

Summary: Reasons to Stay Alive by Matt Haig

Depression, what is it? How do we recognize it?

Throughout Reasons to Stay Alive, Matt Haig tries to define what depression may look like and what it is.

“Whole concepts and words change. Depression didn’t use to be depression. It used to be melancholia, and far fewer peoples suffered from that than they do from current depression. But did they really? Or are people more open about such things?”

The WHO defines depression as a common mental disorder. It involves depressed mood or loss of pleasure...different from regular mood changes and feelings about everyday life.

The NIH defines it as a common but serious mood disorder with symptoms present for at least two weeks that interfere with daily activities.

“Things that occur in the mind can often be hidden. Indeed, when I first became ill I spent a lot of energy on looking normal. People often only someone is suffering if they tell them, and with depression that doesn’t always happen...”

Depression isn’t a tangible, well-defined entity. Depression for one person isn’t depression for another. In medicine, we try to tie it to pathophysiology, like every other disease we treat.

Haig discusses that a lot of research regarding depression focuses on neurotransmitters, dopamine and serotonin. He notes that scientific research has identified an imbalance in serotonin levels, with low levels causing depression.

Naturally, to address this issue, medicine has focused on the development of anti-depressants, many of which are SSRIs or SNRIs. Haig questions this focus throughout the book, as some anti-depressants do not work on serotonin at all. His overall point being that maybe medications are the key to helping one struggling with depression.

As physicians, a lot of the time, we look to medications to help or fix the medical problem at hand. While many medications are essential for treatment, (ex. antibiotics, beta-blockers in CAD) medications often should not be the solely treatment for diseases, depression being one of them. Haig emphasizes this point with his own journey through depression.

Haig focuses on talking to his friends and family, focuses on his support system, doing things to make him feel well.

“Life is what is left when we take all that crap away...Life is for the people who love you. No one will ever choose to stay alive for an iPhone. It’s the people we reach via the iPhone that matter.”

I think this is an extremely important aspect of the treatment of depression. Therapy or even emotional support can make all the difference. It can help individuals process their thoughts, in a way medication cannot. I’m not anti anti-depressants but I do think a large part in the current treatment of depression lacks this piece. For many, it’s due to their SES, their inability to afford a therapist, get in with a therapist. Many patients we see don’t even have one person to call their support system.

Also important is to focus on what makes us better and what makes us feel worse, which can be applied to anyone. I think this is especially important for individuals in medicine and trying to prevent burnout. Haig cites “yoga, summer, writing, listening to music” makes him better and “coffee, hotel rooms, alcohol, editing” make him worse. It’s important to ask ourselves what makes us better and what makes us worse.

Furthermore, Haig notes:

“Goals are the source of misery. An unattained goal causes pain, but actually achieving it brings only a brief satisfaction.”

I can identify with this statement, from getting into medical school to starting residency to now finishing residency. I only felt that I would feel happier making it to the next stage.

“So what’s the way out? How do you stop endless wanting and worrying? How do you get off the treadmill?”

Perhaps the answer is what Haig cites, “to be selfless, while being mindful, seems to be good solution.” “being good feels good because it makes us remember that we are not the only person that matters in the world.” Which for a lot of us is the reason we chose medicine in the first place. To remember this on a particular tough day, tough stretch is important.