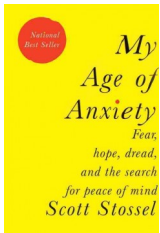


My Age of Anxiety



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This is both a personal and a historical overview of anxiety, a mental illness that far too many Americans share. In the first decade of this century, the numbers grew to 16.2 million—in fact more Americans see a doctor for anxiety than for back pain and migraine combined. Stossel, who suffers terribly from panic attacks, fear of flying, a nervous stomach, and severe social anxiety, has been remarkably successful as both an author and the editor of *The Atlantic*. My favorite section is the opening one titled “The Riddle of Anxiety.” Here he compares how philosophical and psychological greats described the disease. Plato believed that anxiety and other mental problems arose “not from physiological imbalances but from disharmony of the soul.” Hippocrates believed that “body juices” caused madness. He said, “You will find the brain humid, full of sweat and smelling badly.” This description came very close to the author at his wedding, except that it was his body that sweated profusely. He had such a panic attack at the altar that his best man was afraid he would faint.

Stossel describes how anxiety has haunted his family for at least five generations. His great grandfather, who was president of Harvard, was hospitalized many times at Maclean Hospital in Massachusetts. His symptoms eerily match those of Stossel himself, leaving the author to fear for his own future since his grandfather managed to avoid hospitalization until his mid-fifties. The book includes a three chapter section on drugs. The sad thing about all this info on modern and historical pharmacology is how few of the drugs actually helped Stossel and when they did, they did not for very long.

The author’s description of his childhood is revealing—his separation anxiety from his parents was acute even as late his teens. He would run from the babysitter after his parents left at night and demand that a neighbor call the police to check for accidents. He also threw up frequently and was constantly afraid that horrible things would happen including his own death. He compares his childhood to that of his son and daughter who both have inherited anxiety but who seem less stressed than he was.

Another vivid scene in the book is his play for play of a panic attack while working when Stossel ran down eight flights of stairs and nearly broke the door frame trying to leave the building. I also liked the chapter “Worriers and Warriors—the Genetics of Anxiety” where he describes what new genetic tests reveal about his possible mental health.

After years of ineffectual or even misguided therapy, he finally found a psychotherapist whom he could trust, Dr. W., who is also an author. One doctor who was treating him for his emetophobia (pathological fear of vomiting) actually got sick herself and had to cancel her appointments on the day she was giving him exposure therapy to cure this facet of his disease.

His kind current doctor keeps reassuring Stossel that his ?capabilities are far from the picture of inadequacy you carry around in your head.? The most telling advice he gives the author is that in order to deal with the genetic hand he has been dealt, Stossel must not only believe in himself but become truly resilient.

Although the topics discuss are sad, scary, and often unpleasant, Stossel?s fluid writing and in-depth research provide an interesting entry into this unforgiving world.

Posted by Dory L. on February 26, 2014

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