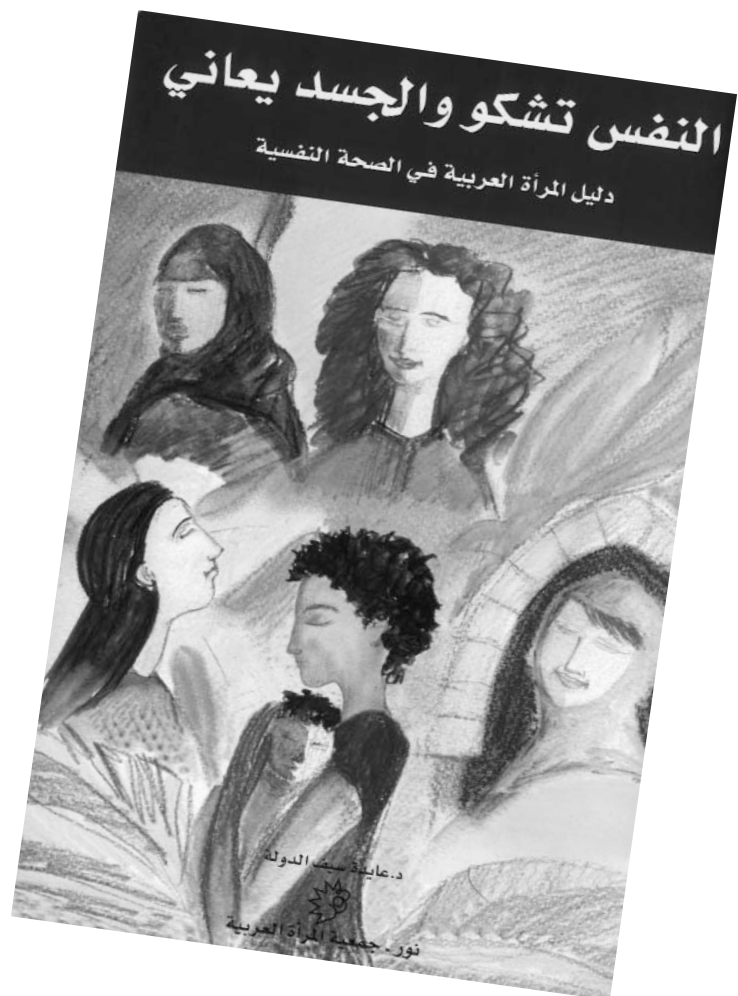


The Mind Complains and the Body Suffers: Arab Women's Guide to Mental Health

■ Reviewed by Azzah Shararah Baydoun

"At various stages of our lives, we women are intrigued by questions and stricken by fears that bring us to wonder whether we are in our right minds or on the verge of madness. In dealing with our emotions and thoughts, we resort to silence and suppression. Each one of us thinks she is the only one in the world to be tempted by such thoughts and feelings. So we repress them in an attempt to elude their attribution to mental illness... Knowledge is the first step towards overcoming fear and anxiety. It is what enables us to confront factors deemed threatening to our sanity."

This excerpt is taken from the back cover of *The Mind Complains and the Body Suffers: Arab Women's Guide to Mental Health*,¹ a book written in Arabic by Aida Seif El Dawla, and published in 2003 by *Nour* – the Arab Women's Association, Beirut. The book's focus on knowledge, as a prerequisite for overcoming those factors that affect women's mental health, highlights the publishing group's goal of deconstructing preconceived notions on this issue. Among these is a faulty belief that by choosing to ignore a psychological problem, we can diffuse it; whereas complaining about it – consequently admitting its existence – boosts its clout over us, thereby weakening our ability to control it.



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One of the book's underlying principles is the right to knowledge – a principle that is repeated throughout its chapters. Hailed as an absolute right and an end in itself, knowledge is also presented as a necessary condition for empowering women, in general, and an avenue leading them to take control of their mental health, in particular. It is deemed imperative in view of the fact that women's mental health is generally shrouded with a "not so innocent" cloud of ambiguity, its expressions are lightly attributed to women's "nature" and biology and presented as a quasi-inescapable lot to be added to the glut of other lots governing their existence.

At the Crossroads of Concerns

Because knowledge is a human right, and because it is a chief means of empowering women, Nour – Arab Women's Association, took the initiative of addressing this issue as part of a range of similar issues related to women.² As mental health is essentially a scientific object of concern of psychiatry, Nour commissioned a woman

psychiatrist who is a university professor at an Arab university,³ to write the book. It is noteworthy that this association adopts an approach to health in general, and to mental health in particular, viewing it as the product of various factors comprising the biological, political, economic and socio-cultural, etc. all condensed in gender. Therefore, this book's area of concern was not limited to the

discipline of psychiatry exclusively; as a matter of fact, an advisory committee and a group of readers from across the Arab world comprised of experts in fields related to psychology, sociology, communication, development, public health, nursing, psychiatry and education collaborated with the writer as consultants. They read the successive drafts written and rewritten by the author in an attempt to sensitize the resultant text to all the factors mentioned.

Yet this book stands out even more due to the publisher's interest to target medium-level educated women, as well as social workers from governmental and non-governmental organizations who, in turn, target underprivileged women in the numerous development and service centers across the Arab countries. In line with this interest, effort was expended to make the text readable and to select subjects that are of interest to this targeted read-

ership. As such, the committee and consultative group of readers offered remarks that thereafter set the criteria for the writer as she was preparing her final draft, in a bid to improve its readability by the target group and more adapted to its needs.

What is in the Book?

This book presents knowledge and information on mental health issues, based, explicitly written or not, on theories related to the field of psychology, psychiatry and mental health. Various issues are tackled related to these disciplines, with a special focus on women. The value in presenting such information does not lie so much in the selection of subjects from a range that is necessarily very wide, but rather in the fact that it offers examples about possible situations and problems that invite the reader to look further into them and entertain the possibility of seeking further knowledge and information about other or similar situations and problems.

This book offers an ascending classification of symptoms and mental disorders, providing thereby a primary guide that allows one to draw the line between "normalcy" and "insanity", and between the ability to rely on one's personal resources and network (parents, friends, sometimes religious preachers) in dealing with normal crises and psychological symptoms, and between the necessity to refer oneself – or be referred to – the care of a specialist's intervention. The professionals, in turn, are classified according to their training and their therapeutic approaches and techniques.

Generally speaking, although the book is scientific, it is seldom written in a dry "scientific" style; rather, the information is presented in such a way as to deconstruct misconceptions or examine preconceptions on certain issues, or in a question-answer form. The frequently asked questions include, for instance, the issues of infertility, the nature of marital relations, the psychological effects of menopause, the justifications used in instances of violence against women, the use and abuse of pharmaceuticals and tobacco, etc.

Following two prefaces – one that explains the writing process of the book and another that explains why it was necessary to tackle the issue of women's health – the book offers definitions of "mental health" and presents in chapter one the various views of the Western schools of thought on "personality". With this chapter, it sets the ground for examining the factors affecting women's mental health. The following chapter enumerates and describes the key stages in a woman's life and the meaning that each stage acquires in our social culture. A following chapter addresses stress and its psychological and physical effects on women. The remaining chapters

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address symptoms, psychological disorders, more specifically psychosomatic disorders, whose title was given to the book itself. The book has a special chapter on violence against Arab women in its various forms, highlighting its destructive effect on women and their families. In a last chapter, almost provocatively entitled "It is your right not to be alone, it is your right to seek help," the book reaffirms the Madrid Declaration and reiterates the UN General Assembly's resolution on protecting individuals suffering from psychological disorders.

Premises and Information

The Mind Complains and the Body Suffers was written by women and for women mainly, but not exclusively. Understandably it involves a friendly and positive attitude towards them; at certain points, it is even possible to sense the writer's anger at the prevailing discrimination against women – and Arab women more specifically, especially manifested when she writes about girls' circumcision and other forms of violence against women.

What may appear as predilection towards women, and based on a set of values related to women's rights or on a commitment to women's issues, derives in fact from a thorough examination of the existing discrimination against women in general, and more specifically, in the field of health care and psychiatry. Furthermore, it is an outcome of research in the sub-field of behavioral medicine accumulated over 40 years of work by women active in the fields of medicine and psychiatry. The facts presented in this book are characterized by their focus on women's issues, such as their reproductive function and its socio-cultural implications comprising preconceptions, law and legislation, and customs and practices in patriarchal societies. It has been acknowledged that these issues have a non-negligible effect on women's mental health, but were mostly ignored in the fields of psychology and medicine, or were solely presented from a male perspective. It can further be noted that professionals in these fields not only did not pay heed to the consequences of the above-mentioned implications – let alone deal with them – but sometimes contributed to their reproduction.

The book implicitly warns the readers that even psychiatrists and psychotherapists can be biased in favor of the hegemonic male authority in the respective profession, inviting women to rely on the human rights charter and its derivatives in the various fields, including mental health. These rights include the right to self-achievement, participation in the decision-making process, refusal and denunciation of discrimination and violence in all its forms. The final chapter includes the Madrid Declaration, and establishes the ethical, legal, and scientific principles on which the rights of the mental patient are founded.

Not a Remedy for Peace of Mind... and Yet

The author is cautious about providing ready-made prescriptions. *The Mind Complains and the Body Suffers* is not "a magic remedy for peace of mind or happiness." But it does include a few instructions designed to help bring about psychological relief or to warn about potential dangers that could exist when women's mental health is addressed. For instance, there is a description of a relaxation technique to ease psychological stress, advice on how to treat pressing sleeping disorders, caution against the use of pharmaceuticals, advice on how to set limits to the intervention of religious men in matters of mental health, on how to deal with violence directed at women, etc. These instructions are all presented explicitly; but we also find instructions that are embedded within the subjects raised, for instance the need to approach sensitive issues such as virginity, the first menstruation for girls who are in the custody of women (mothers, relatives or social workers), the meaning of motherhood, fatherhood, parents' responsibilities, marital relations and the art of their management, facing domestic violence and molestation, etc. When the book looks into the reasons, forms of seeking psychological help – who, when and to whom – it assumes a clear directional tone in telling what must and must not be done.

Fluency and Friendliness

The relevance of the scientific information provided in this book is already being acknowledged.⁴ It is presented in an attractive and not so complicated style, with expressions and terms that have become, more or less, part of medium-level educated people's language repository. It was written using the pronoun "us", in a bid to eradicate the barrier between the seeker of medical advice and its provider, or between the knowledgeable and the recipient of knowledge. This is deliberately done by the author and her consultants in an attempt to empower the women readers of the book, by way of providing them with some knowledge that would permit a degree of control over issues pertaining to mental health. But this friendly formulation has another function too. When the writer addresses women using "us", thus inducing a friendly atmosphere – maybe even complicity – between the writer and reader, this contributes to dispel the solitude of women in facing their mental pains – which is exactly the aim described in the excerpt presented at the beginning of this review.

An Expression of Sisterhood and an Example to Emulate

This book should be hailed as an expression of sisterhood, and deserves a warm salute; it is an expression of sisterhood because it was written by a woman psychiatrist, a professor at one of the most distinguished Arab universities, in collaboration with a women's organiza-

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tion. Furthermore, the author, although distinguished in her field, welcomed the recommendations and alterations of the initial and successive drafts made by consultants and experts and academics from various fields at the boundaries of psychiatry. Finally, the book is written in an easy and attractive style addressed to women in the "us" form, hereby implicating the reader and vulgarizing the scientific material to adjust it to the level of underprivileged women readership.

In addition to it being a 'guide for Arab women on mental health' – as its subtitle indicates – the book is an indication that the women's movement in the Arab world has started to draw the attention of women scholars and professionals who studied under the male academic and epistemological system. It may also be a starting point towards the practice of reconsidering the claim of the mentioned system to neutrality. This might be paving the way for a revision of the male system of knowledge, its theories, its approaches, its ways of dealing with women's issues, in addition to the effectiveness of its applications and practices. Such a revision will eventually lead to integrating women's perspectives, to responding to their specificities, and to consolidating practices that would not violate their rights. Women are not the sole benefactors of such a development: Making science

accessible to women who are poorly educated might be an example that could be emulated by activists in all those fields that are monopolized by experts and academics who use their knowledge and experience to maintain their power over the 'non-knowledgeable'.

Finally, *The Mind Complains and the Body Suffers* claims to have been written for women who do not enjoy a high educational level. But it is clearly a book that addresses everyone.

Translated by Lynn Maalouf

ENDNOTES

1. The book can be ordered from www.nouraw.org
2. The first publication is a book on nutrition *Bilsaha wal Hana*. A book on health for elderly women is currently in the making.
3. The writer has a PhD in Psychiatry, and teaches Psychiatry at Egypt's Ain Chams University.
4. Sensitization discussions of the book targeting social workers of the Lebanese Ministry of Social Affairs have been carried out in the six Muhafazats of Lebanon. The evaluation of the book following these discussion sessions has invariably pointed to the relevance of the information it provided to their work with underprivileged women.

Forthcoming: Arab Women and Disability