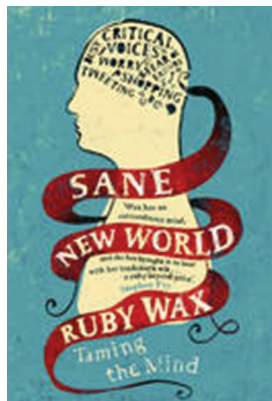


Out of Hours Books

SANE NEW WORLD: TAMING THE MIND RUBY WAX

Hodder & Stoughton 2013

HB, 272pp, £18.99, 9781444755732



Ruby Wax is not on the telly so much these days, but in the last few years she has been developing a second career as a campaigner tackling the stigma of mental illness: as the 'face of depression' for Comic Relief; through taking a successful road show 'Live from the Priory' (in association with Depression Alliance) to the West End; and through helping to set up the 'Black Dog Tribe' social networking site for people with depression.

This book, written following completion of an MA in Mindfulness-based Cognitive Therapy at Oxford with the doyen of MBCT Mark Williams, promotes MBCT for depression, and mindfulness-based stress reduction (MBSR), developed by Jon Kabat-Zinn at the University of Massachusetts, for a wider range of mental health problems. However, she states that the book is not exclusively for the '1 in 4' of us who will have mental health problems at some point in our lives, but for the '4 in 4', that is, everyone, because, she contends 'we're all vulnerable, all delicate creatures under our tough fronts'.

While stating it's for everyone might help

boost sales of the book, I'm concerned that it won't appeal to anyone who doesn't share her world view, which seems to assume that we all suffer from crippling self-criticism, fear of failure, and an unfocused drive for frenetic activity in our daily lives in order to prove ourselves as a result. She promotes this view with frequent references to her own story, blaming her pervasive 'critical voices' on her childhood (particularly her mother), and lacing the text with abrasive jokes which I think unfortunately, are mostly not as funny as I know she can be.

She argues the need to cultivate a greater awareness of our lives from moment to moment, because living on 'automatic pilot' can lead us into habitual maladaptive responses, but I think she goes too far, using hyperbole which I find unconvincing and which puts me on the defensive. For example, she contends that these days we are all '*loaded up to the brim*' with automatic reactions to stress, and:

'... in a constant downpour of adrenaline and cortisol, muscle tension, high blood pressure and lack of oxygen to the brain; all of which can make us very, very ill'.

I find her in-your-face style unattractive, and fear that some readers won't be able to empathise and stick with her long enough to reach the later sections of the book, on mindfulness-based techniques, which are very well described and paint a picture of the possibility of altering the way we react emotionally to our thoughts and fears, which I think would be novel and appealing to many. She describes several exercises, such as paying attention to our breathing, or focusing on the sensations and movements of parts of our body, which through daily practice can help us deal with negative automatic thoughts, noticing them and observing them for what they are, but without reacting to them in a self-critical way.

Is this a book to recommend to our patients struggling with anxiety and depression? I don't think it succeeds as well as other self-help books I have read as, besides the potentially off-putting self-obsession and assumed belief running through the early parts, there are rather difficult-to-read sections listing the parts of the brain, and the many research studies which have now been published on mindfulness. These sections for me are dealt with too superficially, use too much unexplained jargon (such as PET scans and fMRI), and I think would distract readers from the central message of the book. It's a difficult balance, giving information in an understandable format without talking down to your audience, and I would worry that this book would pose more questions than provide answers to many lay readers.

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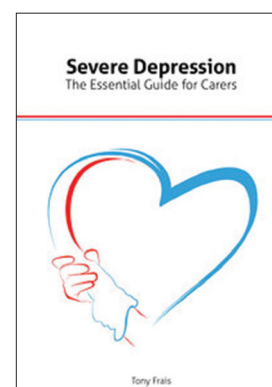
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SEVERE DEPRESSION: THE ESSENTIAL GUIDE FOR CARERS TONY FRAIS

Anthony T Frais 2013

PB, 52pp, £6.99, 9780954806842



This is a short but very helpful booklet written to help people caring or supporting someone with severe depression. Designed to be accessible to a wide audience, it acknowledges that many people who support or live with someone with depression do not

"I'm concerned that this book won't appeal to anyone who doesn't share her world view."

"Carers who are sympathetic to the needs of the patient should be seen as part of the solution not the problem."

always identify themselves as carers. The booklet deals with the challenges of living with someone with this serious condition but also offers a positive message about the value of caring and support.

There are helpful quotes throughout illustrating the emotions and situations described from both carers' and patients' perspectives. Evidence based, it provides an honest insight underpinned by the author's own experiences and is equally valuable to both the patient and carer and their wider family and friends in facilitating understanding.

Throughout, the author emphasises how the carer and patient are partners experiencing the illness together. The booklet explains the condition, not shying away from challenging topics such as suicidal thoughts and stigma. Part one describes the nature of severe depression asserting that carers will be better equipped to face the challenges ahead if they are more informed. The booklet then focuses on the impact of the condition on the carer and addresses issues such as frustration, blame, and guilt:

'I did not cause it. I cannot control it. I cannot cure it. All I can do is cope with it.'

Carers often experience many of these emotions but may not feel able to express them:

'You live each day like you're walking on eggshells ... because any little thing could make him worse.'

Potential sources of advice and support for carers are discussed, with suggestions included for how the carer can assist someone with depression to access help, acknowledging that this can be difficult due to the stigma which surrounds depression and mental illness. The importance of the patient-carer partnership is constantly reinforced:

'The carer and the severely depressed person are considered as partners who are facing this experience together.'

For example, when visiting the GP, the issue of patient confidentiality is discussed.

The booklet highlights how the GP can still support and involve the carer in spite of this.

The booklet explores individual carer's needs. Carers can often feel isolated and shouldn't feel guilty about taking time to manage their own health and wellbeing:

'It's been so beneficial to me being involved in carers groups ... just hearing everybody's story, and realising ... hang on — I'm not the only one going through this.'

The booklet ends on an optimistic note looking at the positive aspects of caring for people with severe depression, which may be easily forgotten or missed:

'I feel the capacity to care is the thing which gives life its deepest significance.' (Pablo Casals, page 43 of the booklet)

Initial comments from GPs have been very positive describing the booklet as a useful tool and a bridge between a self-help book and patient information leaflet. The format allows a more thorough understanding of the patient and carer's journey, yet is not overly burdensome to read.

Approximately 1 in 12 people visiting the GP are carers and up to 40% of carers experience psychological distress or depression and also have an increased rate of physical health problems.¹ The booklet is timely as the RCGP is currently working to highlight the role of carers.¹

As a low-cost intervention, and if offered to carers early, this booklet could make a real difference to both the patient and carer's health and wellbeing.

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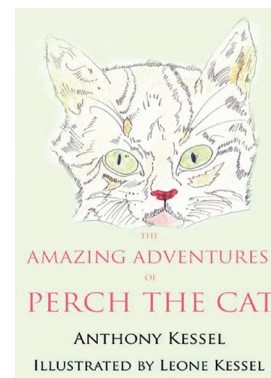
DOI: 10.3399/bjgp13X673810

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1. Royal College of General Practitioners. *Supporting carers in general practice*. <http://www.rcgp.org.uk/clinical-and-research/clinical-resources/carers-support.aspx> [accessed 17 Sep 2013].

THE AMAZING ADVENTURES OF PERCH THE CAT ANTHONY KESSEL

Troubadour Publishing Ltd 2013
PB, 120pp, £5.99, 9781848767591



This is a book of bedtime stories written and told to his daughter by Professor of Public Health Anthony Kessel, about Perch, a London cat. Her escape from a pet shop into the arms of a loving owner and three new cat friends is the start of many adventures, including battles with dragons and an encounter with a ghost cat. Perch evades customs in order to holiday in Morocco before her accidental incarceration in Alcatraz, a high security prison for animals. Thankfully for Perch this is not the end.

There is vivid imagery, and themes which include ethics, horror, love, and growing up, which will captivate an older reader. We particularly enjoyed the short story style of writing, making it easy to complete a story at night, although the small typeface and vocabulary might make it difficult for most 8-year-olds to read alone. The text is broken up with appealing illustrations by the author's daughter, Leone, lending a personal quality to the book.

Overall it is a lively and entertaining read, well suited to the 8–11-year age group.

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