16 Nonfiction Books About Mental Illness

By Kristian Wilson

If you want to diversify your reading list and learn something new at the same time, you can't go wrong by reading nonfiction books about mental illness. Whether you want to read the accounts of others with your condition or better understand why ableism is awful, books by and about people living with mental illness make great additions to your TBR.

According to the National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI), the phrase "mental illness" refers to a wide variety of conditions that affect "a person's thinking, feeling or mood and ... her ability to relate to others and function on a daily basis." These include depression, schizophrenia, and eating disorders, as well as Autism Spectrum Disorder, ADHD, and other neurodiverse conditions.

Mental illness is more common than many people think. NAMI reports that "one in 5 adults experiences a mental health condition every year," while "one in 20 lives with a serious mental illness such as schizophrenia or bipolar disorder."

For Millennials, those numbers are even higher. In 2011, "[t]he average high school kid ... ha[d] the same level of anxiety as the average psychiatric patient in the 1950s." Thankfully, Gen-Y'ers are also more open to talking about their mental health. Young people experiencing mental health issues would do well to follow Linda Esposito's recommendations for self-care, and no one should be afraid to ask for help if they need it. The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services has compiled some excellent resources over at mentalhealth.gov.

Unfortunately, the prevalence of mental illness has not done much to dissolve the stigma attached to it. If you want to better understand different mental health issues and how psychiatric treatment has evolved, the 16 nonfiction books about mental illness listed below are a great jumping off point. As always, please share your own recommendations on Twitter.

1. My Lobotomy by Howard Dully

In the early 1960s, 12-year-old Howard Dully underwent a radical and brutal procedure: the so-called "ice pick" lobotomy. He spent the next three decades alone and in limbo, before he began to pull his life together and came face-to-face with the truth.

2. Girl, Interrupted by Susanna Kaysen

A few years after Howard Dully was operated on, 18-year-old Susanna Kaysen found herself shipped off to the elite McLean Hospital. Diagnosed with depression and borderline personality disorder, Kaysen spent the next two years living in a ward full of girls and young women.
3. **The Man Who Mistook His Wife for a Hat and Other Clinical Tales** by Oliver Sacks

In *The Man Who Mistook His Wife for a Hat and Other Clinical Tales*, neurologist Oliver Sacks respectfully recounts stories of patients with amnesia, dementia, rare syndromes, and brilliant talents.

4. **Willow Weep for Me: A Black Woman’s Journey through Depression** by Meri Nana-Ama Danquah

Combating the harmful stereotype of the strong black woman, Meri Nana-Ama Danquah’s memoir of depression and recovery examines how her mental illness affects family dynamics and women of color.

5. **Just Checking: Scenes from the Life of an Obsessive-Compulsive** by Emily Colas

What she once considered quirks of her own nature soon emerged as full-blown obsessive-compulsive disorder. As Emily Colas recalls her journey through OCD, she offers up the logic behind her "checks" and fears.

6. **Gracefully Insane: The Rise and Fall of America’s Premier Mental Hospital** by Alex Beam

The institution where Susanna Kaysen spent the first two years of her young adulthood — and which hosted Sylvia Plath, James Taylor, and Ray Charles, among others — comes back to life in this microhistory from Alex Beam.

7. **Wasted: A Memoir of Anorexia and Bulimia** by Marya Hornbacher

Marya Hornbacher recounts her love affair and eventual falling out with anorexia and bulimia in this gripping memoir.

8. **Prozac Nation** by Elizabeth Wurtzel

In the 1990s, the relatively new SSRI called Prozac became synonymous with mental illness, due in no small part to Elizabeth Wurtzel's bestselling memoir about the collective mental health of Generation X.

9. **Girl in Need of a Tourniquet: Memoir of a Borderline Personality** by Merri Lisa Johnson

This memoir from university professor and self-proclaimed "psycho girlfriend" Merri Lisa Johnson examines the sane/insane binary and explores the ways in which terminology affects our understanding of mental health and illness.

10. **Loud in the House of Myself: Memoir of a Strange Girl** by Stacy Pershall

A precocious girl from a small Midwestern town chronicles her experiences with anorexia, bulimia, bipolar disorder, and borderline personality disorder in this deeply personal memoir.

11. **An Unquiet Mind: A Memoir of Moods and Madness** by Kay Redfield Jamison

Clinical psychologist Kay Redfield Jamison was helping to treat others' bipolar disorder when she realized that she exhibited many of the same symptoms. In *An Unquiet Mind*, she evaluates her experience from personal and professional positions.
12. **Bedlam: London and Its Mad** by Catharine Arnold

If one hospital has become synonymous with the stereotypical asylum, its Bedlam. In this microhistory, Catharine Arnold examines the history of mental health and illness in London.

13. **The Theft of Memory: Losing My Father, One Day at a Time** by Jonathan Kozol

Before his death in 2008, Harry Kozol was a brilliant and famous neurologist. As his son details in this poignant memoir, however, Kozol recognized his own symptoms and decline, and eventually wound up diagnosed with Alzheimer's disease by a doctor he had once taught.

14. **Brain on Fire: My Month of Madness** by Susannah Cahalan

Unlike many of the other books on this list, Brain on Fire centers on a woman diagnosed with an illness many have never heard of: anti-NMDA receptor encephalitis. Anyone living with an autoimmune disease or other rare, chronic illness will identify with Susannah Cahalan's search for a correct diagnosis.

15. **Madhouse: A Tragic Tale of Megalomania and Modern Medicine** by Andrew Scull

The history of psychiatry is filled with quacks and hacks who ruined others’ lives in their quests to do the right thing. Andrew Scull’s subject in Madhouse, Henry Cotton — who extracted teeth, tonsils, and other organs in the name of mental health — is one of these.

16. **The Lives They Left Behind: Suitcases from a State Hospital Attic** by Darby Penney, et al.

After the Willard Psychiatric Center closed in 1995, the suitcases of more than 400 former patients were discovered in the attic. In The Lives They Left Behind, they are unpacked, photographed, and documented for a new portrait of recent mental health care.