



Let Them Eat Prozac: The Unhealthy Relationship Between the Pharmaceutical Industry and Depression

David Healy

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Prozac. Paxil. Zoloft. Turn on your television and you are likely to see a commercial for one of the many selective serotonin reuptake inhibitors (SSRIs) on the market. We hear a lot about them, but do we really understand how these drugs work and what risks are involved for anyone who uses them?

Let Them Eat Prozac explores the history of SSRIs from their early development to their latest marketing campaigns and the controversies that surround them. Initially, they seemed like wonder drugs for those with mild to moderate depression patients take just one daily dose, and unlike the tranquilizers that were popular in the 1960s, they supposedly did not lead to addiction. When Prozac was released in the late 1980s, David Healy was among the psychiatrists who prescribed it. But he soon observed that some of these patients became agitated and even attempted suicide. Studies were soon published, citing numerous cases in which patients became anxious and reported increased suicidal thoughts while taking Prozac. Could the new wonder drug actually be making patients worse?

Healy draws on his own research and expertise to demonstrate the potential hazards associated with these drugs. He intersperses case histories with insider accounts of the research leading to the development and approval of SSRIs as a treatment for depression. Let Them Eat Prozac clearly demonstrates that the problems go much deeper than a disturbing side-effect of a particular drug. Current FDA regulations encourage drug companies to patent a specific compound and market it effectively to a large population on the basis of minimal effectiveness in a handful of trials.

The pharmaceutical industry would like us to believe that SSRIs can safely treat depression, anxiety, and a host of other mental problems. But as Let Them Eat Prozac reveals, this "cure" may be worse than the disease.

Let Them Eat Prozac: The Unhealthy Relationship Between the Pharmaceutical Industry and Depression Details

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Mazola1 says

David Healy is a British physician who is an expert in psychopharmacology. In Let Them Eat Prozac he examines what he terms the unhealthy relationship between the pharmaceutical industry and depression. What he really means is the unhealthy effects of the greed motivated drive by the big pharmaceutical companies to market drugs for depression. These include bribing doctors to champion drugs for depression that probably don't work nearly as well as the advertising claims they do, manipulating the data of clinical trials to downplay side effects, covering up ominous side effects, and ignoring data indicating that these drugs in clinical trials often don't work even as well as placebos.

The book focuses on Prozac and similar types of anti-depressants, and details how the tendency of these drugs to cause suicidality in some persons was denied and covered up. For instance, if a subject experienced such severe side effects that they had to quit taking the drug under investigation, that person would simply be dropped from the study and its statistics. Or, if a subject experienced suicidal ideation, this might be coded as "agitation."

A difficult question raised by this book is to what extent it is ethical to market a drug that will harm some people seriously and help a larger number of people to some extent. Prozac and its progeny were blockbuster drugs, cash cows for their makers. Little wonder that they fought all efforts to depict these drugs as dangerous to some users. Although Healy testified as an expert witness against Lilly, Prozac's maker, he is hardly a fanatic anti psychoactive drug advocate. He believes in antidepressants, and indeed prescribes them in his practice. His point is that these drugs need to be used more sparingly, and with greater awareness of their side effects.

Healy sees wider implications in the behavior of the drug companies in marketing Prozac and similar antidepressants. As he says, this is not just the story of Prozac type drugs and depression -- it is also about the way drugs for ADHD, bipolar disorders, stimulants, and antipsychotics are being marketed, and for how drugs for hypertension, sexual dysfunction and other maladies will be marketed. Although Healy says it is about culture and the limits of propaganda, it would seem that his real message is that where there's money to be made, big corporations have no limits on the propaganda they are willing to disseminate. Let the buyer beware.

Circul Wyrd says

One of the few books that really tackles the many problems with Prozac and its descendants. As one of those for whom Prozac was damaging, I completely believe the accounts in this book of the unfortunate human guinea pigs that in some cases experienced this drug as a destructive force, not a healing one. It is clear that at the drug approval phase it was known that the drug affects some people in a dangerously powerful manner, and that not only was this known, but in a significant lawsuit the drug developer Eli Lilly won a legal, but not a moral, victory based on a "it's the disease, not the drug" argument. The book's author, David

Healy, as a witness in this trial, had access to records from the clinical trial phase of Prozac and makes a convincing argument that poor - in some cases fatally so - outcomes from these trials were effectively silenced so that the drug's approval would proceed. He also makes a convincing argument that Eli Lilly, in a financially weak period of its development as a company, was desperate to have Prozac approved and staked everything on the outcome of the clinical trials, in a make-it-or-go-bust effort. This led to numerous misrepresentations of the dangers associated with Prozac, and a failure to acknowledge the lives that have been ruined by Prozac, in a one-size-fits-all approach to psychiatric care which sacrifices the lives of those for whom the drug is disastrous to that omnipotent being, the cash-cow. Does this remind anyone of anything, like, oh, I don't know, the opioid crisis promulgated by the Sackler family under the auspices of its company Purdue Pharma? At least, in the latter case, no one could say the people whose lives have been ruined by prescription pain pills were addicted to them before they began taking them ("it's the addiction, not the drug that gets you addicted" - no, guess that one won't work). I'm sure they have thought of another even more lame defense though, which can be made to work if all the right wheels are appropriately greased. Not that I'm cynical or anything.

Adam Ross says

This was a long, and detailed history of the depression industry, written by a psychiatrist who was heavily involved in that industry from its beginnings. He still supports depression medications for the right people, but argues in this book that the expansion of the definition of "depression" by clinical psychologists and the expansion of applications for drugs by the drug companies, has led to giving these antidepressants to the wrong people, increasing the risk of suicide, reckless behavior, character and personality alteration, and even homicide. As this is an academic work, it is not written primarily as an application for the present, but a record of the past, and because of this it does not offer advice for those who might be concerned with themselves or a loved one going on antidepressants, which I think was a needed chapter to tag onto the end of the book, and which kept me from giving it a full four stars.

Kalin says

Very informative and significant.

Kyle says

This book wins hands-down for best-titled brain science book ever. Freaked out by reports that antidepressants can't outperform placebos in clinical trials, I thought I needed to learn more.

Lucas says

Unfortunately, there is a dark side to Prozac and other drugs in its class of SSRIs. A powerful effect of these drugs is to increase the rate of suicides in patients taking them. The increase of suicidality in studies of these drugs is terrible (they roughly double the rate of suicide) especially since the whole point of antidepressants is to bring people away from the brink.

Healy did a study on healthy patients without a history of depression (his colleagues, actually) using Zoloft, and the results were frightening. In less than two weeks, two out of twenty began to have night terrors and seriously considered suicide for the first time in their lives.

Most doctors would never encourage patients to take such a drug if it were over the counter or illegal, but the fact that they are prescription (along with direct marketing by drug companies) gives them the air of legitimacy. Healy proposes a radical solution, make these drugs over the counter, so that doctors are the patient's advocate instead of being a gateway to drugs.

Tina says

Big pharma wants you to take drugs to cure your depression. They make sure lots more people are diagnosed with depression. And this author was one of the researchers trying to convince you (and your doctor) of this need.

I found most interesting, the political fight and the trials with ambiguous results. Also a rather good description of how SSRI's work, or don't.

This also requires you doing more research, along the spectrum of 'drugs will save your life' to No! no! drugs will take your life-- and the author gives the references.

Charlene Smith says

I have the great blessing of not having ever suffered depression, but I read this book as part of research for a book I am writing on prescription drug overmedication and addiction. It is very useful for someone who has BiPolar, Schizophrenia or any depressive or anxiety diagnosed, it says as book after book says and no one seems to hear - stay away from these drugs, use them sparingly, if at all. They are dangerous. Your brain is sensitive, protect it.

Joshua says

Scary. As I read it, my mind kept wanting to read it like it was a Grisham novel. I had to keep reminding myself that this was not fictional. Truly scary.

Beth says

Interesting look at Healy's experiences with Prozac (from a clinician's point of view) and the various lawsuits that emerged regarding it. While not as analytical as some of his other work (this is more personal), it fits well with his previous works on antidepressants (The Antidepressant Era and The Creation of Psychopharmacology), and continues to remind us that the history of depression isn't so clear cut, after all.
