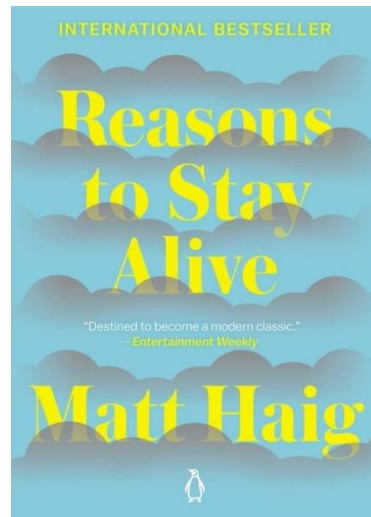


Book Review

Reasons to Stay Alive

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Over the past few weeks, I have come across a hashtag #reasonstostayalive spreading across social media. It has become a popular hashtag for a while in which people recommend a book called “Reason to Stay Alive”, written by Matt Haig and published in 2015, as well as share their own “reasons to stay alive”. Therefore, I decided to give it a try. “Reason to Stay Alive” is a memoir of Matt Haig, a British author, who had been through anxiety and depression during his mid-twenties. The book describes a series of life events in which Haig struggled with depression, that turned his life upside down, and eventually learned to find ways to cope with it through “peaks and troughs”. This book definitely speaks to people who are struggling with depression and mental illness. It contains loads of insights from first-hand experience that intend to serve as a reinforcement to those who suffered that they are not alone and that “the tunnel does have light at the end of it”. Moreover, I believe it would not be exaggerating to say that this book should be read by anyone (Or maybe I am being exaggerated, but it is definitely worth reading). It is not only recommended to depressives or those who had been through depression, but also to those who are looking for how to support someone with depression.

There are five main chapters in the book which are brilliantly named as: Falling, Landing, Rising, Living, and Being. These titles clearly depict a painful yet beautiful journey of what the author had been through and how he felt as a person who suffered from panic disorder, anxiety, and depression until he gradually realized his mental conditions and learned how to cope with them. His writing style is simple but extremely witty and fun. The book contains a clear depiction of how it feels to have depression through the use of vivid images and metaphors. It is also loaded with his insights towards understandings of the illness and what he had learned from those years of fighting with “the black dog”.

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Depression is...

Haig begins the story with a flashback to 14 years ago which was the time when he was in Ibiza, Spain where he experienced a breakdown and tried to jump off the cliff because he felt like he was living through a “strange hell”. He thought that “death seemed such a phenomenally good idea” and believed that what he “was experiencing was something that other people had ever felt”. These introduce the readers to the idea of how terrible and frustrating it is for him, as well as depressives, to be unconsciously experiencing anxiety and depression and to be trapped in his mind until death seem to be the only solution. However, what keeps him from that dreadful situation is love, of family and loved ones, which is one of his “reasons to stay alive”. The author also mentions that “life always provides reasons to not die, if we listen hard enough”. This somehow invites the readers to sit back and take the time to reflect on what keeps them going.

The book really helps the readers understand how anxiety and depression feel like. Haig describes depression as seeing “no hope” and “no future”. Depression is invisible like “walking around with your head on fire and no one can see the flames”. It is not like having a headache or bleeding wounds that everyone can see from the outside. Instead, the torments constantly happen on the inside and words cannot describe how terrible they are. Depression also makes a person feel alone as if there is no place for them in the world. The author also provides further explanation about his symptoms including an infinite sadness, a sense of being disconnected, fear of going mad, and a continual sense of heavy dread. Apart from mental symptoms, there are also physical symptoms such as loss of appetite, an inner trembling, insomnia, and palpitations. At the very beginning, he had no ideas about what he was experiencing. He spent much of his time trying to deny his “unhappiness” and become what the society define as “normal”. Then with the help of his girlfriend, Andrea, he became aware of his mental illness while gradually tried to understand and cope with it, even though it might seem impossible for him at the time.

Healing

Though the pain and sufferings inflicted by the illness seem to be infinite, Haig has made it clear in the book that there are several ways of healing. Medication is one of the many treatment options available, however, for him personally, he prefers alternative ways including exercise, sunshine, sleep, and intense conversation. While medication helps “numb the pain”, those things help him know his pain very well and know what would make him feel better. With those things, he became “in tune” with himself and was able to “build” himself “back up from scratch”. Reading is also one of the things that give him “comfort” as well as “escape”, especially when it is a story about “other people who have suffered, survived, and overcome despair”. It provides him with the opportunity to explore other people’s stories that he, or anyone, somehow can relate to and become preoccupied with what is happening in the book rather than what is going on in the mind. Knowing there are several people out there who have felt the same way and been through an equivalent pain as we do is quite a relief and comfort. It leads to a sense of hope that things will be better. Therefore, Haig hopes “this book can do the same” in being a reassurance for those who suffered. Another thing that helps is putting oneself in an unfamiliar and unpleasant situation. The key is to fight our fear with a bigger one. Being in such situation spurs a sense of excitement and nervousness that distract us from our mind and force us to focus more on the world outside our head. For Haig, such situation includes traveling and forcing himself into a new environment. Apart from those ways of healing, his wife, Andrea, one of the most important people in his life, plays a significant role during his recovery. She has been by his side from the very beginning of his first breakdown in Ibiza. She is kind, supportive, and patient. She accompanied him during his confrontation with the illness. She is the one “waiting patiently” during his “absence” from himself. She also encouraged him to face his mental illness, to seek help when it is needed, and to publish the book about it. Her significance and influence towards Haig are highlighted by the fact that he dedicated the book to Andrea because he, in fact, owed her “his whole life”.

Although there are many possible ways of healing, there is no one-size-fits-all solution to it. Since everyone is fighting their own battle and the levels of pain are experienced in a variety of levels, therefore one has to try different methods and sees what works best for them. During his recovery, Haig points to the fact that depression does not just disappear. It is still there in the dark corner of our mind waiting for the time we fall again. However, the difference is the next time it strikes us, we now know that this bad day is not going to last forever. We have been through it and we will make it again. It is worth keeping this in mind that “life

is waiting for you. You might be stuck here for a while, but the world isn't going anywhere. Hang on in there if you can. Life is always worth it".

To overcome the stigma

According to statistics from WHO, the Guardian, Mind, and Black Dog Institute, "suicide is the leading cause of death among men and women" and "men are over three times more likely to kill themselves than a woman". The numbers from the Office of National Statistics show that men are 3.5 times more likely to kill themselves than women. This is because the society has made men see mental illness as a sign of "weakness" or unmanliness. It highlights how the society, one way or another, can be one of the reasons behind the illness. Thus, it is also crucial to point out that depression or mental illness has nothing to do with gender. It can happen at any time to anyone regardless of their gender, age, race, or sexual orientation. What is more important is to address the stigma towards depression and focus more on listening, sympathizing, and encouraging those suffered from it. In the section "How to be there for someone with depression or anxiety" and "How to live (forty pieces of advice I feel to be helpful but which I don't always follow)", as the names clearly suggest, Haig has provided useful and informative advice on what people around depressives should and should not do. Additionally, in the latter section, he also includes his compilation of helpful advice, from different sources including well-known authors and he himself, which could be applied to daily life. It is also very thoughtful of him to include some of the messages from the hashtag #reasonstostayalive. These messages help emphasize the idea that there are millions of people out there who have been through or living through depression and are still "alive" because of so many reasons, ranging from friends, family, sunshine, future, music, Sunday mornings, bacon rolls, fresh air, to pets. These lines read like an affirmation that we are not suffering alone and that there is hope that "the black dog will leave eventually".

Conclusion

To put it plainly, I sincerely appreciate Haig's courage on publicly opening up and being honest about his experience of overcoming panic disorder and depression. The story is truly thought-provoking and absolutely inspirational. In addition, it is highly insightful of him to shed light on the stigma of "invisible" mental illness that still exists despite the rising numbers of suicides and depression around the world. I would like to, again, recommend "Reason to Stay Alive" to anyone. It may seem tad exaggerating to some, but I absolutely agree with most of the readers that this book could save a life and give hope to all of us.

Here are one of my favorite lines:

"Depression is also smaller than you. Always, it is smaller than you, even when it feels vast. It operates within you, you do not operate within it. It may be a dark cloud passing across the sky, but – if that is the metaphor – you are the sky. You were there before it. And the cloud can't exist without the sky, but the sky can exist without the cloud."

It is so uplifting and heartwarming to have someone, who had been through depression, assuring that "a dark cloud" can happen from time to time but eventually we are "the observer of our mind, not its victim". After completing the book, I somehow manage to find more of "my own reasons to stay alive" and I do wonder what yours would be?

References

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