

BOOK REVIEW

Profiles in Mental Health Courage

by Patrick J. Kennedy and
Stephen Fried (2024) Dutton Penguin Random House. Pp. 320,
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Patrick J. Kennedy's *Profiles in Mental Health Courage* is a deeply moving and inspirational book that sheds light on one of the most misunderstood and under-discussed aspects of human life - mental health. The book presents a series of 12 stories that celebrate resilience, courage, and the unbreakable human spirit. For Indian readers, this book offers valuable lessons on empathy, understanding, and the urgent need to address mental health challenges in our own cultural context.

Patrick J. Kennedy is a former U.S. Congressman and a member of the renowned Kennedy family. His personal struggles with bipolar disorder and addiction including witnessing some of his family members undergoing their own challenges, prompted him to work to bring mental health issues to the forefront and remove stigma surrounding it.

Stephen Fried, an award-winning journalist and bestselling author, co-wrote *Profiles in Mental Health Courage* with Kennedy. They collaborated previously on the book 'A Common Struggle', published in October 2015 by Penguin. Fried's compelling narratives and deep investigative reporting on topics related to health, medicine, and society have been invaluable in making this book relatable across cultures.

Patrick J. Kennedy's journey into the world of mental health advocacy is not just professional but profoundly personal. As a member of the Kennedy family—a dynasty often in the public eye—he has openly shared his struggles with bipolar disorder, addiction, and depression. His honesty about his own battles sets the tone for the book, making it a heartfelt and authentic read. For Indian readers, where conversations about mental health are often cloaked in stigma, Kennedy's vulnerability feels both refreshing and necessary.

He emphasizes repeatedly that his motive to write this book on mental illnesses is not to shame nor judge people but to bring to light the struggles that people with mental illnesses face day in and day out, which are no less than the wars that have happened so far. He believes that mental health is one of those things that everybody experiences but nobody talks about.

The author touches on a lot of sensitive issues including suicidal ideations and how they are far too common amongst those who have experienced relationship trauma or abuse of any sort, especially when they were powerless children. This is evidenced by the myriad stories narrated in the book.

It emphasizes how having an insight into what is happening is not enough and the need for professional therapeutic help is essential. This is especially true for those who publicly advocate for mental health but are undergoing pain.

The book's core strength lies in its storytelling. Kennedy introduces readers to a diverse array of individuals who have faced mental health challenges head-on and emerged stronger. These profiles include people from various walks of life like veterans coping with post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), parents advocating for their children with special needs, and even public figures who have used their platforms to destigmatize mental health issues.

While the book is primarily set in the United States and provides those statistics, the themes it explores—stigma, resilience, and the power of community—are universal. Indian readers will find parallels in their own society, where mental health is often taboo, and seeking therapy is seen as a last resort. Kennedy's

emphasis on breaking the silence around mental health feels especially relevant in a country grappling with rising rates of anxiety, depression, and suicide.

One particularly poignant story features a mother advocating for better mental health care for her child. Her journey—marked by frustration with a broken system but also incredible perseverance—mirrors the struggles of many Indian families navigating the country's overburdened mental health infrastructure. This narrative serves as a call to action, urging readers to push for systemic change while also offering hope that individual efforts can make a difference.

Each story is a testament to resilience and the importance of seeking help. For instance, the chapter about a teacher who overcame depression to create a support network for her students is particularly inspiring. In an Indian context, where teachers often play a pivotal role in shaping young minds, this story underscores the need for educators to prioritize their own mental well-being.

India faces a daunting mental health crisis. According to the National Mental Health Survey (NMHS) conducted in 2015-16, nearly 14% of India's population requires active mental health interventions, yet the treatment gap—the proportion of people needing care but not receiving it—is as high as 83%. This gap is a stark reminder of the systemic challenges that hinder access to mental health services in India (Mental Health in India – A Growing Concern, Care Me Health).

Suicide rates in India are alarmingly high. The National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB) reported over 1,64,000 suicides in 2021 alone, with a significant number of cases involving young people aged 18-30 (India Mental Health Observatory, IMHO). Contributing factors include academic pressure, unemployment, and family conflicts, exacerbated by the stigma surrounding mental health.

Adding to the problem is the acute shortage of mental health professionals. India has fewer than 9,000 psychiatrists and around 2,000 clinical psychologists to serve a population of over 1.4 billion. This translates to approximately 0.75 psychiatrists per 100,000 people, far below the recommended ratio of 3 per 100,000 by the World Health Organization (Mental Health Workers Data by Country, WHO).

Access to mental health services is further hindered in rural areas, where the availability of specialized care is almost non-existent.

The Mental Healthcare Act (MHCA) of 2017 is a landmark piece of legislation in India, designed to protect the rights of individuals with mental illnesses and ensure access to care. The Act decriminalized suicide, recognizing that those attempting it require care and support rather than punishment. It also guarantees the right to affordable mental health services and aims to reduce stigma by promoting awareness.

Despite its ambitious goals, the implementation of the MHCA faces significant challenges. Budgetary allocations for mental health remain low, constituting less than 1% of the total healthcare budget. Furthermore, a lack of trained professionals and infrastructure continues to hinder the Act's effectiveness.

For Indian readers, the book's message is clear that mental health is not a luxury, it is a necessity. Kennedy's stories highlight the importance of early intervention, the role of community support, and the transformative power of sharing one's struggles. These lessons are particularly important in a country where mental health resources are scarce and societal pressures often discourage open dialogue.

The book also challenges stereotypes about who can be affected by mental health issues. By featuring stories of soldiers, teachers, parents, and celebrities, Kennedy underscores that mental illness does not discriminate. This is a vital reminder for Indian society, where mental health problems are often dismissed as a "western" issue or a sign of personal weakness.

Kennedy's writing is simple, direct, and deeply empathetic. He avoids clinical jargon, making the book accessible to a broad audience. The tone is conversational, almost as if he is sitting across from you, sharing these stories over a cup of chai. This approach makes the book particularly appealing for Indian readers, who may be new to discussions about mental health but are eager to learn.

Moreover, the book's structure—short, standalone chapters—makes it easy to read in small doses.

One of the book's most inspiring aspects is its focus on advocacy. Kennedy not only shares stories of individual courage but also highlights the importance of systemic change. From advocating for better healthcare policies to creating more inclusive workplaces, the book offers practical steps that individuals and communities can take to support mental health.

For Indian readers, this emphasis on advocacy is particularly timely. With its growing population and unique cultural challenges, India cannot afford to ignore the mental health crisis any longer. The Mental Healthcare Act of 2017 was a significant step forward, but there is still much work to be done in terms of implementation and awareness. Kennedy's stories can serve as a blueprint for grassroots activism, inspiring readers to become agents of change in their own communities.

Critique and Limitations

While the book is undeniably powerful, it does have its limitations. The focus on American stories and systems may feel somewhat distant for Indian readers. The book also skips on multiple techniques and therapies that can provide a more targeted help, but focuses more on traditional therapies. Additionally, readers looking for a more in-depth analysis of mental health conditions may find the book lacking in technical details.

Each of the stories feel like a mini biography that provide us with a holistic view of the person's life. However, it does feel heavy to read and can only be read slowly.

Final Thoughts

The book is inspiring and leaves one feeling heard, seen and understood, the holy trifecta of emotional healing. It provides a lot of hope and courage to its readers. More importantly, it has the potential to reduce the stigma surrounding mental illnesses.

Kennedy's book is evidence that healing happens where stories are told . We can add to that that healing happens where stories are told and received with care and empathy.

So go ahead and pick up this book meant not only for those undergoing mental health challenges, but also their care givers, family members, mental health professionals who seek to understand the "lived experience" of their patients, and anyone who is interested to learn more about what it is like to live with mental health issues.

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