

Struck by Living: From Depression to Hope

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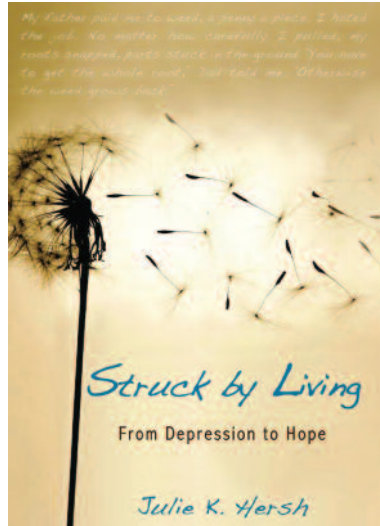
Walk into most bookshops these days and the section for health related memoirs is likely to have increased in size since the last time you were there. A highly unsystematic search of one online book retailer in April 2012 returned 803 results for 'patient memoirs'. In a review article in the *New York Times*, Dr. Abigail Zuger classified health-related memoirs generally as "compelling stories, if not literature".¹

These books in general are not aiming to be classic literary tomes, but to share a lived experience and perhaps offer a message, be it of hope, caution or outrage. The growth of this area is reflected in the creation of Narrative Medicine graduate study programmes at some universities. Patient memoirs can certainly be a source of information and inspiration for others going through a similar experience, as well their families and friends. For health professionals these books can be a source of insight both into how illness can affect a person but also a reflection on how we are perceived. Conversely, there are many 'survivor' stories that paint the profession in a rather grim light, and although they may reflect individual experiences, they do not correspond to most clinicians' experience.

I therefore approached this book with some trepidation, but was pleased to find it balanced, honest and well-written. It is an autobiographical book, chronicling an American woman's struggle with depression. She eschews a traditional timeline, instead telling her story through a combination of her life history and contemporary setting.

The author is refreshingly direct and self-critical throughout, and does not gloss over her experiences, nor does she sugarcoat her description of her recovery, which includes a relapse. It is written for a general audience but psychiatrists or other health professionals may be particularly interested in aspects of diagnosis, treatments and risk factors whilst reading. These are well described, thanks to the author's maintenance of a journal from early on in life. The book also describes the experience of receiving ECT realistically, including the side-effects on her memory. One jarring note is the author's description of being strapped down for the ECT "in case the muscle relaxant failed to stop the spasms". This may be the practice in some centres in the USA, but I am not aware of it being used in Ireland or the UK.

Despite her education, affluence and excellent support network, Ms Hersh's story reinforces the fact that many episodes of depression can come out of the blue, or in her words, "mental illness is an equal opportunity disease". Some of her coping strategies, such as hiring a personal shopper to help her prepare for charity events, may not be options for the average person



attempting to recover from depression. This, however, is a minor point. All in all, her account is easy to read and of sufficient detail to give a complete picture without being onerous. The author remains an active mental health advocate and has appeared on various TV shows as well as writing a blog on the *Psychology Today* website. Topics on her blog include reducing the stigma of mental illness and promoting awareness of depression and suicide. Her willingness to share the experience of her ECT treatment gives her a rare position within the advocacy field.

I would happily recommend this book to those looking for a non-medical account of living with depression. It might be particularly

helpful for people considering ECT and their families. For professionals, this book acts as a reminder of what living with depression can be like. It reflects how we as doctors may often play only a small, albeit important, part in the journey to recovery.

1. Zuger, Abigail. Compelling Stories, if Not Literature. *The New York Times*. 29/06/2010.

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