



The A–Z Guide to Good Mental Health: You Don't Have To Be Famous To Have Manic Depression

Jeremy Thomas & Dr Tony Hughes
Penguin Books, 2008, £10.00,
336 pp., ISBN 978-0-141032-17-7

This book is written by a man with bipolar affective disorder and his doctor, who is also a personal friend of his. It is divided into several sections and has a foreword by a famous person with manic depression: Stephen Fry. Dr Tony Hughes and Stephen Fry also collaborated on the recent television documentary.

The distinct sections of the book are: a dialogue between the authors about Jeremy Thomas's bipolar disorder; a selection of life stories from other people who also have bipolar; and an extended glossary and information section – the 'insider's guide to mental health'. This last section also includes a wealth of websites and addresses intending to point the reader in other useful resources.

It is a layperson's guide to having a mental health problem; the language is simple or explained and there is an attempt to use humour and cartoons to counter some of the seriousness of the subject matter.

The really good thing about this book is that it is extraordinarily frank about how difficult it can be being around someone with a serious mental health problem and about the strange situations such a person can get themselves into. It's also very positive: all of the contributors have found coping skills and appear to be living satisfactory and/or successful lives.

I really enjoyed the 'insider's guide to mental health' section. It's a bit off the wall and as well as containing information one would expect on, for example, medication, the Mental Health Act and various mental health problems, it also contains information on poets, Saturn and the Simpsons. Interestingly though, it does not mention hearing voices or having hallucinations at all. I completely disagreed

with their choices of music 'to reflect upon the darker side of life' and 'to fill you with the joys of spring' but was very amused that they have been included.

I also liked the short life stories from a group of people with bipolar disorder; however, the dialogue section at the beginning of the book was harder for me to read. I found comments such as 'Tony Hancock was certainly an alcoholic depressive' difficult because I don't think Tony Hancock was just a psychiatric label – he was a person with an alcohol and depression problem. I was also a bit bemused by the comparison of Alcoholics Anonymous and going to church.

Overall though, this would be a good book to recommend to someone who had recently been diagnosed with bipolar disorder (though they would have to be told manic depression is the same thing). It covers all the basics and demonstrates that someone with this 'illness' can find ways of living with it and even laugh about it.

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doi: 10.1192/pb.bp.108.023150

Journeys with the Black Dog

Tessa Wigney, Kerrie Eyers & Gordon Parker (eds)
Allen & Unwin Academic, 2008,
\$16.95 pb, 300 pp.,
ISBN 978-1-741752-64-9

Journeys with the Black Dog is a Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission award-winning book from the Black Dog Institute in Australia, a centre dedicated to improving knowledge and treatment of mood disorders. Although aimed mainly at patients and carers, it is also relevant to healthcare workers. The book is a collection of excerpts from an essay competition where patients and carers were asked to describe their personal experience of depression or the 'Black

Dog'. In total, there were 634 entries with an age range from 14 to 70 years old.

The excerpts are arranged in chapters which deal with depression stage by stage, from the onset then through the dark days and on to recovery and learning to live with the Black Dog. The stories are very articulate and at times humorous but they are often harrowing to read. The layout of the book works well, enabling readers to pick and choose chapters without having to read them in sequence. The layout also allows comparison between individual descriptions often showing similar thought patterns. However, the layout also means that it is impossible to read an author's story from beginning to end. I found excerpts became quite repetitive and were repeated in several chapters.

The isolation and desperation associated with depression were well portrayed in a way that 'outsiders' could understand. The chapter on carers' and families' views was well written and showed patients how the depression affects their family and friends, while giving carers helpful advice on how to cope. There is no suggestion of a miracle cure and the general message is that it may need several approaches to treatment to find one that suits an individual, but there is something out there for everyone.

Overall, this book is not a light read but a good book for those wishing to gain a true understanding of depression, so is well worth reading. Having said that, I wouldn't recommend it to someone who currently has acute depression as it could potentially exacerbate their symptoms. For those who are more stable, this book offers hope in a balanced way with the message that while depression cannot be cured it can be managed in a variety of ways and that no matter how bad things are 'it will pass'.

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doi: 10.1192/pb.bp.108.022103