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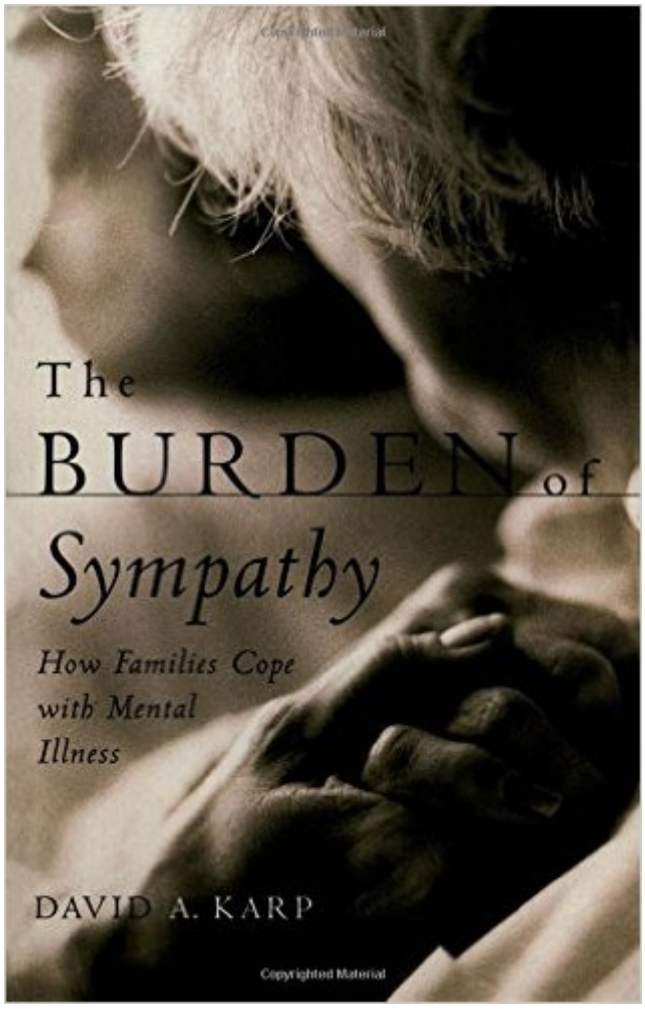
The Burden Of Sympathy: How Families Cope With Mental Illness



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Synopsis

What are the limits of sympathy in dealing with another person’s troubles? Where do we draw the line between caring for a loved one, and being swallowed up emotionally by the obligation to do so? Quite simply, what do we owe each other? In this vivid and thoughtful study, David Karp chronicles the experiences of the family members of the mentally ill, and how they draw "boundaries of sympathy" to avoid being engulfed by the day-to-day suffering of a loved one. Working from sixty extensive interviews, the author reveals striking similarities in the experiences of caregivers: the feelings of shame, fear, guilt and powerlessness in the face of a socially stigmatized illness; the frustration of navigating the complex network of bureaucracies that govern the mental health system; and most of all, the difficulty negotiating an "appropriate" level of involvement with the mentally ill loved one while maintaining enough distance for personal health. Throughout the narratives, Karp sensitively explores the overarching question of how people strike an equilibrium between reason and emotion, between head and heart, when caring for a catastrophically ill person. The Burden of Sympathy concludes with a critical look at what it means to be a moral and caring person at the turn of the century in America, when powerful cultural messages spell out two contradictory imperatives: pursue personal fulfillment at any cost and care for the family at any cost. An insightful, deeply caring look at mental illness and at the larger picture of contemporary values, The Burden of Sympathy is required reading for caregivers of all kinds, and for anyone seeking broader understanding of human responsibility in the postmodern world.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

To write this book Karp, a sociologist, performed three-years' worth of in-depth interviewing of family members of mentally ill patients and attended support groups among these family members at McLean's Hospital in Belmont, MA. He also read extensively on mental illness and living with mental illness, mostly from sociological literature and some from medical books and a few medical journal articles. When I first looked at the book at the library, I noticed the chapter called "The Four C's." Looking at this chapter was what caused me to take the book home. I ended up reading almost the entire book carefully.Throughout the book, Karp discusses and quotes 60 caregivers (by "caregivers," I mean someone with a close relative with mental illness) talking about their relatives and about their own feelings, always focusing on the caregivers' reactions to the events surrounding the illnesses. Karp's main concern is with the obligation family members feel toward their mentally ill relative(s) and with how these family members cope with fulfilling their obligations toward the ill person(s) while trying to live their own lives. One theme that reappears often is that many mentally ill persons refuse to acknowledge their illness at one level or another, thus making their familial caregiver's role more difficult. This includes elderly parents who refuse to get help as well as young spouses with manic episodes who place blame on their healthy spouses. Another theme is the evolution of family caregiver emotions, from those of surprise and pain and hope at first to resentment and even severing of relations in some cases.Karp notes that parental care and obligation is the strongest of the familial ties with the mentally ill.

In _Burden of Sympathy_, sociolgist David A. Karp presents a well-articulated view of how people today are trying to cope with mentall illness in their families.However, it's important to note that the mental health system generally provides little help for *families* of the mentally ill, so the many people Karp interviews are very much trying to learn to cope. Therefore, this is not the book to read if you're looking for guidance. It is, however, a revealing picture of what it means to have mental illness in one's family today.For example, this book's focus in on the caregiver and his/her relationship to the patient. Almost no one is prepared for the personal, spiritual, moral and emotional challenges (not to mention financial) that seem to burst on you when someone you love has a mental illness. The people in _Burden of Sympathy_ have not gone the whole journey, and this is particularly reflected in one mother's account. She and her husband are not able to fully acknowledge their son's illness until he cruelly -- and possibly life-threateningly -- attacks his

brother. The mother expresses concern that because she is completely enveloped in caring for her ill son, that she's failing her other children.The effect of mental illness on families is almost a system in itself, and due to the focus on caregiver-patient in this book, that system is not illuminated. Children who do not play a caregiving role are also profoundly affected and challenged, and have needs of their own that often are not met -- with consequences casting a long shadow over the rest of their lives. I hope David Karp will explore this issue in future books.

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