

On mental health, psychedelics and life

This is a story about mental health, psychedelics, psychology and the mind. It is a story about the joy of family, the joy of friends, the joy of being in love, and the joy of doing scientific research. It is a story about life, the world, and how amazing they both are.

After 18 months of intolerable torture, and after many months of consideration **I have decided to end my life.**

The now

Everyone must have a limit for how much pain they can cope with. I cannot cope any longer • with the extent of the pain that I am experiencing, day by day, second by second, since Feb 2023. I have been trying so long to find another option, for you, and to try to make amends for everything that I have done. But the pain is too great, and this is as long as I can last. If a person was in mortal physical pain you would understand why the humane thing to do is end their life. This is no different. What I can do, with immense effort, is to write this note and hope that you, and future generations of people, can benefit from my story. I want people to know how I died from mental illness, but also the fact that you can (as I also did) overcome it, prosper and build the most incredible, happy life in spite of it. I also want folks to know about the risks of alcohol, the risks of drugs, the risks of being a selfish person.

I am well aware that what I have chosen to do now is the most selfish thing of all. But I've realised that I have been a selfish person for a long time. My recent severe illness has only exacerbated this. However, that does not change the fact that this is the best outcome not only for me but also for you. If you have any positive memories of me from the years before my severe illness, I hope that you can enjoy them. And I hope that those who have spent time with me since the crisis can look past those interactions and remember some of how I was before. I have put some reminders in the [highlights](#), (follow the links there to find some funny videos and travel writing).

Based on both introspection and clear evidence (longstanding experience overcoming severe depression, repeated attempts to recover this time over the last year, every treatment in the book), I have strong conviction that I will not recover this time. If I were to keep existing, I would spend the remainder of my life without meaningful employment, alone and likely with involuntary stays in (terrifying) mental hospitals. You don't want that as much as I don't want that. The truth is that **I killed myself accidentally in Feb 2023**. The rest is just a nightmare of a coda. I hope anyone who experienced the coda can forget it in time.

I know my choice to no longer exist will cause the most pain to those closest to me. But those closest to me stand to lose the most by my illness continuing indefinitely. My choice enables you

to travel to be together, to explore all that life has to offer, unencumbered. If I can still have wishes at this stage, my only one is that you do exactly this. I know this is horrendous to bear - one of the hardest things of all - but you must believe me when I say that this is better in the long term for all of us than the alternative.

My story

With amazing parents to thank, the first 37 years of my life were incredibly happy. Many of you know my Dad and what an incredible person he is. You may not have known my Mum, who was my best friend. Together, you gave me everything, and enabled everything good that I have done. You were truly the best parents in the world.

Somewhere between Oxford and Cambridge, when I was about 24, there was a particularly crippling bout of anxiety and depression, but I was helped by an immense act of kindness from a friend, the headmaster of a wonderful school, who understood depression, understood me and took a risk giving me a job. With a glimmer of hope and a stimulating environment full of bright children, kind colleagues, intellectual challenges and unlimited sport, I recovered. With such a role model to go with my parents and amazing friends, I learned to manage the depression and it became only a small part of my life.

Because of wonderful friends and unique intellectual challenges, I was happiest of all at Oxford, at Cambridge, and at DeepMind. At Oxford, doing pure maths, I learned what it feels like to stretch one's intellect to its limits. At Cambridge, I learned what it is to do research, and I learned what it feels like to be in love, sharing adventures across the world with the most unassuming, brilliant, calm, strong partner. And at DeepMind I learned what it is like to do all of those things at the same time while working, and becoming friends, with your scientific idols.

Perhaps it was the elation of finding my dream vocation, doing research with my scientific heroes and sharing it around the world; perhaps it was the devastation I felt about my Mum's Alzheimer's diagnosis and the process of watching her fade away - I'll never know. But **somewhere during the last 5 years, my drinking became a problem**. It didn't happen too often, but on occasion I was mean and combative with friends and loved ones. I am so eternally sorry and mortified about this. Even after years of therapy I have no idea or understanding of why the result of drinking too much was to be nasty.

Although maybe I am just a psychopath, I wonder if some of the meanness and selfishness came from fear. Since having depression, I have always been incredibly frightened that the illness would come back if I didn't keep going, and didn't keep succeeding. So I doubled down on ambition, at the cost of looking out for my loved ones. Sometimes, moving forward in my career felt like a life-and-death issue, like I would drown if I didn't keep going; that I had to succeed to survive.

I also wonder about medications. I have taken an antidepressant continually since 2009. I was perfectly well (happy) for almost all of that time, but scared to stop. Paroxetine took away the

fear that the depression would return, but that absence of feeling took away some empathy, made me more reckless, less disposed to look after myself, and may have even made me less kind. This is not a Tom Cruise moment. Antidepressants are critical drugs that save lives every day. If you are depressed, you should take them. But once you are well recovered, perhaps you should discuss with your doctor if it is best to try to stop. At least, it feels important to share the possibility that there can be not entirely desirable changes to who you really are.

Drinking was certainly something I enjoyed, and helped to catalyse many important friendships. But it was also a way of overcoming my fears, and in the end it made me a worse not a better person. **Even after months of therapy and research, I do not understand why I became unkind when drinking.** It's harder for me to understand because, as might be expected, I don't remember when I was very drunk. I wish I had actually comprehended at the time how alcohol changed me, and what that was doing to others. The signs were there but I found ways to look past them.

From happiness to death overnight

The challenges that I have described are more commonplace than we might imagine, presumably because few people talk openly about them. But what happened next is hopefully less common, and that's why I think it's even more important to talk about.

I have been an incredibly happy person almost all my life (except those little bouts of depression - horrendous but infrequent). In the last few years before it all unravelled, albeit devastated about Mum, I felt particularly happy. In the time following the happiest day of all - when we formalised our relationship with friends from all over the world - work was getting more and more fun and exciting. I particularly enjoyed the challenge of leading, mentoring and connecting people to bring the best out of each individual. However, I suppose there was always this idea in my head that I could and should do better. And so **I became increasingly curious about Silicon Valley stories of drugs that reduce anxiety and improve focus, as well as remove the need for alcohol as a means to switch off.**

This experiment with psychoactive drugs is ultimately what would kill me, and, more importantly, what would tear my family's life apart.

Ketamine

I started to take Ketamine (Elon Musk's choice), because it was the easiest of the psychoactive drugs to get, and because it felt 'safer' to me than something like LSD or psilocybin. It felt safer because I thought the effects wore off quickly, and because I knew there is growing evidence for its very promising application as a treatment for mental health conditions, particularly depression.

Recklessly, I clearly took too much. Within a week or so I became acutely psychotic. After days of unspeakable behaviour that I have some partial memory of, I was committed involuntarily to a

mental health ward for 4 weeks. The trauma experienced by my friends and family at this time is hard for me to comprehend even now. If you got a strange message from me around Feb / Mar 2023, this is why.

I didn't know then, but coming out of hospital (the first time) was only the start of my problems. The pain began, and it hasn't relented since. The pain is not psychosis (that lasted maybe 4 weeks, and I don't see any reason why it should return), it is depression. But I've heard it said that depression is the most deadly of the mental illnesses, and I can certainly believe that.

I wish so much that I'd never taken the Ketamine, at least without medical supervision. Without that, I am sure I could have resolved the challenges around alcohol, ambition and being too self-centred. I am sure those fixes are not easy, but they feel easy given my current problem. Ketamine, and the consequent psychosis, converted me from someone who has learned to live with depression on-the-whole pretty successfully to someone who is dead. I was happy, very happy, less than two years ago. We had so many plans, a year of trips already booked, and I had so many hopes for our future in my mind. I used to say, "We can do anything we want" and I really believed it. Whatever challenges life might have presented us with, we would have been strong enough to learn from my mistakes and keep going, I imagine for 40+ more happy years. I'm sure many of you reading this are facing immense challenges, traumas, loss and other difficulties, and you are staying strong and moving forward.. Without the ketamine, I think I could have been just like you.

I recovered from psychotic behaviour quite quickly. But I was never going to be able to recover from what it did to my mind thereafter.

Please if you have any voice, try to warn the public that drugs like Ketamine, which have important applications in treating mental illness, can have a notable side effect if used the wrong way -- to end a promising life and destroy multiple families, pretty much overnight. And it is a very slow and painful death.

My team

Ceb, Andy, Owen, Craig, Rich G, Steve and Ailis, Rob, Adam, James W, Becky, Chris and Lizzie, Siewy, Nic, Pablo, John, Dmitri, Christian, Ivan, Rodrigo, Douwe, Kyunghyun, Rich E, Jay et al. Wow, what an author list. I'm so pleased you are reading this. Many of you were there on our happiest day and you are the people who made my 37 years so special. But you were also there when things were horrible. You dropped everything and came to help at huge personal cost, sleeping overnight on hospital floors, explaining to police at 4am, driving a dazed psychotic back from London to stay for weeks, numerous visits to psychiatric hospitals. Since then, you have called, texted, and been there in so many ways. During the last year, I often couldn't respond, not because I don't love you, but because I was in too much pain. To say that I'm lucky to have had you as friends is an understatement.

DeepMind and Cranleigh

When I was seriously ill, Shane Legg, who founded DeepMind, spent numerous hours in his office trying to make me feel better. Shane knew everything I had done, the ECT, the hospital stays, going crazy in Demis's office and all the mistakes I had made. He shared very personal stuff and provided wonderful therapy, all as a way to help me feel better. This had no benefit to the company, it was just complete unconditional kindness. Jay McClelland, my first scientific idol (think about what connectionism will do for our understanding meaning, how language works, nature/nurture, neuroscience, the fallacy of localism, AI; and taken together, Western philosophy in general) did much the same, providing me countless hours of face to face support and hope when there was none. My managers, Daan Wierstra and Murray Shanahan, my first report, Andrew Lampinen (who studied with Jay and will one day match his accomplishments) and Laura Fouquet from People and Culture at DeepMind were just as selfless and kind. I would like these people to know how much I love them and how much they did for me.

Guy Waller did something similar for me when I was 24, and the culture he built was at Cranleigh school, which was as great a place as DeepMind, but for younger minds.

I'm not saying all this to name drop but because I want people to know what a difference a culture like the ones that Guy, Shane and Demis built can make. It surely played a huge part in enabling such a diverse range of brilliant people to achieve so many proprietary steps forward for science and humanity (AlphaFold, AlphaGeometry etc). It may be interesting for the media to know that this sort of kindness lies at the heart of a scientific and business success story like DM.

If you are a leader in any field, public or private, please remember that a kind and supportive environment is a way to make your organization stronger and better, not weaker. Those who prosper in bad environments are the minority, and even they could surely do better in healthy environments. If only a minority can do their best work for you because of your culture, you better be a small organization. And if you have any aspiration for growth, things are not going to end well. Face to face collaboration is essential, and one of the great joys of life. But don't be seduced by Eric Schmidt's conviction that mandating 5 days a week in the office at the expense of family etc, might somehow cause an organization to achieve more. There is no empirical evidence for that. A scientist should know better than to make stuff up without evidence. Many of us work almost all of the time in our heads, but being 'at work' for too long kills creativity, productivity and ultimately achievement.

The truth is, there are exceptionally kind people, people who struggle, and incredibly successful people, and sometimes they are all the same person.

I also want it to be very clear that none what has happened to me did so because I felt 'under pressure' from professional responsibilities. My professional life, doing research, was never anything except the most incredible joy. Pressures I felt were the consequence of me not allowing myself to find peace with what I was achieving, comparing to others, always wanting to

be better. Ambition is a double-edged sword, and a fine balance to strike. I knew this (I had devoured a lot of Buddhism and Stoicism), but I didn't find the right balance. Nothing external could have fixed that particular problem.

Returning to the question of mental health, one thing I hope to do by sharing my story is to reduce stigma and generally further the progressive evolution of society in a small way. Not long ago people were embarrassed to have cancer. In [Humans of AI](#) I tried to raise this a bit with Druv Batra, but I wasn't brave enough to do it properly. Maybe we can use some of my savings to get the message out further. I'm ashamed of many things, but I'm not ashamed of my illness, and it would be nice to build a world where nobody is.

Could I have recovered?

When I was well, the most important things in my life were research, family and friends. Looking back, I often put research first, which is shameful, I think because of my fear of not carrying on. After the crisis in 2023, I was depressed, but it wasn't like any depression I'd known before. Maybe it was post-psychosis-PTSD. It was certainly post-psychosis shame (however much I know psychosis is an illness like any other, I know that I caused this illness through my bad choices). I'd had depression, maybe half a dozen times, once quite seriously, and I know a lot about it. This was very different. Reading about psychosis can maybe give you some idea.

At this time, I still had my job, and I still had my partner. But that is a moot point because I couldn't interact, I couldn't think straight, my short term memory and executive function wasn't working, I couldn't get out of bed, I couldn't respond to text messages even from bed. Every moment was, and remains, an indescribable hell of hyper anxiety and mental anguish, different from anything I'd experienced before. I was put back to hospital 3 times because of suicide risk (a psychiatric hospital is not the right place for someone with my illness, it makes it worse). I returned to work (which is definitely part of the solution, if there is a solution) countless times with the incredible support of colleagues, occupational health and managers - but I couldn't sit down for more than an hour at a time without indescribably panic attacks. It might not have looked like it externally, but I was trying with every ounce of my being to get better.

My brain has always been hyper alert, and constantly connecting things. I imagine this helped me to be good at academic stuff, and creativity to some extent. I love to connect ideas, which makes conversations fun, and maybe that helped me bring some joy to my friends and partner at times. But when a brain like that starts going wrong there is serious danger. Depression can affect anyone, but I wonder if it's worse for people like me. Or maybe I am just weaker. Or maybe that's the same thing. What I do know is that all of the power of my mind has gone into hurting itself, for a very long time, and the effects are inhumane.

After a year doing nothing except being at home or in hospital, in bed, hurting my own brain 24 hrs a day, I lost my partner, I lost research contacts and reputation, I began to lose friends that I wasn't able to reply to or meet. The grief of losing almost my whole world was indescribable. One minute I was getting married, the next, divorced. One minute I was looking forward to

helping Dad in his new phase of life, and then the next he had become my full-time carer. My only motivation in life became relieving the burden on Dad and friends. I tried again with every ounce of my being to get better. It was even more futile this time. Nothing helped. Not doctors, not therapy and medication, not electro-shock therapy.

Now, it will soon be almost 2 years. The emergency alarm continues to strike blind panic and fear into my mind every second. 2 years might not seem long to folks who are well, but I can assure you it is a long time for a mental health emergency. More so when, thanks to your illness preventing you from finding a way out, you have no real life to occupy it with other things. Imagine being a person who never felt secure that his week's work was enough at the best of times, and then imagine that person causing himself to do precisely nothing for over a year, and imagine how that feels. No self worth, no utility, no light at the end of the tunnel, no timeline for the pain stopping. Even though the point of torture is torture, I can't think of a method of torture that lasts this long.

It has taken me many months to write this letter, because I can't think and the ECT has taken my memory (in terrifying ways). It's the only thing I have done using my brain in the last 18 months. I do a bit every few days. And I am determined that it's the last thing I'm going to finish.

Now It's stupid to expect different results from doing the same thing. But you might wonder, and I have asked myself, why not just one more time (when almost nothing remains from what you worked your whole life to build, when you may never do research again because of the damage to your memory, when the only person you have ever loved is gone, when, even if you could somehow miraculously recover, you could face many acute relapses in the future) try with every ounce of your being to get better?

I want more than anything to keep existing for Dad, and for my friends. I know they would do the same for me in a heartbeat. But I have never been one of the strong ones. To paraphrase Bill Clinton's guy who I can't remember the name of because I've lost my memory - it's the pain stupid. The pain is too much. I don't feel I can keep alive any longer, it would be too much more time, too much indescribable pain, for someone as weak as me.

Could anyone have prevented this?

Please don't think there is any way in the world that you can have done anything to prevent this. There is certainly nothing my partner could have done. It is hard to comprehend what she went through. Watching a loved one lose their mind to psychosis, over a period of days, having to call the emergency services, having to put up with horrible psychotic words, rejection of hospital visits. Then having to watch them fade into a zombie with no hope, and no recovery in sight. What an indescribably lonely place that must have been. I know she is both brilliant and strong enough to build a new, better future, and that brings me a little peace.

Since the psychosis, I have been under the continual support of some very well respected doctors. The NHS is a marvel. The USA should try it. Camden EIS is wonderful. Chloe Friedman

is an exceptional care coordinator. They couldn't prevent this. Hundreds of hours of therapy couldn't prevent this. A large network of friends and family checking in with me constantly over the last year didn't prevent this. Psychiatric hospitals certainly couldn't prevent this. ECT couldn't prevent this. The only person who could have prevented this was me.

Since I first had depression in 2006, preventing anything of this nature became one of my life's goals. That's what drew me to the Vipassana course, to Buddhism, to yoga, to marathons. Thanks to the amazing love, support, experiences and opportunities that my friends provided me, we got from 20 to 38, and those were 18 incredibly happy years (as you can see from the highlights). I didn't get to 80, and I didn't achieve my dream of having a family of our own, but apart from that we did pretty well. The only truly bit I'd change is the last 18 months.

The only way that I could have been able to prevent this is by not taking ketamine.

And so

If I didn't get back to you over the last two years, please believe me, I wanted to, but the pain was too great. I want all of my friends, family, colleagues and collaborators to know how much I love you. Please use your judgement to share my story in way that helps make a positive change in understanding of mental illness, suicide and reducing stigma. Let's beat these illnesses with research, but also by creating a world in which nobody feels reluctant to talk openly.

Some out there might know what it's like to feel suicidal. Many won't, and now you might have a slightly better idea, which is a good thing. Hopefully you won't need this yourself, but hopefully it helps you to help others, if they ever need it.

Thank you for reading and thank you for everything, everyone, from the bottom of my heart. Make the most of the world. I was fortunate to see quite a lot of it, and it's an incredible place. Keep tabs on your ambition, be kind even if you are drunk and don't take ketamine without a doctor. If you are having difficulties, talk to someone. Alcohol, drugs, mental illness or just grief. If you are feeling suicidal, please, for your friends and family, try all of the help that I tried, however hard it feels. Even endure the pain of hospital, at least once. Hospital itself is an even greater hell, but telling professionals how you are feeling may be worth the risk. Keep talking and keep going. These things work for a lot of people, and you don't know they won't work for you until you have tried. I know the pain makes doing this incredibly hard. But before acting, you owe yourself the external evidence that you won't get better.

There is so much out there to live for. I used to love it so much.

Maybe I'm with Mum now. I hope so.

Context: Felix finished writing this in August 2024. Through September he was hospitalized with a second episode of severe psychosis which he gradually came down from through October. By December he had slid back into deep depression.

As during the first episode in March 2023, you may have seen or received a strange or happy message from him during this period.