

Book Review

Stand by me: Helping your teen through tough times

Kirwan, J. (2014). Auckland: Penguin.

Sir John Kirwan's latest book is a great addition to his first, and one I will add to my bookshelf as a quick "hands on" reference to help with my teenage stepson.

It's not that my stepson is, as far as I know, experiencing mental illness, but he's 14 and the grunting has started – so how do I really know?

And that's the beauty of *Stand By Me* – it isn't just for parents who have children in the throes of mental distress, it's relevant and extremely helpful for all parents wanting to do a better job bringing up and listening to their teens.

It digs down into the ways and reasons that teenagers hide their feelings and what you can do to gently bring them out of themselves and support them unconditionally when they tell you something you may not want to hear.

The book is factual in that it has statistics and best practice for identifying and managing mental illness in youth, practical in that it has so many wonderful and generous comments from teens and their parents about how to do, and how not to do, things, and compassionate with JK's warmth and frankness about his own mental health and natural everyday concerns for his three teens.

Like *All Blacks Don't Cry*, this new book is a page turner. The chapters are short and to the point, which makes for easy digestion, and usually hold at least one pearl of wisdom.

Anxiety – give your fear a cuddle

My favourite is John's idea that anxiety, or fear, should be cuddled, rather than run away from or hidden.

"The last thing that ugly creature wants is a cuddle. So grab hold of it and give it a cuddle – this breaks it down a bit and take the fear out of it," JK says (page 51). This makes me giggle, and I'll remember it next time I need to exercise some self-management.

Chapters include topics such as teen anxiety and depression, the teenage brain, getting out of it, self-harm, eating disorders and suicide, warning signs – when to worry, how involved should parents be, loving the real child, hope, resilience (excellent) and wellbeing.

Advice and information from psychologists Elliot Bell and Kirsty Loudon-Bell are necessary I think to give the book more professional weight than just having JK's voice alone, as entertaining and valuable as that may be.

Depression is like a tree in winter

The occasional comments here and there from psychiatrist Lyndy Matthews are refreshingly down to earth and strategically placed by freelance writer Margie Thomson, who, in John's own words, did much of the heavy lifting in the writing of Stand by Me. Lyndy's description of how nerve cells affected by depression are like a tree in winter (page 114) is a beautiful and easily understood concept.

The only annoyances the book held for me were that Elliot's information tended toward the impenetrable (what is an objective circumstance, for instance?) and could certainly have been more user friendly; the summaries at the end of each chapter were often unwieldy and difficult to read: grey text in grey boxes. And I would have liked a photograph of the psychologists, and Lyndy, to relate better to who had been talking to me.

Otherwise, bravo, an awesome resource for Kiwi parents and caregivers bringing up teens with or without experience of mental illness.

Reviewed by Susie Hill, Website Consultant with the Mental Health Foundation.

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