

A Shortcut for Feeling Just a Little Happier

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Lately, my back has been hurting. I did something weird in the gym, resulting in a dull ache, and now I'm taking it easy. I appreciate the feedback the pain provides, because I would like to be able to walk upright for a few more decades and don't want to risk a more permanent injury. Still, I don't enjoy it, so I've been taking acetaminophen to blunt my discomfort.

Back pain is normal, but a different sort of hurt is even more typical in my life, and probably yours as well: mental suffering. I don't mean clinical depression or anxiety, which require professional intervention, but rather the routine, chronic grind of conflict, dissatisfaction, and sadness, which often constitute a dull ache in the background of our days. Many philosophers have considered this discomfort to be our natural state. In his *Pensées*, Blaise Pascal [asserted](#) that, at rest, man “feels his nothingness, his loneliness, his insufficiency, his dependence, his weakness, his emptiness.” Maybe that seems a little overstated to you, but research does [show](#) that people tend to experience negative or mixed emotions nearly half the time.

Wouldn't it be nice to have a handy tool to blunt everyday mental pain a bit? Not to become numb to life—just to take the edge off, especially when it is interfering with normal life, the way you can swallow a Tylenol when your back hurts. It turns out that there are safe and healthy methods to do exactly this, including taking the same sort of painkiller for what ails your body and your mind. And that's only the beginning.

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