

My Life with Crazy: Learning to Thrive While Coping with Mentally Ill Family Members

Nan Walker

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My Life with Crazy is an enlightening memoir about navigating a family member's mental illness.

A portrait of a family ravaged by mental illness, Nan Walker's *My Life with Crazy* makes a defiant case for overhauling arcane health and legal systems.

My Life with Crazy explores the trauma and helplessness of living with someone who refuses medical help while battling a severe mental illness. Anchored in Walker's experience of her husband, Sam, and their eldest son, Galen, as they descended into depression, experienced bipolar episodes, and attempted suicide, the book illustrates the gamut of painful decisions and traumas that intimate bystanders endure. Firsthand accounts of having a husband and son succumb to bipolar disorder are combined with pointed critiques of a system that is unwilling to take "meaningful steps to help get the afflicted into treatment, or take the necessary steps to help their families help them."

Among other issues, the book details the laws that make it difficult to get someone over the age of eighteen into a treatment facility. Broken into four parts, it moves from sharing its harrowing memories toward delivering a general primer on navigating legal systems and maintaining personal well-being while supporting intimate family members with severe mental illnesses. But because of its ambitious scope, the book is somewhat cumbersome as a resource.

At the center of the memoir-cum-guide is a sense of the invisible toll that mental illness takes on the "sane" family members who are left to adapt to and negotiate their loved ones' symptoms. Indeed, the fine line between care for someone else and caring for oneself is evident as Walker tries to protect her children, her financial situation, and herself. A candid discussion of Walker's decision to divorce her husband, evict her son, and obtain two protection orders evokes the subtle shame and guilt that can plague bystanders. These corrosive emotions are examined in the latter half of the book; the former half is more engaged with the tangible realities that create them.

While the narrative in the book's first half is enlightening, it also meanders through Walker's memories. It includes long-winded digressions and instances of minutiae as it covers the stories of Sam, Galen, and Walker's other two children. Indeed, rather than meshing together, these sections diverge from and repeat themselves. All of them contain moments of beauty, heartbreak, and insight, if obscured behind discursive passages. A memory of attending parties with Leonard Bernstein, for example, devolves into complex, multilayered anecdotes that are unconnected to the larger story.

The final three parts of the book are also weighed down by peripheral ideas and long explanations, if to a much lesser degree. Designed as a practical guide for individuals seeking help for themselves or their family members, this half of the book makes ample use of lists and other clear structuring principles. Art-based activities for grounding oneself are named and explained; resources for finding and choosing medical clinics are laid out; and specific organizations dedicated to severe mental illnesses are introduced. The forthright, charismatic tone that permeates the text as a whole has more opportunity to shine in the book's final, more pared-back, more organized portions.

A memoir that tackles a taboo subject, *My Life with Crazy* discusses the enduring effects of navigating a family member's mental illness.

WILLEM MARX (January 5, 2024)

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