

Book Review

I've Never Been (Un)Happier

By Shaheen Bhatt, New Delhi, Ebury Press, Penguin Random House India, 2019, 175 pp., Rs. 250 (paperback), ISBN 9780143449126

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Written by one of the daughters of Mahesh Bhatt, a famous director of commercial Indian films (Bollywood), "I've Never Been Unhappier" is an autobiography as well as a guide for understanding depression. The author draws on her own experiences of growing and living with depression to give the readers a first-hand view of this debilitating disorder. Shaheen Bhatt charts out the development of her depression in a way that makes her journey relatable, and helps readers really grasp the fact that depression has no particular causes or victims; it can be experienced by anyone at any time, regardless of their gender, age, childhood experiences or financial situation.

After the foreword (written by Mahesh Bhatt) and the preface, the 10 chapters of the book can be categorised into three parts. In the first part (the first three chapters of the book), Bhatt describes the beginning of her struggle with depression. She starts off with elaborating on "the feeling" of depression, and how varied it is in its manifestation, even for a single person. She emphasises the lack of accurate ways to convey what depression feels like as the reason why it is so misunderstood. "It's why the only people who really understand it are those who've experienced it firsthand, and even then, their experience of it may differ greatly from your own" (p. 93). As a sensitive child, Bhatt was exposed to childhood experiences where her physical appearance was unfavourably compared to that of her younger sister (Alia Bhatt, now a successful Bollywood actress), leading to the first inklings of insecurities that resulted in morphing a once happy and social child into a lost

individual unsure of their identity. Adolescence, a period of possible upheaval on its own, was an even more trying period for Bhatt as she battled with an ever-present hollow emptiness that she could not and did not understand.

The second part of the book (Chapters 4 – 7) covers how Bhatt started to learn to cope with her depression. The finality of death was a shock that Bhatt experienced when she lost a childhood friend due to an accident. Stunned and withdrawing deeper into the recesses of her mind, she attempted to commit suicide. But after this failed attempt, she came to the painful realisation that “suicide is a notoriously permanent solution to a vacillating problem” (p. 68). This was when she realised that she could not handle this “demon” alone, and decided to finally seek help, from her mother first and then from professionals. Her journey from barely surviving through her initial panic attacks while being unaware of what these were, to learning to be prepared for them at any social outing, are admirable and inspiring. As she started to share her inner world with the people around her, she slowly began to understand the disorder, and with this understanding came strength to fight this battle.

Through the third and final part of the book (the last three chapters), Bhatt shares her epiphanies and philosophical ideas about depression, the society’s role in its development, and its relation to her identity. As Thomas Fuller famously wrote, “it is always darkest just before dawn”, so is the case with Bhatt. She came to distinguishing her individual identity from that of depression when she had reached “rock bottom”, a phase characterised by her anger towards the world. This was the phase in her life when she truly felt that she had lost herself, and yet, she resolved to find herself again. This is also the part of the book where Bhatt presents a critical analysis of fame and the positivity movement. She observes that the social norm to “constantly avoid or suppress negative feelings” (p. 128) reflects the “tyranny of positivity” (p. 128-129). She admits to having “mastered the skill of talking around how I feel with excessive intellectualization of my emotional states” (p. 129). She reflects how such accepted methods of handling and expressing feelings close off “every possible avenue for vulnerability and as a result, real, meaningful human connections” (p.130). In the closing chapter of the book, she describes her journey towards acceptance of imperfections, change and pain.

Bhatt manages to present an easy-flowing book that reads like a story, and importantly, this is the story of any person. The book is full of her experiences, and also allows the readers a glimpse into the inner workings of her mind, as she shares some of her diary entries throughout the book. The inclusion of some of the pictures of Bhatt and her family gives a personal touch and represents the images of what her childhood was like. Along with her life experiences, Bhatt has provided some basic psychoeducation by differentiating between various mentalhealth professionals and sharing the lesson, “(t)herapy is nothing but an education in yourself” (p. 108). After the last chapter, she has included references, a list of recommended readings, acknowledgement, information about her NGO (Here Comes the Sun), and finally, space for readers to make notes, which is very useful, as the book is extremely thought-provoking.

Even though there have been many breakthroughs in the fields of psychology, neurology, psychiatry and neuroscience, there are things about how our minds work that are still a mystery. Bhatt attempts to reduce some of the ignorance about depression by sharing the painful lessons that she learnt while living for about twenty years with this disorder. She shares that mentalhealth cures are not one-size-fits-all, and with regard to pharmacotherapy, it is only through trial and error of medication prescribed by professionals that one can find the medication and doses that work.

I've Never Been (Un)Happier is a book that can be recommended to anyone. For mental health professionals, it is a glimpse into the minds of their clients. For people suffering from depression, it is a resource that helps build strengths in the face of vulnerabilities and a reminder that they are not alone. For the general population, it is a guidebook to understanding depression and mental health without getting lost in scientific jargon. For policymakers, it is a source of information which can be used to provide better support and services both at individual and society levels.

At its core, it is a book about survival, personal triumphs and acceptance. It is an exploration of the complex dynamics of modern relationships. Bhatt manages to convey this message poignantly through her closing statements:

“(T)here are still days and weeks and months when I am also consumed by depression, when I forget all my lessons, when I forget everything but the pain. And that’s also when I turn to the very idea I’m afraid of: transience. I remind myself if happiness is fleeting, then so is sadness. I remind myself depression is the weather, and I’m a weather-worn tree. I remind myself even the worst storms pass. I remind myself I’ve survived them all.” (p. 151)

