



Barbara Vorsamer
**The pain and the
beauty of not giving
up**
My life with depression

Original title: Mein schmerzhaft schönes Trotzdem

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Intense, moving, powerful

Barbara Vorsamer knows how it feels when an elephant is sitting on her chest in the mornings. When she doesn't even have enough strength to turn over in bed. When that feeling of worthlessness gets the upper hand, and the only way out is to be admitted to a psychiatric clinic eventually. It was a painful process. Barbara Vorsamer needed therapies and numerous spells in hospital until she learned not to suppress her feelings but accept them in all their ambiguity. She writes intensely about sinking into a deep, dark depression, about pain and grief. These are personal issues that point far beyond the private because we need to talk – as a society, too – about how we are feeling.



Barbara Vorsamer, born in 1981, is an editor for the society section of the Süddeutsche Zeitung. She has had several nominations and awards for her writing. The mother of two has suffered from depression for many years. She has learned how to live with chronic pain and depression. Despite depression. And even though she still oft en feels so wretched that she can't imagine ever doing anything again

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Sample Translation by Anette Pollner

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INTRODUCTION

I always wanted to write a how-to book about getting rid of migraines, or of depression. Or at least read one.

The problem with the first of these is that I don't know. The problem with the second one is that others don't know either. I've read countless books about pain, migraine and depression and what I couldn't find anywhere was that one piece of advice that made everything alright.

For decades, I've been struggling with migraines that incapacitate me for a days, several times a month, and with a severe depression that afflicts me now and then and that I take medication for, which sometimes helps a lot and sometimes less so. Sometimes I go to therapy, sometimes not so much. In spite of this, my depression is always there, at least as a ruminating white noise underneath the surface of everyday life. Constant self-hatred, frequent suicidal thoughts, and months of deep sadness without any particular reason were all normal for me. For a long time, I didn't realise that other people don't have these thoughts and emotions, or only very rarely. I wanted nothing to do with psychotherapy or even psychiatry.

But depression, like other diseases, doesn't ask for permission. Instead it gets worse if it is left untreated. In 2008, I spent time in a psychiatric clinic for the first time because of it, in 2011 for the second time. By now, I've have over 15 years of psychotherapy with therapists of very diverse approaches under my belt and I've tried at least a dozen different psychopharmaceuticals. You won't find the ultimate tip in this book, telling you which method combined with which kind of medication will heal you. But I make you a promise: it will pass. There is help.

And if you are a fellow sufferer, if your brain works the way mine does, you just thought: and then it comes back again later. There's no point.

Yes and no. Yes, if you have chronic depression, it can come back. No, it doesn't mean that treatment doesn't work. There's no guarantee either, with physical illnesses like a torn ligament or pneumonia, that you won't injure yourself again after treatment, or catch another germ next year. In my

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opinion, the expectation to not only be liberated from your current ailments but be healed forever only exists for psychiatry.

In 2018, I wrote about my depression for the first time. After my text was published, I received hundreds of reader messages telling me how much it had encouraged them. Then, two years later, right in the middle of the Covid-19 pandemic, I slipped back into a depressive phase myself and read my own words. They comforted me. Not because they told me how to get out of depression. As I said, I don't know about that. But I do know that it happens. That you get out of your depression, some time, somehow. I promise.

I know how to go on living. With chronic pain, with depression, in spite of everything, and even when I feel like crap, so much so that I can't even imagine ever doing anything again. Yes, in these moments I can't even imagine ever wanting to do anything again and these moments still exist.

My life today is nothing but a huge 'anyhow', and sometimes I feel there is no other kind of life, at least not for me. This book is about getting up although you don't feel like it, as much as it is about staying in bed because, sometimes, there's nothing else you can do. It's about the fact that the goal might not even have to be to find a psychotherapy method, a doctor and the one medication that blows all the pain away so that you can, finally, start living. It's about being allowed to live with mental illness and as a pain patient. And about having to live this way, something I write about at the end of this book.

I'm going to describe my path through the jungle of emotions, physical and mental. It's about the connection between body, spirit and soul but also about the fact that, sometimes, there is no such connection and there's no point in pretending there is. It's about talking about pain and emotions, and also about the fact that talking about it sometimes doesn't help at all. And again and again, it's about why it's good for you anyway. Anyhow. I don't have a solution. But I know by now that the desperate search for a solution can keep you from living your life and that it may be the most important thing to start living now. Anyhow.

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In the past few years, as a journalist, I wrote about emotions many times, about my depression, about painful experiences and about the emotional effects of the Covid-19 pandemic for so many. But that was never what I wanted. My professional career started at the news desk of the Süddeutsche Zeitung newspaper. What I wanted was to be taken seriously as a political journalist. I focused on US politics and worked many, many night shifts covering the seemingly endless primary season of 2008, the duel between Barack Obama and Hillary Clinton. But I watched its highlight, the election of Obama as US president, from a psychiatric clinic. I had over-worked myself. Or perhaps the other way round: maybe I had worked so hard because I didn't want to feel what was really going on with me. We'll get to that distinction later.

At the time, I was probably what emotion scientist Carlotta Welding calls emotion-blind. I couldn't feel my emotions very well and what I was able to feel I couldn't recognize. And when it came to expressing my feelings I really came up against my limitations. There was nothing there but crying. And so I cried a lot. Was I really sad or rather depressed or maybe something else entirely, angry perhaps? I'm going to write about how all this can get mixed up and also how can you get out of this mess again.

I entered the clinic with the intention of getting myself repaired quickly by all the people there with a P – psychotherapists, psychiatrists. I didn't know anything about big emotions. The up and down, backwards and forwards of my psyche was an inconvenience to me.

So it may seem quite presumptuous for me as an emotion-blind person to write a book about mental illness and emotions. But maybe I'm the right person for the job because of it.

Someone who's always done things right naturally often can't describe how they work. My husband, for example, is very good at badminton and tennis. I'm not good at it at all. Right at the beginning of our relationship we went to the park with a few rackets, just for fun. I failed immediately because I didn't know how to hold that racket correctly. He showed me, I imitated him, but incorrectly. He told me that and then we got stuck. Because he's always intuitively done it the right way, he couldn't explain to me how exactly I should hold a tennis racket.

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Luckily, playing tennis is not necessary for survival. You can go through life very well indeed without ever holding a racket. But we can't go through life without feelings, and we probably don't want to either. I only learned late and in a painful, time-consuming way involving several hospital stays and therapies to accept my emotions and allow myself to have them, but not necessarily always act on them, because that's not always what it's about. What is important instead is creating the space for our emotions that they need and to tolerate them when they are unpleasant, contradictory or even incomprehensible. That's the only way we can find out who we really are and what we really want. This book is about what it's supposed to be like and how it's going to work, creating that space. That's what this book is about.