

Not Your Mother's Library Transcript

Episode 34: Help Yourself

(Brief intro music)

Rachel: Hello, and welcome to Not Your Mother's Library, a readers' advisory podcast from the Oak Creek Public Library. I'm Rachel.

Leah: And I'm Leah.

Rachel: It is Mental Health Awareness Month, which aims to raise awareness for the hundreds of millions around the world who suffer from mental illness. It's all about providing increased support, public education, fighting against stigmas, and advocating for changes that make things better not only for those who suffer but for their families and other support systems. I think that it is fair to say being able to talk about mental health has become easier in recent years. Not only that, but access to virtual therapy has exploded since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, with lots of people coming to recognize a need for more help or—at the very least—a listening ear. There's nothing quite like an abundance of isolation, stress, and despair to kick our neurons into high gear.

Leah: Mmhm.

Rachel: The goal, of course, is to develop our society in a way that makes it simple for anyone who needs support to get it, and for that support to be of the highest quality. We're not there yet, but strides have definitely been made. Just thinking about what people had to go through in the American healthcare system prior to deinstitutionalization makes me want to scream.

Leah: Scream!

Rachel: And it's not like everything which came after was much improved. But, thankfully, the situation is not nearly as dire as it was half a century ago. These days, most people tend to view mental illness in a softer light, for which many of those in my own generation are grateful. One modern benefit is the plethora of books on the subject. Arm yourself with knowledge, as we librarians tend to say! Especially since, in the end, you are your own biggest advocate. If you are at all interested in brushing up on your understanding of the human mind and its countless imperfections, stay tuned! I do want to point out that there is a link to a list of helplines, should you find yourself in need. The National Alliance on Mental Illness has compiled an exhaustive list of resources. NAMI's own staff and volunteers are trained to

provide support, so don't hesitate. For quick guidance, visit nami.org/help. There are plenty of alternatives, like Mental Health America, SAMHSA, NIMH, and more for those living outside of the U.S. This episode of our little podcast is by no means a go-to if you are struggling. We're just going to recommend some books that you might find interesting and then leave everything else to those who are way better qualified. Now that the disclaimer is out of the way...Leah, what is your first pick for today?

Leah: All right, up first is a recently published book—in 2021—called “Find Your Fierce: How to Put Social Anxiety in Its Place” by Jacqueline Sperling. Now, Dr. Sperling knows her stuff: she's got a PhD and is a faculty member of Harvard Medical School. She's also the co-founder and co-program director of the McLean Anxiety Mastery Program at the McLean Hospital. How she found time to write a book is astounding.

Rachel: Right?

Leah: But all that to say that Dr. Sperling certainly has the credentials to back up writing a strategy book for dealing with anxiety. And that's just what this is! While targeted towards young adults, the cognitive behavioral strategies that are outlined in the book certainly will translate to any age. Perhaps the situational examples might not be quite as relatable if you're not in high school or college anymore, but I think we can all remember when we were in school and put ourselves in those shoes again.

Rachel: Definitely.

Leah: The practical strategies that she presents are sure to be applicable in your life in some way if you struggle with situational anxiety. I'm just gonna add, also, that the cover design of this book is really striking. It's a cream cover with a line illustration of a snarling tiger's face in bold black, with the tiger's eyes and the title of the book a bright orange. Just excellent cover design, and I hope it inspires lots of readers to pick up the book. Maybe you can't judge a book by its cover, but covers can definitely catch your eye.

Rachel: Absolutely they can. I have a book that isn't about self-help so much as self-awareness. It's “Atlas of the Heart: Mapping Meaningful Connection and the Language of Human Experience” by Brené Brown. Dr. Brown studies what it means to be human, including the power of empathy. Garnering an understanding of others informs us about ourselves, and I believe that can only ever be beneficial. So, in “Atlas of the Heart,” Brown looks at 87 emotions and experiences “that define what it means to be human.” Big claim, right? Well, Brown is highly qualified. She is a research professor whose entire

professional career has surrounded these studies. In fact, her TEDx Talk on “The Power of Vulnerability” is currently the second-most popular ever watched. That is quite the accolade.

Leah: For sure!

Rachel: The chapters in “Atlas of the Heart” are broken down by different emotions. For example, the first chapter is called “Places We Go When Things Are Uncertain or Too Much,” and it talks about the emotions “Stress, Overwhelm, Anxiety, Worry, Avoidance, Excitement, Dread, Fear, [and] Vulnerability.” For contrast, the fourth chapter is called “Places We Go When It’s Beyond Us,” and it takes a look at “Awe, Wonder, Confusion, Curiosity, Interest, [and] Surprise.” Hopefully that paints a clear enough picture of what you can expect. Brown has a strong grasp on emotional description, and she is able to compare these feelings to recognizable instances in real life. This makes deconstruction and analysis a lot more accessible to the average reader. So, yes, I recommend “Atlas of the Heart” if you are looking to build a solid base of knowledge. It has collected an impressive number of five-star ratings since its publication late last year, and it is still trending on certain booklists. If you need a readalike, pick up a copy of “Switch: How to Change Things When Change Is Hard” by Chip and Dan Heath. This title also takes on sociological and psychological perspectives, but it’s more to do with identifying patterns to overcome the battle of desires between our left and right brains.

Leah: My next pick is called “Practicing Mindfulness: 75 Essential Meditations to Reduce Stress, Improve Mental Health, and Find Peace in the Everyday” by Matthew Sockolov. Not sure what that is? Well, mindful.org defines it: “Mindfulness is the basic human ability to be fully present, aware of where we are and what we’re doing, and not be overly reactive or overwhelmed by what’s going on around us. While mindfulness is something we all naturally possess, it’s more readily available to us when we practice on a daily basis. Whenever you bring awareness to what you’re directly experiencing via your senses, or to your state of mind via your thoughts and emotions, you’re being mindful. And there’s growing research showing that when you train your brain to be mindful, you’re actually remodeling the physical structure of your brain.” End quote!

Rachel: (laughs)

Leah: And, guys, the thought that we can have direct control over remodeling part of our brain in a way that’s helpful for us is powerful. I just think that’s so cool. Anyway, back to the book!

Rachel and Leah: (laugh)

Leah: It's split into three parts. Part one: Basic mindfulness exercises. Part two: Everyday mindfulness. Part three: Mindful moods. It's nice to have it broken down into easier-to-understand sections. Clinical psychologist Allison Gilson said in a Business Insider article that this book is "Full of brief, 5- to 15-minute exercises [and] will help you build a sustainable mindfulness practice and tackle some of the common challenges, such as a wandering mind, that beginners often experience." Another pick for a book that has different mindfulness exercises is "The Art of Stopping Time: Practical Mindfulness for Busy People" by Pedram Shojai. Calling himself the 'Urban Monk', Dr. Shojai is a doctor of Oriental medicine, New York Times Best Selling author, and award-winning filmmaker. But we're here to talk about books, so back to "The Art of Stopping Time." How do we learn to stop time? Dr. "Shojai walks us through a 100-day Gong, which is based on the Chinese practice of designating an amount of time each day to perform a specific task. The ritual helps you become mindful, train your mind, instill new habits, and fundamentally transform your relationship with time. We can find moments of mental awareness while in the shower, eating a snack, listening to podcasts, and even while binge-watching our favorite TV shows." That's straight from the book description, folks; I couldn't write it better myself!

Rachel: (laughs)

Leah: I know I personally wouldn't mind finding more time in my day.

Rachel: I chose my next book because I figured it would make sense to read about mental health issues from the point of view of somebody who both studies and suffers from them. In "Maybe You Should Talk to Someone: A Therapist, Her Therapist, and Our Lives Revealed," author Lori Gottlieb is just that. As a practicing therapist who goes through a hard time in her own life, she ends up becoming a patient herself. It's not all about Gottlieb's sessions, though, because she also discusses some of her clients and what they are going through. The big takeaway from this memoir is that we are all human; trained professionals can struggle just as much as we do. But it's that exact similarity which makes empathy possible. Gottlieb soon comes to realize that she can connect more closely with her patients after taking a closer look at some of her own faults. Introspection fills her out as a person and, in turn, that change makes her a better therapist. Easy to say, more difficult in practice, I think. If you want to find out more about Gottlieb's personal journey, check out "Maybe You Should Talk to Someone." I also recommend the readalike "Easy Crafts for the Insane: A Mostly Funny Memoir of Mental Illness and Making Things" by Kelly Williams Brown. This woman has experienced the highest of highs and the lowest of lows. After a particularly bad spree of horribleness, she ends up depressed and stays at an inpatient facility in order to recuperate. She finds that doing crafts—simple, accessible, hand-occupying crafts—helps to drag her

out of the depths on even her worst days. As Brown puts it, “To craft is to set things right in the littlest of ways; no matter how disconnected you feel, you can still fold a tiny paper star, and that’s not nothing.” And you know what? She’s right. I’m terrible at crafting. I use too much glue, and everything usually turns out ‘meh’ at best. But it still feels good to have done something with my time and have proof to show for it. Brown’s book includes craft tutorials, but she also uses it to talk about how things fall apart and can be put back together. It’s witty, and probably right up your ally, Leah.

Leah: Honestly? Yeah! I love a hands-occupying craft. It can be a total dopamine hit! Now, I’m not sure where this chart originated, but on a super practical level, I google the “Happiness Chemicals and How to Hack Them” infographic whenever I feel like I could use a little bump in that area. It was recommended to me by a therapist, and boy, does it clearly explain the things you can do to trigger dopamine, serotonin, oxytocin, and endorphins. Those are all the happy brain chemicals.

Rachel: My favorite chemicals.

Leah: The best ones! If you’re interested, I encourage you to google that chart and take a look. Crafts, though, would fall under “completing a task” and potentially “celebrating a small win,” both of which are listed as dopamine producers. You want all those happy brain chemicals as once? Do something physical, outside, with loved ones, while you’re accomplishing something. Ticks every category. Anyway, I guess I ought to get back to books now. It might not come as a surprise that I might pick a science book to insert here. Maybe you’re not into the self-help strategies but you are interested in the history of depression and how it’s treated. Well, look no further than “A Cure for Darkness: The Story of Depression and How We Treat It” by Alex Riley. The book description from Amazon was pretty amazing, so why don’t I share that? “Depression is a leading cause of disability around the world today, a growing health crisis that affects us all. It is a complex and diverse condition. But it is also highly treatable. In this profound and sweeping history, Alex Riley charts the macabre, ingenious, and often surprising developments in the science of mental healthcare over the last 2,000 years. In the pursuit to understand his own experiences with mental illness, Riley interweaves his own family history with fascinating stories of biological and psychological treatments which illuminate the past, question the current state of diagnosis, and investigate the hype and hopes for future treatments. From the re-emergence of long-forgotten therapies to a group of grandmothers who stand at the forefront of a revolution in mental healthcare, A Cure for Darkness is an essential exploration of one of the most pressing problems of our time.” I think the book sounds fascinating. Right up my alley of medical non-fiction history and learning about (sing-song) science!

Rachel: (sing-song) Science!

Leah: (normal voice) This book came out in 2021, and I must just have cream, black, and orange on the mind because this book, like my first pick, has a striking cover in pretty much the same color palette.

Rachel: Huh.

Leah: No snarling tiger this time, instead we have a beautiful monarch butterfly. In any case, another one to catch the eye.

Rachel: My last selection is primarily aimed toward parents. Mental health is paramount no matter your age, and it helps children if their family members have some idea of what they're going through. Sympathy and compassion can be especially hard when you're caught up in the thick of things, so having something to compare your situation to might be just the lifeline you require. That's why I recommend "Understanding Teenage Anxiety: A Parent's Guide to Improving Your Teen's Mental Health" by Jennifer Browne. Man, there are a lot of authors with the last name "Brown" this episode, aren't there?

Leah and Rachel: (laugh)

Rachel: Anyway, the author's son was diagnosed with chronic anxiety and depression, so this book explores their mutual experiences while he was growing up. It tackles heavy subject matter, such as the physical and emotional symptoms of anxiety, self-harm, and coping mechanisms. This book is actually co-written by Browne's son, Cody Buchanan, and he provides insight on some of the things that worked and others that did not. Also, even though this is about teenage anxiety, a lot of the suggestions and steps seem practical for anyone suffering from a similar disorder. A readalike title is "Under Pressure: Confronting the Epidemic of Stress and Anxiety in Girls" by Lisa Damour. Obviously, this one looks at the other side of things: the struggles young women are confronted with in a modern society and how those stressors can weaken your mental state. What I find fascinating is that Damour "explains the surprising and underappreciated value of stress and anxiety: that stress can helpfully stretch us beyond our comfort zones, and anxiety can play a key role in keeping girls safe." Recently, I have learned that there is such a thing as 'good' and 'bad' stress. The good kind is usually short-term and acts as a motivator, while the bad may feel insurmountable, eventually contributing to serious health problems. As Damour writes, "no parents want their daughter to suffer from emotional overload," and that 'overload' is exactly the issue she scrutinizes when examining toxic cultural pressures. I have heard the case studies Damour presents are somewhat lacking, especially when it comes to racial, sexual, and socio-economic minorities, so do keep that in mind when considering this title.

Leah: That's it for today's episode.

Rachel: Indeed! And it's kind of bittersweet, because this is actually going to be Leah's last episode with us. She is moving on to greener pastures.

Leah: Wetter pastures, maybe?

Rachel: (laughs) Yeah.

Leah: Mountainous pastures? They could be 'greener'. In any case, my husband is in the Navy, and we got shiny new orders to head out to the Washington State area. Couldn't be more excited about all the hiking and new places to explore! I'm really going to miss Oak Creek, though.

Rachel: We're going to miss you like crazy. In fact, in my script I put a little sad-face emoticon...

Leah: (laughs)

Rachel: ...because that's how I was feeling when I wrote it.

Leah: Mmhm.

Rachel: As for the podcast, listeners, there may or may not be a slight delay on the next episode, depending on who I am able to record with. So, if there is a month gap, we apologize in advance. If there isn't, and things go on as usual, that means we've got it on lock and you should be amazed!

Leah: (laughs) Remember to visit the show notes section for a complete list of recommendations and resource links. We hope that you will subscribe and rate the podcast if you like what you hear. Listeners can reach us at any time through the Oak Creek Public Library website or Facebook page by messaging @OakCreekLibrary. Until next time, happy reading.

Rachel and Leah: Bye!

(Brief outro music)