



How to Be Sick: A Buddhist-Inspired Guide for the Chronically Ill and Their Caregivers

Toni Bernhard, Sylvia Boorstein (Forward)

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This life-affirming, instructive, and thoroughly inspiring book is a must-read for anyone who is--or who might one day be--sick. And it can also be the perfect gift of guidance, encouragement, and uplifting inspiration to family, friends, and loved ones struggling with the many terrifying or disheartening life changes that come so close on the heels of a diagnosis of a chronic condition or even a life-threatening illness.

The author, who became ill while a university law professor in the prime of her career, tells the reader how she got sick and, to her and her partner's bewilderment, stayed that way. Toni had been a longtime meditator, going on long meditation retreats and spending many hours rigorously practicing, but soon discovered that she simply could no longer engage in those difficult and taxing forms. She had to learn ways to make "being sick" the heart of her spiritual practice and, through truly learning how to be sick, she learned how, even with many physical and energetic limitations, to live a life of equanimity, compassion, and joy. Whether we ourselves are sick now or not, we can learn these vital arts of living well from *How to Be Sick*.

How to Be Sick: A Buddhist-Inspired Guide for the Chronically Ill and Their Caregivers Details

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I'd So Rather Be Reading {Nat} says

I've been living with chronic illness my entire life: I was born with a genetic immune deficiency which has worsened with age. Along with the immune deficiency, I have several other auto-immune conditions as well as a chronic pain syndrome. To look at me, you'd never know how sick I am: I look perfectly fine on the outside. People like me are said to have "invisible illnesses." We are often misunderstood by family members, friends, even health professionals (for those of us with rare conditions, like me). Trying to live a full and happy life despite my health challenges is my greatest struggle. It's even more profound now that I'm a mother: I don't want my daughter to see me as a sick person. I want to be the best that I can be for her, and have the most positive outlook possible.

So it was with excitement that I read Toni Bernhard's *How to Be Sick*. I read an article written by Toni online and loved her writing style and message. I immediately bought her book and I simply devoured it. This book spoke to me and affected me deeply. I am a Christian and was a little leery of the fact that this book is Buddhist-inspired. I didn't know what that meant, really. All I knew about Buddhism is that practitioners meditate. That was it!

Toni gently educates the reader by applying Buddhism's principles to how to live peacefully with chronic illness. The main concept of this book is how to alleviate the mental suffering that accompanies chronic illness. Common examples of mental suffering are: asking why is this happening to me, being envious of healthy people, and being uncertain about the future (when will I relapse, will this treatment work, fear of testing and doctor visits, and fear of being unable to attend family events, etc). These issues are all things I struggle with in my every day life. So, to read a book that teaches me specific ways to address these fears was a true gift.

I loved that Toni gives so many practical examples throughout the book. The examples really drove the points home and made me feel like I could start applying what I learned right away. There is a great section at the end of the book with bullet points of what to do in certain situations. I loved that!

As soon as I finished *How to Be Sick*, I turned back to page one and got my highlighter ready. Now I'm reading the book a second time and really making a study of this insightful, life-changing guide. I can't say enough good things about this book. If you have anyone in your life who is chronically ill, or a caregiver, I would highly recommend *How to Be Sick*!

Happyreader says

You don't need to be suffering from a chronic health condition to benefit from this book. I originally bought this book for my mother, who suffers from chronic pain, and ended up reading it myself in a single day over the Christmas holidays. Probably one of the most practical and helpful Buddhist books I've ever read. A well-written, accessible manual of how to approach life when it doesn't go the way we expect it to, something we can all relate to. I almost wish the title was something more along the lines of "When Life Disappoints" so that people who consider themselves healthy would pick up this book. As it is, an excellent book for chronic health sufferers and life sufferers alike.

Gwen (The Gwendolyn Reading Method) says

A good read for anyone with a chronic illness. Toni's chronic illness is much more severe than mine, but any Chronic Illness is a mentally heavy weight to carry and this book offers some great techniques for handling the load.

Heather (DeathByBook) says

This is a great book! Whether you have to cope with a chronic illness or just the chronic condition of being human, this book has something to offer. It is written in a non preachy way by a woman who knows what she is talking about. This is the first book of it's type that I have found helpful even when I am too unwell to get out of bed. It can be read in little parts or gobbled up whole. I keep it next to my bed for a refresher/reminder when my illness is weighing heavy and I forget "How to BE sick." I highly recommend it to everyone and I am buying extra copies for friends.

Orchid says

"It's easy to look back and see what a mistake it was to continue working while sick—it probably worsened my condition—but many people who have contracted a chronic illness have done the same. First, there's the financial need to keep working. Second, there's the utter disbelief that this is happening to you (reinforced by people telling you that you look just fine—people who don't see you collapse on the bed as soon as you get home)"

"Part of the reality of chronic debilitating illness is continually trying to figure out why you are so sick—and never getting a definitive answer."

"Ironically, people may think you're giving up, when in fact you are simply giving in to the reality of your new life."

I'm only on chapter 3 but already this book is resonating very deeply with me- despite my illness being "illness lite" compared to what the author has gone through. I'm hoping this book will help me mentally, as it can be very trying to get my hopes up and get them dashed again. Need to gurd my loins here.

Bridget Parker says

This is one of the first books I've read in regards to chronic illness. It is AMAZING. It's refreshing to see someone being so honest about being sick, acknowledging how awful it is and sharing ways to make life a little easier. Highly recommended for any spoonies out there.

Erin says

Most of the problems I had with this book were nicely put into a paragraph in the last few pages so I can just quote it here:

Now, on a day when I start to sink into that "Why me?" mood, I turn it into "Why *not* me?" I, too, have health insurance. I, too, did not suffer financially when I had to stop working, other than having to tighten our budget. I, too, have the best of caregivers.

I had high hopes going into this, and that is perhaps my fault, but this is more of the same from the same people who have been talking about CFS the most publicly since forever and makes me feel even more isolated than when I started reading this. Despite all the "Buddhist-inspired wisdom" of this book, I feel like the takeaway is that, if you already lived a fulfilling life and had a career and a family before getting sick, if you have financially security and a lot of other resources at your disposal, your life might not be unrecoverably horrible, but, if not, there's not a whole lot out there for you. As such, I'll take away a few good ideas from this, but am left wanting in the how and why of a lot of the things involved in living a sometimes okay life, which is really all Bernhard is selling as the result of guide.

I did find that Bernhard's descriptions of what it's like to live with Chronic Fatigue Syndrome accurate, and reading something by someone with CFS is something I didn't realize I was as starved for as I was. It's definitely a (too) diverse syndrome that presents itself pretty differently, but she touched upon more or less all of the universal symptoms in a way that was both accurate and expressive. She also mentioned pretty much all the other things that come along with such a devastating illness, and how it impacts those around the one who is ill. So for that, and for what she wanted this book to be, I give it 2 1/2-3 stars. But really, I am kind of more bummed out about my life than I was before I read it, which, ouch, is not great.

tl;dr: rich middle-aged white Buddhist gets sick, and finds a way to still be a rich middle-aged white Buddhist, not terribly helpful for those in other situations, but not useless either.

Chrissie says

I have been told you don't have to know how to meditate or even be attracted to Buddhist beliefs, to be helped by this book. Anyone with a chronic illness or who cares for another with a chronic illness should consider this book. This is a book for those people who have an illness that is not going to go away.

I am very reluctant to read self-help books. I just get out a piece of paper and pen and think while I jot down my thoughts. A dear friend suggested this to me. She said read a bit and see what you think. That is what I did. It drew me in, and I wanted to continue. So this is what I am reading.

This book is the first that has shown me the value of Buddhist beliefs. I had always seen Buddhism as excessively negative. Unfortunately the prime focus of Buddhism is that life is filled with suffering. Buddhism also says that suffering can come to an end. Perhaps just momentarily, but there are numerous

ways to end suffering if we just know how. And this book shows how. The book, in a very simple manner, explains Buddhist thoughts, but more importantly, it shows you how to achieve peace. How to stop yourself from worrying all the time. How to lessen stress. These are phenomena that everyone encounters daily. The book is aimed at those who are chronically ill, because such people simply worry so much they feel they are about to drown, but absolutely anyone will benefit from this book.

I have instinctively disliked the thought that desire was bad. Buddhism stresses that it is our desire that makes us suffer. In reality it is when we desire what we cannot achieve that desire becomes negative. Let me just say that this book explains this so much better than I can. No other book I have ever read about Buddhism has made it all so simple and clear. And it is not negative at all.

And you smile when you read the book. Buddhists make list and number everything: Four Noble Truths and the Eight Fold Path to Freedom/Liberation and the Three Marks of Existence. The Buddhists can count..... It does make you smile!

What is best about thi book, forget all the other stuff you intellectually learn, is that it shows you how to enjoy life more. Listen to what I am saying! Is that a negative message? Indeed it is not! There is nothing negative at all about the Buddhist teachings. The book is filled with ideas of how you can get more out of life when you are worried and stressed and upset. You do not need to be chronically ill to get a lot from this book. If you are chronically ill, it is a life-ring that helps keep you afloat.

It is however up to you to take the routines described in the book and use them. The book is so simple. Through practices/routines it shows you what you can do. I will give you one example, that is found in this book. Close your eyes and think of something in your past that makes you unhappy, perhaps an event where you wish you had behaved differently. Pick something that troubles you in your past. Then open your eyes and look ilmmmediately at your cat, or your garden, or your dog or whatever you do love. Something that makes you spontaneously happy! Don't you just feel the worry drop off you? You "dropped it", that worry. If you practice this in other situations you will learn and teach your body how to "drop it" on command. This book is filled with little things that you can do. Some worked for me. Others didn't. Some I simply didn't know what they were talking about, but I am just at the beginning. This is a little book to practice with.

OK, maybe borrow it from the library the first time you read it, but if you do not have it at home you will forget what to do. This book is written in such a way that you will understand what you must practice. YOU do them as much as YOU need them. You choose those routines that work for you.

This book refers to many other Zen and Buddhist books. The author gives examples that another particular book/author suggests. In this way you know which books maybe you want to try next. For me there is so much in this little book that I need nothing more, not yet at least. The magic of this book is that theses teeny exercises worked immediatley. She has a knack for explaining them. She is herself chronically ill. She has had to use these routines. She know what works and doesn't work. I think that is why she explains the routines so well. And the routines have fun little names so they are easy to remember.

I have had diabetes for 50 years. That is a long time. In the last year I have had increasing problems with my vision. This has really messed up my emotions. This book was a life-ring thrown to me. It is not going to improve my diabetes or my vision, but it will help lighten the emotional burden. Many of the ideas presented were in fact not new, but the book somehow has made these philosophical beliefs that I have always held a means by which I can fight worry and stress and fear.

P.S. The book is not perfect. I would sometimes think: "Hey, that is wrong! Here is a counter example!" But

it helps so much so that it is worth five stars. When will I ever agree with everything I read?!

Shelley says

I was unsure about this book initially because of its title. I found myself thinking " I don't want to know how to be sick, I want to figure out how to get well." However, after reading it, the only thing I did not care for about the entire book was its title and it has even grown on me. The book is Buddhist inspired. I found great help from it in spite of having essentially no knowledge about Buddhism. I plan on looking up some of the references to learn more, in fact.

Reading this book if you are chronically ill is like opening a treasured box of chocolates. Each one has a new flavor and builds on the experience of the entire box. The book is packed with pearls about dealing with chronic illness which also build upon themselves and lace the entire book with flavor of life and living in spite of the suffering that comes with chronic illness. At times I even cried, which is rare for me, because I identify with the journey of the author and her stories.

Toni reminds us that all people suffer and she frankly discusses the issues that come up with doctors, friends, family and self while dealing with chronic illness and then presents some solutions for not allowing those issues add to our suffering. There is a summary key in the back which also lists specific issues and practices which can be helpful when the issues come up. I felt like a dear friend was writing to me and I could completely relate with the mirror stories that have happened in my own life and even mirror lessons.....though I am not Buddhist.

I would recommend this book to anyone dealing with chronic illness or who is a caregiver for someone with chronic illness. It is a book I will reread which is also rare for me. It is also a book that I will likely purchase for other friends coping with chronic illness.

Michelle says

An important book for anyone with chronic illness, but unfortunately not quite as applicable to me as I had hoped.

Full review: <http://bit.ly/XkE6XS>

Julie says

My dear friend Bev sent me this book, thank you Bev! I am not a Buddhist, but I didn't feel that I needed to be in order to grasp the main points and gain insight from all of the lessons within. I think this book is perfect for all who are chronically ill, or care givers of the chronically ill, looking for a guide on how to better navigate and cope with the mental side of being ill. I know for me being chronically ill there is an overwhelming feeling of helplessness knowing you can't change the physical, but Bernhard shows through a series of simple practices that a change in perspective can lead you right out of that negative space mentally. One of my favorites is this affirmation: There is sickness here, but "I" am not sick. Very empowering! I will refer to this book again and again.

Deanie says

Living with chronic illness is not for sissies and there is not a lot of resources that help you deal with anything beyond the actual physical condition. Most people think in terms of varying degrees of good health and death...very few consider the limbo of ill-health or living indefinitely with a terminal illness. Friends desert you, life as you knew it ceases, your activities are limited, you can no longer count on your body to perform on a daily basis, no one allows conversation about your condition, your independence is non-existent, etc. This book addresses how to survive all of these changes in a way that you can handle without the assistance of someone else. It was extremely helpful.

Jody says

This is probably the most important book I've ever read. For anyone who has a chronic illness, or takes care of someone who has a chronic illness, I can't imagine a better book. I keep it near me often & have it both on my Kindle and in print form so that I can mark the passages that resonate with me.

William has read parts of the book also and found that it not only affirms things we have both known (but sometimes forget when my flare-ups are at their worst) as well as new ways to cope and look at the world. It especially helped me this holiday season when I was not able to be part of several parties w/friends & family.

Even though neither of us are "religious", This Buddhist inspired book, along w/the wonderful computer/ipod/etc friendly yoga & meditations that I buy on my yoga teachers web-site, www.yeslifecoachcompanion.com have made terrible days, in tollerable days.

I highly reccomend this book to everyone. Toni Bernhard is wonderful and the struggle of her illness makes the fact that she has written this book even more of a feat.

Tita says

This little book is a "MUST READ" for anyone with chronic issues (of which I have many). And it is the kind of book that one must not read at one sitting, though one will be tempted to do so. The compassion, the wisdom, the fellow-traveler warmth, the many suggestions and practices that Toni Bernhard offers need to be taken out one at a time, cherished, contemplated carefully, put to use in a mindful way. The book has become a dear friend at my bedside, offering comfort when I need it most. Although I have not finished it-- and maybe I never really will, since I would guess that I will keep re-reading and ruminating over its wisdom over and over--there is no doubt but that there are not enough stars to rate this book. My sincerest gratitude to Toni Bernhard for sharing her tears, her laughs, her heart, her wise soul with those of us who are in need.

Wilhelmina Jenkins says

I have lived with chronic illness for the past 27 years and I have read lots of books about how to life a

healthy life with an unhealthy body. This book would now be my top recommendation for anyone who has a chronic illness or who cares for someone who does. Author Toni Bernhard has Chronic Fatigue Syndrome (as do I) and she doesn't sugarcoat how severe an illness this is. Her life was turned upside down, but she shares in this book the spiritual practices she uses to live her life as fully as possible. The techniques she explains come from Buddhism, but they can be used by anyone. I am a mainstream Protestant - no problem! These techniques do not cure illness, but they can change the way that one thinks about illness, eliminating the thought-patterns and attitudes that stand in the way of living a spiritually healthy life even with physical limitations. There is even a guide at the end of the book that reviews and summarizes the practices she presents in the text.

Changing the way that one thinks about illness is not easy. But by emphasizing such practices as compassion, loving-kindness toward oneself and others, sympathetic joy, and equanimity, Bernhard shows us that it is possible to have a sick body but a healthy spirit. I know that I will turn to this book often and I hope that many others will also.
