don't hijack my behavior. They don't require suppression.

They make sense.

That's the difference.

I'm not anti-medication. I will never say that pharmaceuticals don't save lives. They saved mine. They gave me time. They gave me space to survive long enough to build something better.

But medication was never meant to be the foundation.

It was meant to be the bridge.

And bridges are not places you live.

What finally changed my life wasn't removing drugs. It was building something solid enough underneath me that I no longer needed them.

That's the part most conversations skip.

You don't heal by subtraction alone.
You heal by replacement.

You replace chaos with structure.
You replace avoidance with discipline.
You replace numbing with awareness.
You replace external authority with internal truth.

And when you do that—slowly, honestly, responsibly—the need for chemical crutches fades on its own.

Not because you force it.

Because you outgrow it.

That's what a crutch is. When your broken leg heals, you take off the cast, and you learn how to walk again.

Somewhere in that process, another realization settled in — quietly, without panic.

I'm going to die anyway.

Whether I stayed medicated or not.
Whether I avoided discomfort or not.
Whether I numbed myself or showed up fully.

There was no version of this where I escaped mortality.

Once that landed, the calculation changed. Fear lost its leverage. The question stopped being *How do I stay comfortable?* and became *How do I want to live with the time I have?*

So I chose to carry the weight instead of anesthetizing it.

I chose to carry my cross and walk uphill — not as punishment, not as self-denial, but as acceptance. Of responsibility. Of effort. Of reality.

That wasn't religion to me. It was practical.

Suffering is unavoidable. Meaning is optional. And avoiding pain only postpones the bill.

Once I accepted that, there was nothing left to run from.

Chapter Eight: Ditching the Drugs and Facing Reality

I'm writing this with tears of joy running down my face.

Not sadness. Not grief. Joy.

A kind of disbelief that's still settling in. The realization that I made it through. That I survived long enough to be here, in this moment, writing these words, feeling these feelings, revisiting these memories without being swallowed by them.

I am recovered.

Not perfect. Not invincible. Not exempt from life.

Recovered.

I lived through something that kills a lot of people. Quietly. Slowly. Sometimes all at once. I'm standing on the other side of it, alive, aware, and present.

That matters.

When I look back at the path that brought me here, the most honest word I can use for it is *luck*.

Sheer, undeniable luck.

I shouldn't have died — but I could have. Many times. And many people who walked paths similar to mine didn't make it. They weren't weaker. They weren't worse. They just didn't get the same combination of timing, support, opportunity, or second chances.

I want to pause here for them.

For the people who didn't survive.
For the people who didn't get out.
For the people who didn't have the family, the friends, the therapists, the strangers who said the right thing at the right time.

For the people who weren't as lucky.

I carry them with me in this moment.

Because surviving something like this doesn't make you superior. It makes you responsible.

Part I — Perspective Changes Everything

I've started saying something that might sound dramatic, but it's true:

I am the luckiest man alive.

If you doubt that, re-read this book.

When I was born, the umbilical cord was wrapped around my neck. I didn't share that earlier. I shouldn't have survived the start.

When I was five, I electrocuted myself on a Christmas ornament. The scar on my middle finger is still there.

When I was nine, I nearly plummeted three stories from the top escalator in a mall. My mom grabbed me at the last second.

The hits keep coming.

I should have died more times than I can count. Through substances. Through recklessness. Through negligence. Through chance. Through statistical probability.

And yet — here I am.

Still here.

Still breathing.
Still thinking.
Still evolving.

And here's the other thing, when you've had a brush with death, it allows you to truly feel life, in ways that most people who haven't, never will. You realize how crazy this whole thing is, how fragile we all are, how quickly it could end. It makes you happy to be able to even touch the keys while you type, feel the ground beneath you, feel the buzz and warmth of your body when you put on a hoodie.

I call it "Mainlining Gratitude". Best drug I've ever taken, I'm hooked.

That perspective changes everything.

It removes entitlement.
It removes self-pity.
It removes the illusion that time is guaranteed.

What replaces it is gratitude — not the performative kind, but the quiet, stabilizing kind that makes you take care of what you've been given.

Once you see survival as a gift instead of an expectation, you stop wasting it.

Part II — Why I'm Not Staying Quiet

And for a long time, I stayed quiet.

Not because I was ashamed — but because I didn't know how to talk about this without oversimplifying it or turning it into ideology.

I'm done with that.

I'm sharing this openly now for one reason:

If my experience can save someone years of confusion, pain, and unnecessary suffering, then keeping it to myself makes no sense.

I'm not trying to convince anyone of anything. I'm not trying to sell a program. I'm not trying to replace one belief system with another.

I'm sharing what I've learned about life, about bodies, about minds, and about the lies we're often told from birth — about alcohol, about drugs, about happiness, and about pharmaceutical solutions.

Pharma saves lives.
It saved mine.

But it is not the cure.

It treats symptoms. It buys time. It creates space. And sometimes, that space is the difference between life and death.

But I don't believe we are designed to live permanently on chemical crutches — at least not in their current form. Maybe one day, when we've figured out a lot more about ourselves and the universe, things will look different.

Today, they don't.

So we act accordingly.

We build foundations.
We tell the truth.
We stop numbing what needs attention.
We stop outsourcing responsibility for lives that only we can live.

That's not punishment.
That's freedom.

Part III — Gratitude Is Not Optional

I didn't do this alone.
That's important to say out loud.

If you're reading this looking for a hero's journey, you won't find one here. What you'll find instead is a long chain of people—some close, some distant, some anonymous—who helped keep me alive long enough to figure this out.

Most of them didn't have a manual.
Most of them didn't know what was "right."
Many of them didn't understand what I was going through or what to do with me.

But they tried.
They showed up anyway.
They stayed longer than they had to.
They listened when they didn't have answers.

That effort mattered.

None of these things were miracles on their own.
Together, they were.
Like bricks laid day by day, like building a pyramid.

Some thank you's are in order.
So here we go.

To my friends and girlfriends—past and present—who stuck around, who laughed with me, who tolerated me, who left when they needed to, who shared their experiences and wisdom, and who showed me by example what functioning actually looks like. And the music—so much beautiful music—that carried me through when words couldn't.

To my therapists, who didn't try to save me, but helped me learn how to save myself—slowly, safely, and honestly.

To strangers who said the right thing at the right time without knowing how much it mattered. "You can always rely on the kindness of strangers." I live by this quote to this day.

And yes—to AI. I know that won't land for everyone. It doesn't have to.

A tool that helped me reduce friction, clarify thought, build systems, and turn intention into action when my brain was still learning how to do that on its own.

To my extended family

To everyone not named individually here: there are too many of you to list and too many moments to count, but please know this includes you.

Thank you for the conversations, the examples you set, and for simply being who you are. For the ways you showed up without realizing it. For the values you lived out loud. For the sense of belonging that comes from knowing you're part of something bigger than yourself.

I am incredibly lucky to have been born into this family tree. Many people don't get this level of support, stability, or connection. I don't take that lightly.

I love you all.

See you at Christmas, and hopefully Thanksgiving.

To my mom, Vicki

Thank you for the gift of life, and for giving me a place to get sober and rebuild when I needed it most. You gave me safety without conditions, space without pressure, and love without an agenda. That mattered more than you know.

And thank you for all the sobriety trinkets. Especially the one you gave me after year one that said, *"My best days are ahead of me."*

I think about that often. And more and more these days, I'm realizing it was true. Every year keeps getting better. Still.

To Richard

Thank you for the conversations. For the insight. For the way you think about motivation, behavior, and why people do what they do. Your perspective helped me understand myself in ways no diagnosis ever did. I still have the "Every accomplishment starts with the decision to try" placard on my desk.

To my older brother, Jared

Thank you for Marijuana 101, Intro to Punk Rock, Drum Lessons, Rush, and everything else that came with it. You were a second father to me my entire life. Seven years is a big gap when you're kids, and you filled it with guidance, protection, and love. I can never repay you for what you gave me. No matter where life takes us, I will always respect you, love you, and carry what you taught me with me.

To my older sister, Cassie

What can I say, Cass. From playing "school" when we were kids to everything we've

lived through since, we've come a long way. You were always a sounding board. Always a kind voice. Always ready to laugh at anything. Where would I be without you? I love you.

And to my younger brother, Brady

Thirteen months younger, my better half for years. We grew up so close, in such tight tandem, that we were basically twins. People often have said we speak our own language. The love you showed me throughout this journey, the guidance, the steady voice of reason, and the philosophical insights you shared—those were priceless. You were always better at that part than me. We both know it. Wherever life takes us, I will always love you. Brothers to the end.

Thank you.

My dad, John

For structure when I needed it and patience when I didn't deserve it.

For the daily conversations.
For the encouragement.
For pushing me to be better when it would've been easier to let me slide.

You were my coach when I didn't know how to coach myself. You stood up for me when I couldn't stand up straight. You believed in me long before I had any reason to believe in myself.

You never gave up on me — even when I made that difficult.

That matters more than I can say. Pals forever with my dad. I love you man.

To Shirley—

Thank you for calling me out when I needed it most, back when I was still drinking and pretending everything was fine. Thank you for taking care of my pops, for seeing the growth when it started to show, and for adjusting the way you treated me as I changed.

That meant more than you probably realize.

Love you.

And to my wife, Hannah

You met me when I was still on lithium. 6 months sober. Still on risperidone. Still medicated, still dulled, still disconnected in ways I didn't fully understand myself.

I honestly don't know if you were aware of the full scope of what I'd done or where I'd been. This book may come as a shock. Some of it may be hard to read.

What I do know is this: you stood by me anyway.

Day by day, you watched me trip, fall, and get back up again — over and over. You lived with the consequences. The blowback. The arguments. The yelling. The tantrums. The embarrassment.

And still, you stayed.

You followed me with a kind of faith I still don't fully understand. *"Where you lead, I will follow."* That isn't a phrase people say lightly — and it's not something you earn by accident.

You believed in a total stranger. A medicated, video-game-addicted mess of a man you didn't fully know or understand. You saw something good in me when no one else did — including me.

And you went all in on that belief.

I still don't know what you saw back then. I'm not sure I ever will. But whatever it was, it helped carry me here.

I can never fully repay you.

All I can do is try to build something worthy of the faith you placed in me — and hope that whatever I make of myself in this life reflects even a fraction of the gratitude and love I feel for you, even when I don't always show it well.

To Susan and Geoff —

Thank you for your support at some of the most pivotal moments of my life. From quitting the best job I ever had at JLL (what up, BMO team!), to starting CharlieWorks, to building the original SportsTown (shoutout to Mr. Fixit and Miss Avocado 1959), you showed up with encouragement, belief, and love when it mattered most.

Welcoming me into your family meant more to me than I can properly put into words. The trust, the generosity, and the way you stood behind me as I took risks I didn't fully understand yet—that's irreplaceable.

You set the bar incredibly high for in-laws, and I appreciate you more than you know.

As someone who grew up in a divorced family, being able to witness your partnership—your commitment to each other, your steadiness, and your care—has

meant more to me than you probably realize. It's a rare thing, and I'm deeply grateful to have seen it lived out so clearly.

I love you guys.

And last by not least, my dog — Charlie

The inspiration behind CharlieWorks.
The quiet beginning of my return to emotion.

Through lithium, through numbness, through chaos, loving a dog cut straight through the noise. The love for a dog heals wounds you don't know how to touch. It bypasses intellect. It bypasses rationalization. It's simple. It's honest.

Sometimes, when I'm sitting with you or playing with you, I think this whole path—every wrong turn, every hard lesson, every slow correction—was just to get me to a place where I could have a dog. Where I could be stable enough, present enough, grounded enough to experience this kind of love.

When we brought you home, you were a menace. Pure chaos. And now, somehow, you're the best dog in the world. I know everyone who's worth anything probably feels that way about their dog—but I also know what you gave me was real.

That's how I knew we were meant for each other. You were just like me.

You brought me back to feeling in a way nothing else could.

I love you, Charlie. 🐶

Part IV — To the Dude Who Hit the Ball

There's one more thank-you I need to give.

To the guy who hit the ball back at me.

You didn't know it, but you almost ended my life—or maybe just reminded me how close that end always is. You gave me something I couldn't have gotten any other way.

Clarity.

That moment didn't scare me into paralysis. It scared me into honesty. Into urgency. Into finally acting like this life matters because it *does*.

Without that moment, I might still be waiting.
Waiting to speak.

Waiting to act.
Waiting to live fully.

So—thank you.

Part V — To the Part of Me That Carried Us Here

There's one final acknowledgment I need to make.

To the part of me that kept going when I didn't want to.
The part that showed up when I checked out.
The part that dragged me forward when I was numb, lost, or afraid.

The subconscious.
The signal beneath the noise.
The part that knew what was true long before I was willing to listen.

You're the one who got us here.

You endured the drugs.
You endured the confusion.
You endured the years of false solutions.

You waited until I was strong enough to hear you.

You're not mystical.
You're not magical.

You're intelligent.
Relentless.
And honest.

You're a fucking genius.

And now—I'm listening.

Closing Thoughts

I wouldn't change a single thing.
Not the pain.
Not the mistakes.
Not the years it took.

Every step led me here—alive, clear, present, and capable of building a life that doesn't require escape.

I'm not saying follow in my footsteps. You can get here without doing what I did. You only get one life—one precious life—and you don't need to lose fifteen years learning the same lessons the hard way.

If you're reading this and you're still in it—still drowning, still confused, still looking for the thing that will finally fix you—hear this:

You are not broken.
You are not weak.
And you are not alone.

The cure isn't hiding from you.
It's waiting for you to stop numbing the signals and start building the foundation.
Slowly.
Honestly.
Responsibly.

And you don't need to wait for some dramatic moment of truth. You don't need to wait until you have no other choice. You don't need a near-death experience to wake up.

All you have to do is turn around, face whatever it is you've been running from, and start walking toward it. You'll notice something as you do: the closer you get, the smaller the shadow becomes. And eventually, you'll find the thing you were afraid of.

You're going to find it anyway.
So you might as well do it on your terms.

One day at a time.
Brick by mothafuckin brick.

You don't have to do it perfectly.
You just have to stay alive long enough to begin.

With love,
Cory Gardener

Thank you for reading. This was The Cure for Pharma.

You can find my other writings at CharlieWorks.org.