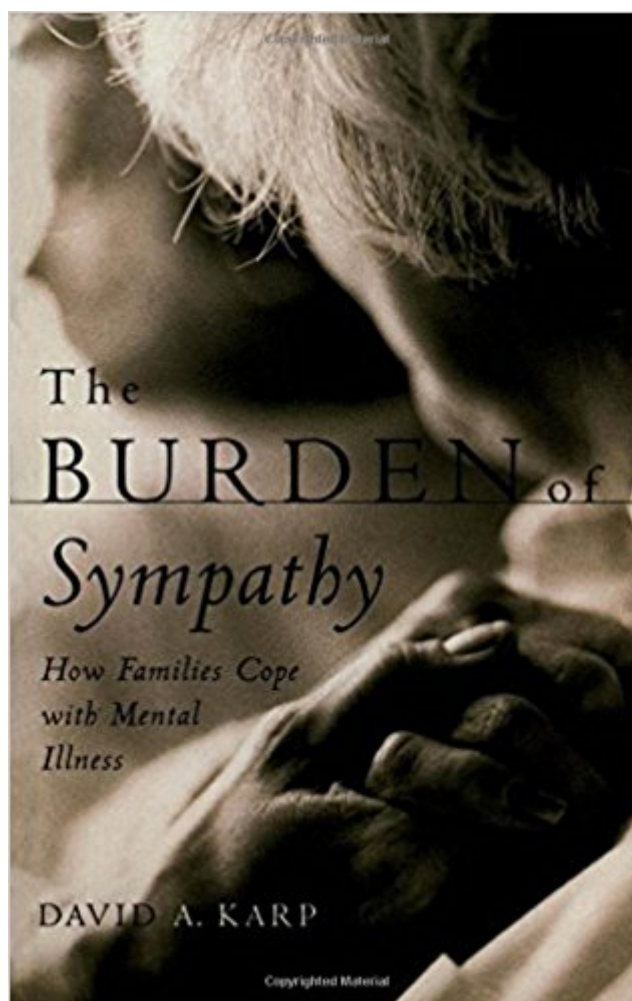


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# The Burden Of Sympathy: How Families Cope With Mental Illness



## Synopsis

What are the limits of sympathy in dealing with another person's troubles? Where do we draw the line between caring for a loved one, and being swallowed up emotionally by the obligation to do so? Quite simply, what do we owe each other? In this vivid and thoughtful study, David Karp chronicles the experiences of the family members of the mentally ill, and how they draw "boundaries of sympathy" to avoid being engulfed by the day-to-day suffering of a loved one. Working from sixty extensive interviews, the author reveals striking similarities in the experiences of caregivers: the feelings of shame, fear, guilt and powerlessness in the face of a socially stigmatized illness; the frustration of navigating the complex network of bureaucracies that govern the mental health system; and most of all, the difficulty negotiating an "appropriate" level of involvement with the mentally ill loved one while maintaining enough distance for personal health. Throughout the narratives, Karp sensitively explores the overarching question of how people strike an equilibrium between reason and emotion, between head and heart, when caring for a catastrophically ill person. *The Burden of Sympathy* concludes with a critical look at what it means to be a moral and caring person at the turn of the century in America, when powerful cultural messages spell out two contradictory imperatives: pursue personal fulfillment at any cost and care for the family at any cost. An insightful, deeply caring look at mental illness and at the larger picture of contemporary values, *The Burden of Sympathy* is required reading for caregivers of all kinds, and for anyone seeking broader understanding of human responsibility in the postmodern world.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

Living with a family member who is afflicted with a mental illness may be quite a difficult and frustrating experience for some people. *Burden of Sympathy* is a helpful aid for people who must deal with the many issues that envelop people close to those with mental illness. Karp, a sociology professor and award-winning author (*Speaking of Sadness: Depression, Disconnection, and the Meaning of Illness*, 1996), presents the stories of some of the families that have survived. He combines medical and sociological studies with quotations from various people from around the country. This book is a great opportunity for people seeking guidance on this issue to learn from others who have gone through similar experiences. *Burden of Sympathy* is an enriching companion book for anyone seeking advice and solace for handling the issues that arise from loving someone with a mental illness as well as a commentary on the moral values of contemporary society. Julia Glynn

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"In this excellent, riveting work, David Karp explores the quandary of familial caregivers and how ethical obligations to those with emotional disturbances shed light on the ties that bind the whole of humanity together. I found in this remarkable book a clear moral vision ensconced in a series of page turning portraits depicting the mentally ill and of those who love them." --Lauren Slater, author of *Prozac Diary* and *Lying: A Metaphorical Memoir*"David Karp has captured the essence of caring and caregiving in his fine book. For family members of individuals with schizophrenia, manic-depressive illness, and severe depression, he accurately describes 'the social tango between emotionally ill people and those who try to help them.' This will be a useful book for families of mentally ill individuals...I strongly recommend it." --E. Fuller Torrey, M.D., Executive Director, Stanley Foundation Research Programs, National Alliance for the Mentally Ill Research Institute, and author of *Surviving Schizophrenia*"David Karp is a great ethnographer of disrupted lives, offering profound truths in clear prose, combining empathy with analysis. *Burden of Sympathy* gives eloquent voice to care givers; I know no other book that tells their story with such respect. This brilliant study offers personal validation, a model study of suffering and moral decision making, and a profound challenge to policy makers." -- Arthur W. Frank, Professor, Department of Sociology, University of Calgary and author of *At the Will of the Body: Reflections on Illness and The Wounded Storyteller: Body, Illness, and Ethics*

I purchased this book so that it could give me insight on learning how to deal with my adult daughter's recently diagnosed depression. I found the book was helpful in dealing with the responses that I get from family members who feel that I can "fix my daughter with a snap of my finger by doing this or that? The book has testimonies from caregivers that have experienced all of this. Family members like to tell you what to do but they have no understanding of what "depression" involves and the emotional impact it has on the caregiver. This book helped me deal with all that negativity. Before reading this book I had already come into the realization that I had no "control" over my daughter's mental condition or the poor choices she continues to make. This book helped me to realize that even more. It was the final thing I needed to hear so that I can let go and accept what I cannot change. I feel that caregivers should purchase multiple copies of this book and give them to their family members so that they can hopefully stop giving us advice and just SUPPORT us when we need it. What I didn't agree with is that ALL depression is not curable. I sometimes felt that the author felt this. I disagree with that due to my education in the Psychology field (I have a degree in Developmental Psychology) and faith. I am hopeful that my depressed adult child will learn how to cope with her feelings and in time come to understand her illness, she is not perfect and either am I. For those that have lost family members due to depression. I highly recommend a book titled "Message for the Week, Getting through the First Year of Grieving by Charlene Mabins. It is a very good book written by a Mother who lost her adult child to suicide. It was a truly inspiring book.

This book reads more like a dissertation but it is helpful in demonstrating the commonality of the "burdens" those of us struggling to deal with mentally ill loved ones in a flawed system. I didn't get any insights from the book, but it reinforced the sense that I am far from alone. Probably a good read for those who will work professionally with families of the mentally ill.

A brilliant and honest book that will resonate strongly with those who care for loved ones with mental illness. Its great value, I think, beyond making the experience public, is to make it clear to such people that 1) things often do not get better; 2) the road to recognizing this often takes years; 3) self-preservation is not a sin; there is no shame or stigma in walking away and caring from a distance if you can, and leaving the everyday care to professionals who get paid and can go home at the end of the day.

Saw myself in so many of the stories. Made me feel I wasn't alone and was normal in my thinking. Great research and honest. Only those that face living with a person that has a mental illness will understand how important it is to know that your thought and feelings are not wrong. Beautifully written and portrayed with empathy and understanding

David Karp's book is essential reading for dealing with the emotional challenge of supporting a loved one who is dealing with the complexities of mental illness. The book is easy to read and understand with the right balance of technical education and the everyday practical experiences of real people and their stories. I found it enormously helpful and have recommended it many others.

This is an excellent book that goes into depth on the impact of mental illness on the family. The author explores an honest and transparent perspective on the burden of caregiving and shared stories that we can relate to and understand.

Sociologist David Karp shares the insights gleaned from over 60 interviews of those who have loved ones suffering from the ravages of mental illness. He pieces together excerpts of these interviews to illustrate the different ways mental illness affects the lives of families and friends. Those interviewed share how they attempt to cope with such issues as personal feelings of guilt, the societal stigma associated with mental illness, and the frustration of dealing with a bureaucracy that is not always responsive. At the core of many of the interviews is a redeeming theme of hope. Karp's thesis is that the moral boundaries of caregiving necessarily shift as the mental illness emerges over time, and that it is imperative to balance the needs of the mentally ill person with the needs of those who provide care and support. Karp reminds readers of the 4 C's: (1) I did not cause it, (2) I cannot cure it, (3) I cannot control it, (4) all I can do is cope with it.

Reading this book was such a relief. Dealing with a mentally ill family member is so hard to explain to someone who doesn't share the experience. People would tell me, "You look like you have the weight of the world on your shoulders." I just couldn't find the words to express what it was like to care for a family member who was severely depressed and psychotic until I read this book.

Rereading it helped me see that it was not only OK but necessary to set boundaries to preserve my own mental health. Fortunately for my family, once I set boundaries, things changed dramatically for the better. The ill person in my family saw that I was serious about maintaining my own boundaries and actually started to get better. I realize that we might be the exception, and not the rule.

recommend this book highly, as it provides deep insight and a bit of comfort to those who are grappling with the devastating financial, physical, and emotional effects of caring for a mentally ill family member.

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