



## **The Burden of Sympathy: How Families Cope with Mental Illness**

*David A. Karp*

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## **The Burden of Sympathy: How Families Cope with Mental Illness** David A. Karp

This work is a compassionate exploration of how to maintain one's own mental health while caring for others. The author has been working in this field for two decades and has gained a reputation for being an incisive analyst of everyday life.

### **The Burden of Sympathy: How Families Cope with Mental Illness Details**

Date : Published May 23rd 2002 by Oxford University Press, USA (first published October 1st 2000)

ISBN : 9780195152449

Author : David A. Karp

Format : Paperback 340 pages

Genre : Nonfiction, Psychology, Health, Mental Health



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## **From Reader Review The Burden of Sympathy: How Families Cope with Mental Illness for online ebook**

### **Pat says**

Very thorough analysis with clear personal experiences which are easy to relate to. Good for both those experiencing these very serious, difficult and life changing problems and those who are professionals in several fields. New insights obtained.

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### **Linda says**

I found the first-person accounts of individuals who have family members who are mentally ill to be touching, moving, and enlightening. Otherwise, the book was a bit dry and made some generalizations and analogies that I thought were a bit of a stretch. Bottom-line, every family's experience is completely different, and mental illness is very, very difficult to cope with in a family.

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### **Anna says**

I'll start with the bad points of this book. The author is a sociology professor, and the book is really written for a scholarly audience, so it can be pedantic and unreadable (although much less so than a lot of books written by social scientists). Depending on your point of view, you might also find it a disadvantage that *The Burden of Sympathy* is really a summary of how the 60 folks profiled felt and what they did, with little analysis on the author's part of whether they're doing the right thing. This definitely isn't a self-help book written by someone who thinks he knows all the answers, but it might give you enough insight that you can discover the answers on your own.

Those cons aside, I found the book very thought-provoking and helpful. I've struggled with how much obligation/responsibility family members of people with mental illnesses have toward their less healthy compatriots, so seeing many other people's take was interesting. Karp's analysis is that each person's feelings of obligation differ, depending on factors like relationship (mothers tend to feel most obliged, children least, spouses and siblings in the middle) and gender (women are more likely to take on caretaking roles, perhaps because of lack of power which prompts them to learn empathy, perhaps because it is assumed that caretaking is a woman's role, or perhaps because women are simply hardwired to be caretakers). In addition, caretaking responses tend to change over the course of a family member's illness, as the caretakers realize that they can't do anything to cure or control the illness, that they might actually be making it worse through enabling behavior, and that the caretaker is making him- or herself sick through becoming too invested. Disappointingly for my black-and-white mentality, there is no one right answer for how much responsibility a family member has, but it helps to know that others are confused too.

The meat of the book aside, it also raises larger questions. For example, the author relates that the current emphasis on the family unit being responsible for its members is a relatively new phenomenon, with Industrialization having pushed us away from a community mode of obligation into a smaller family mode. Would it be easier to deal with mental illness in the community model, where presumably those without mental illness in their families would jump in to help those with? Karp also argues that Americans have a

hard time figuring out our responsibilities because we're simultaneously told by society that our family is our primary obligation, but also that we are obligated to put our own self-fulfillment above all else. Is this American idolization of individuality why relationships of all kinds fail so terribly in our society? On the other hand, wouldn't we all really prefer that over having to live in a village with the same 50 people (45 of whom are probably annoying) all our lives?

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### **Lisa says**

This is a must read for families struggling with the care of a mentally disabled loved one. It was comforting to read the quotes from those embroiled in the struggle of finding care, psychs, meds for mentally disabled loved one. I found some of his observations in the last chapter not so relevant as in much of the section "Taking Care: Whose Problem Is It Anyway?" I found the sociological treatise a bit pithy and the debate of personal responsibility vs state's responsibility tiring.

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### **Deva Fagan says**

Very good, but had to return to the library. Need to revisit later!

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### **Bonnie says**

The book is slow starting and rambling. The topic is of interest to me so I will read on.

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### **Ally Johnson says**

The book really brings the reality of mental illness to light. The day to day struggles and internal battles of wanting to keep distance and yet being compelled to interact with the ill. It takes such a heavy emotional toll.

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### **Jennifer Wasserman says**

Sad.

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### **Linda says**

Based upon three years of interviewing families affected by mental illness, Karp was able to identify unique challenges associated with caring for a child, sibling, spouse and parent. I wish that I had read this book earlier since it hit "home" to the feelings, reactions, and thought processes. On the negative side, Karp did interweave his own comments that related to his personal experience with depression, which was distracting

from what I would consider the main theme of the book.

Note: I did not read the ebook, but the hardcopy version.

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### **Maggie says**

Somewhat disappointing. Reads like a sociological presentation which makes for factual rather than enjoyable reading. Based on the outcome of interviews with 60 people the highlights of the book were the snippets of the interviews where 'real people' shared their insights. Certain chapters were better than others. For example "The four c's" and "Surviving the system" both of which brought home just how similar things are for people dealing with mental health regardless of where they live.

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