Book Review of *Resilience* by Jessie Close

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*Resilience* written by Jessie Close who is the youngest sister of actress Glenn Close provides a very private look into the life of a woman with bipolar I disorder with psychotic features and a tendency to a mixed state. Later, Jessie’s doctor also diagnoses her with trichotillomania because of the way she scrapes at her arms until they bleed. Her memoir shares a unique story because while the majority of the book focuses on her struggles to lead a normal life for herself, her eldest son, Calen develops a mental illness as well. He is diagnosed with schizoaffective disorder at age 22. Forced to watch her son struggle with the same issues she did, this work provides a distinct tale of what it is like to witness your own child desperately struggling to find sanity just as Jessie had all of her life.

Jessie has distinct periods of mania that often involved sex sprees, rushed marriages, moving around the country, drug use, opening new businesses and buying cars. Jessie’s episodes of depression are just as debilitating. She talks about being in a fetal position for hours at a time and locking herself in the bathroom to cry while her three, young children banged on the door. She also contemplates suicide often. During her “mixed state” Jessie discusses being highly energized yet really saddened which is a dangerous combination.

In the final chapters of the book, Jessie hears “the Creature”, a squirrel like thing with evil, red, glowing eyes who constantly orders her to kill herself. This is an example of her psychotic tendencies. Jessie also experiences incapacitating migraines for a portion of her life, causing “vision spots” at times as she is driving. She medicates the migraines and mood swings with copious amounts of alcohol and Calen shows similar patterns of self-medicating. He smokes lots of weed and drinks booze as his disorder grabs hold of him, just like Jessie had done when she was his age, falling down the same slippery slope.

Calen is even more paranoid than his mother and becomes frightened by the things he sees on T.V., thinking that vampires are outside of his window and in alleyways waiting to kill him. He has a deep rooted fear that everyone, including his own family is out to get him. While on a skiing trip he becomes convinced that his own brother, Sander is trying to feed him alien meat for dinner. He becomes easily overwhelmed by being around lots of people and having to make normal, everyday decisions. Jessie would find him holding his knees as he sat on the floor rocking back and forth in his bedroom, mumbling to himself. To make matters worse, Calen also had mood swings like his mom.

Sadly, the disorders of both people could not have been prevented unless their family stopped reproducing all together because they are biologically engrained issues. The lack of education Jessie and those close to her had of mental illness would be considered a social cause for the amount of time it took for her to be diagnosed and treated. Jessie may have even chosen not to have children if she had known the likelihood of passing on her illness to her offspring.

By the book’s end it became near impossible to keep track of how many different mixtures of medications Jessie had tried and the same goes for Calen. Reading this memoir made me realize that being diagnosed is only the tip of the iceberg when it comes to the rocky road of finding a healthy mental state. Since every human’s brain operates differently, learning the right type and dosage for medications can take years. This was true in the cases for both Jessie and Calen.

In early chapters, Jessie’s father who is a doctor prescribes her antidepressants like Zoloft because he does not recognize her mania, just her obvious depression. While it helped with the depressive episodes, antidepressants actually made the manic ones worse. After receiving treatment at Mclean Hospital, Jessie used the medication Geodon, an antipsychotic drug, and eventually finds out it is slowly killing her by deteriorating her muscles. This caused her to develop neuroleptic malignant syndrome (NMS) (p. 267) and for this reason she stopped taking it immediately. To stop her trembling hands and control her anxiety she also takes Neurontin for a time. Among a plethora of medications, she also uses lithium which our textbook talks about in the treatment of bipolar disorder as it is the only FDA approved mood stabilizer. It helps Jessie to control her suicidal thoughts brought on by the Creature she claims is living by her left temple. In the end, Jessie finds the drug that works best for her combination of illness is clozapine, also an antipsychotic drug.

By the time I reached the last page of this memoir, I couldn’t help but feel grateful for being given this assignment. Having suffered with premenstrual dysphoric disorder (PMDD) during my teenage years through my early twenties before being prescribed an SSRI, I was able to see that bipolar disorder and premenstrual dysphoric disorder shared some similarities as they are both classified as mood disorders by the DSM-5. Jessie’s diagnosis is much more serious than my PMDD diagnosis but reading her story touched me. Jessie and Glenn are advocates for raising awareness about mental illness and by Jessie writing this book, I was able to connect with her- a woman who suffers from a mental illness not my own, years my senior, miles away and yet we connect. Knowing one of her goals in writing a book was to make others see that they are not as alone as they may feel; it seems she accomplished that at least with me.

I wondered time and time again how Jessie managed to cope with her slew of mental disorders until she was in her fifties. This just shows that people learn to keep going with their daily lives despite having no treatment to help them. This is something I have experienced myself and like hearing about another person’s situation often does- it put mine in perspective. I was lucky to be diagnosed at 22 years old rather than at 50 like Jessie and obviously I am lucky to have a much less severe mood disorder and only one at that!

Jessie made the book very accessible to readers without knowledge of psychology and all of its vocabulary. Many times she introduced a term and defined it saying “During a mixed state a person can feel sad but also extremely energized.” (p. 256) She goes on to explain why this is more dangerous than depression alone. She also describes the events in her life in a way that makes the reader feel as if they could picture being in her shoes. The mentally ill are people who have the same goals as everyone else who surround them. Sadly, they have mental handicaps that make day-to-day life a relentless struggle and these goals become near impossible to accomplish at times.

Since Jessie was working to cover her entire life, the book could feel hurried at times and names of people would blend as would the dates for lots of events. I think Jessie provided a good level of detail, being sure to say just enough but not so much that the reader would feel overwhelmed or bored by the amount of information being presented. I’m sure this was a difficult skill to master while trying to tell something as important as a life story.

After reading her story, I also have a deep appreciation for the title she chose- *Resilience*. This word is perfect for describing what it takes to overcome biological hurdles many individuals are unfortunately born having to overcome. After reading countless pages that were filled with emotional turmoil, heartache, substance abuse, and pain, for the book to end in Jessie and her son Calen finding a voice to help raise awareness about the stigma mental illness in our society carries felt particularly triumphant. Because they had the financial means to get the treatment they needed, they were able to recover but for so many this will never happen. Jessie notes that not everyone is as privileged as she and Calen were in being able to go to one of the best mental hospitals for extended periods of time. Not everyone gets a chance to be resilient.

Not only did they each find the correct cocktail of medication after many trials and tribulations of treatment, they also found the strength to be advocates with Glenn’s assistance by starting their Bring Change 2 Mind campaign which gained noted publicity. Jessie states several times that mental illness was not in her family’s vocabulary. Her family evolved from almost no knowledge of mental illness to being passionate advocates and supporters! This proves what education on the subject can do. Just knowing someone with mental illness can be enough to make others become advocates.

In addition to establishing their campaign, Calen and Jessie made a huge contribution to the scientific community and the future of treatment for patients. By undergoing extensive medical tests to track down the genes that lead to mental issues like Calen’s schizophrenia, doctors found the specific gene mutation that could be responsible. This mutation was found in both Jessie and Calen, demonstrating that it was passed down to Calen from his mother. Because of their willingness to try experiments involving glycine decarboxylase as treatment for a possible glycine deficiency which causes a malfunctioning of a receptor in the brain, they may have helped develop a new type of medication for mental patients in the future- glycine pills.

These factors combined make Jessie Close’s memoir a powerful, moving and inspiring journey into the life (and mind) of someone who has a mental illness. Although everyone’s brain works differently, her story reminds us that we can relate in our own unique way. If we can empathize for people like Calen and Jessie then we are already one step closer to ending the stigma associated with mental illnesses. On the final page of her memoir Jessie says “Now, when the final page is written, I can close this book and continue advocating for the mentally ill. It is my heartfelt wish that all of you join me.”(p.297) I have joined her noble cause without a doubt because a society is only as strong as even its most vulnerable citizens. It’s important to help every individual find their stability and therefore, their strength to live a healthy life.