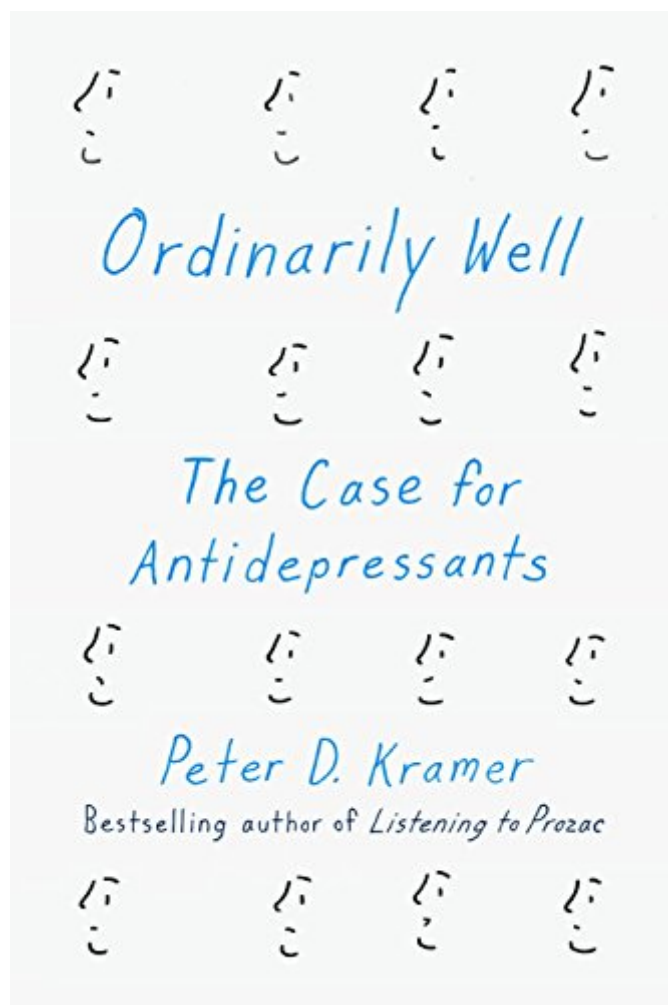


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Ordinarily Well: The Case For Antidepressants



Synopsis

Do antidepressants work, or are they glorified dummy pills? How can we tell? In *Ordinarily Well*, the celebrated psychiatrist and author Peter D. Kramer examines the growing controversy about the popular medications. A practicing doctor who trained as a psychotherapist and worked with pioneers in psychopharmacology, Kramer combines moving accounts of his patients' dilemmas with an eye-opening history of drug research to cast antidepressants in a new light. Kramer homes in on the moment of clinical decision making: Prescribe or not? What evidence should doctors bring to bear? Using the wide range of reference that readers have come to expect in his books, he traces and critiques the growth of skepticism toward antidepressants. He examines industry-sponsored research, highlighting its shortcomings. He unpacks the "inside baseball" of psychiatry's "statistics" and shows how findings can be skewed toward desired conclusions. Kramer never loses sight of patients. He writes with empathy about his clinical encounters over decades as he weighed treatments, analyzed trial results, and observed medications' influence on his patients' symptoms, behavior, careers, families, and quality of life. He updates his prior writing about the nature of depression as a destructive illness and the effect of antidepressants on traits like low self-worth. Crucially, he shows how antidepressants act in practice: less often as miracle cures than as useful, and welcome, tools for helping troubled people achieve an underrated goal—becoming ordinarily well.

Book Information

File Size: 995 KB

Print Length: 336 pages

Publisher: Farrar, Straus and Giroux (June 7, 2016)

Publication Date: June 7, 2016

Sold by: Macmillan

Language: English

ASIN: B01828N3LE

Text-to-Speech: Enabled

X-Ray: Not Enabled

Word Wise: Enabled

Lending: Not Enabled

Enhanced Typesetting: Enabled

Best Sellers Rank: #67,159 Paid in Kindle Store (See Top 100 Paid in Kindle Store) #4 in Kindle

Store > Kindle eBooks > Health, Fitness & Dieting > Counseling & Psychology >

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Customer Reviews

One of the first books I read after being diagnosed with depression and social anxiety in 2001 was *Listening to Prozac*. What I got from that book was that Peter Kramer was skeptical about Prozac, but after years of seeing people in therapy and not progressing, then making remarkable progress on Prozac, he came around to its usefulness, although he did question what it meant when it would be so easy to change our personality with a pill. Over the years, the skepticism and blowback against antidepressants has changed the public opinion of them greatly. Like the benzos and first generation antidepressants, they were first beloved, but then maligned because they were either seen as not much better than a placebo, dangerous, causing suicidality and dependence or simply a product of big pharma greed. *Ordinarily Well* is very much a continuation of *Listening to Prozac* as well as a reaction to a lot of the negative backlash against antidepressants. This book alternates between case studies where Peter describes how his patients healed along with descriptions of controlled studies. He goes into a lot of depth about how and why studies can be flawed, either because they are in a controlled clinical setting, because the patients have failed antidepressants before and are less likely to succeed, because of the imprecise practice of using a scale to calculate depression, because the mere practice of going to a clinical center is therapeutic, because the doctors have a lot of pressure to produce positive results as well as numerous other reasons.

I am a layman who is extremely interested in psychiatry, human cognition, and a broad spectrum of issues in human & animal behavioral science. I have been following the antidepressant debate for quite a while and noticed the general commentary in the media on this topic, even in the more thoughtful outlets, tends to have a significant anti medication bias. There are usually two angles that sometimes tend to contradict each other. Either antidepressants don't work much better than placebo, or they work, but somehow rob us of feeling and expressing our "natural" emotions. Typically, the media outlets don't actually engage in thoughtful analysis of these really important questions, but rather (poorly) regurgitate and interpretation of one study or another. Worse yet, science journalists covering this topic repeat silly, red herring clichés such as "it's bad to prescribe antidepressants for someone grieving over a loss of loved one" and so on. Despite this treatment of the antidepressant topic in the media, there are a number of

thoughtful blogs (a lot of them from practicing physicians) who tell a much more nuanced story about these drugs. The picture that ultimately emerges is quite different than the angle peddled by the media. It is on one of these blogs, that I discovered Dr. Kramer's *Ordinarily Well: The Case for Antidepressants*. I want to start by saying that even if you somehow skip all the sections about the nuances of antidepressant efficacy and just read the remaining sections, you will learn a great deal about modern medicine. What I mean by this is that Dr.

I've previously read "The Emperor's New Drugs" and "Manufacturing Depression" and the arguments in those books mostly convinced me that antidepressants are ineffective. Subsequently, I end up discontinuing them, but the depression that haunted me since my early childhood intensified, at least intermittently, afterwards. And so did the related conditions like Social Anxiety. Eventually, I end up volunteering at a drug study to find an antidepressant that is not just a "placebo" and actually works but after many months as a "guinea pig" in several antidepressant studies I quit without feeling better than on approved antidepressants I've tried before (incidentally, as the book described, many if not most participants I encountered at the research center indeed looked very impoverished and like they were there for the money. To that effect even a notice was posted by the entrance: "Participants tested positive for drugs won't get paid for your today's appointment") After reading this book I was mostly convinced about SSRI efficacy, but certainly some doubts still linger about its safety, especially long term, as Dr Kramer himself readily admits. The author was less convincing with his jabs at the evidence based medicine. Certainly, the quality of evidence are only as good as the studies that produced them, and there have been a lot of bad studies performed expediently by the Pharma, often, ironically, to their own detriment. Clinical judgment on the other hand could be clouded by the profit motive and hubris, that EBM suppose to keep a check on.

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