

Book Reviews

Exuberance. The Passion for Life. By Kay Redfield Jamison; Alfred A. Knopf, New York, New York; 2004; ISBN 0-375-40144-X; \$24.95 (hardcover); 405 pp.

Like probably many voracious and curious readers, I have always been attracted to and interested in the writings of Kay Redfield Jamison. In her works, she has explored some fascinating areas, such as her own struggle with manic-depressive illness; suicide; or the relationship between creativity and manic-depressive illness. She is an eloquent, skillful, literate and passionate writer with a great ability to provide a broad, yet focused view of whatever she writes about. I was wondering what was coming next in her writings. Well, being an exuberant person, she brings us a book about an emotion close to her heart — exuberance. (It is obvious that she is right writing that emotions are rubbing off, or infectious, as even my own writing style becomes more exuberant while writing about her book.)

Some might ask: What is exuberance, what does it describe? Jamison writes that, “Exuberance is an abounding, ebullient, effervescent emotion. It is kinetic and unrestrained, joyful, irrepressible. It is not happiness, although they share a border. It is, instead, at its core, a more restless, billowing state” (p 4). It seems that exuberance, joy, and enthusiasm have been emotions fairly neglected by the fields of psychiatry and psychology. Yet, as Jamison writes, “exuberance is a vital emotion, and joy is essential to our existence” (p 5). One would assume that since this is an important and positive emotion, it would have been studied and written about a lot. However, as Jamison states, psychology and psychiatry research has devoted much more time to studying “negative” emotions like depression and anxiety than to studying the positive ones, such as joy, happiness and exuberance. According to one calculation, for every one hundred journal articles on sadness and depression, only one is published about happiness. The focus on potentially destructive and negative emotions makes sense as they raise the awareness of threats and/or help being alert to peril. According to Jamison, from a certain point of view, “positive emotions, in this context, could be viewed as an evolutionary luxury” (p 95). Interestingly, “negative” emotions activate the older, primitive, subcortical parts of the brain, while positive emotions activate a phylogenetically much younger part of the brain, the prefrontal cortex. It seems that the ability to appreciate positive emotions and situations requires more a sophisticated level of processing by the brain.

Positive emotions, as Jamison suggests, “can generate alternative solutions to menace and hazard, foster resilience and social bonds, and reward successful behavior with an infusion of pleasure” (p 95). Exuberance, a positive emotion, can be, according to Jamison, “conceptualized as high on the pleasantness dimension as well as high on activation” (p 98). It is also more “likely than happiness alone to lead to new and energetic pursuits” (p 98). Positive emotions seem closely related to creativity, curiosity, preference for novelty, and academic performance.

In her book Dr. Jamison deals with numerous aspects of positive emotions, namely exuberance. The discussion of various facets of exuberance are intertwined with examples of exuberant and passionate people, such as John Muir, Theodore Roosevelt, Wilson Bentley, James Watson, Robert Gallo, Carleton Gajdusek, and Samuel Barondes. (Some of them, for example Watson, Gallo, Gajdusek and Barondes she interviewed for this book.) A portion of the introductory part of this book is devoted to childhood exuberance and the role of play. The book also discusses the importance of exuberant play in other species, where it helps to curb aggressive instincts towards others of their own kind, to nourish social affinities and to diffuse social tensions. Other parts of the book deal with biological findings on positive emotions, the role of genetics (Samuel Barondes believes that exuberance is determined by the environment as well as heredity), imaging studies, relationship of exuberance and extroversion, the role of dopamine in exuberance and extroversion, the role of laughter in these emotions, and the fact that we frequently seek these high emotions (we, as a species, are not the only ones, other species seek high emotions, too). I was intrigued by the gender differences in laughter — “women laugh more often than men, although men are more likely to evoke laughter in others” (p 146).

Another part of the book discusses the “pursuit of knowledge as an intoxicant” and the “feeling of excitement after finding something no one else has seen before or understood” (p 174). Jamison describes the positive role exuberance may play in a creative, scientific process, as “it helps to overcome the tedium and setbacks intrinsic to scientific work, overrides mental and physical weariness, and makes risk-taking both attractive and probable” (p 182). Jamison gradually comes to the conclusion that, “passionate enthusiasms, ... are essential to survival as they are indispensable to imagination and social change” (p 246). Even the Western

expansion, as she discusses, “was a case study in unfettered exuberance, one that led to reckless exploitation of the land” (p 250).

However, exuberance poses some dangers, as Dr. Jamison points out. “Exuberance becomes dangerous when the goal is reprehensible, the means suspect, or the delight indiscriminate. Enthusiasts may be more interested in the problem being solved than in the ethical issues” (p 256). The book suggests that war provokes such passions, and brings examples of unbridled enthusiasts of war such as Generals George S. Patton and William “Billy” Mitchell. Patton's tactical brilliance and exuberance were legendary, yet at a certain point his intemperate behavior disintegrated into an unpardonable one, when he possibly inflamed soldiers to wanton killing. As Jamison warns us, “normal exuberance can escalate into pathological enthusiasm, anger or even mania” (p 275). Nevertheless, “the juxtaposition of the exuberant and the malignant is potentially dangerous, but a balance between the two can provide ballast and gravitas” (p 286).

Interestingly, at the end of her book, Jamison points out how inherently an *American emotion* exuberance is. She quotes Albert Einstein who once said that America is more capable of enthusiasm than any other country. Americans “see enthusiasm as an advantage ... and they are more likely than people from other countries to favor enthusiasm and ... believe that enthusiasm is a useful and constructive emotion in their lives” (p 296). Interestingly, as Jamison notes, high rates of manic-depressive illness have been observed in American immigrant groups, which suggests that persons with mild forms of this illness but with high energy, exuberant mood and prone to risk taking may have been more likely to immigrate to America. This notion about exuberant people being more likely to come to America provides an interesting complement to Peter Whybrow's book “American mania. When more is not enough” reviewed also on the pages of this journal. Interestingly, Whybrow, a European immigrant, provides a more temperate, yet as insightful, view of the role of mania in American life, while Jamison, an exuberant and enthusiastic American, presents a more positive spin, but does not leave the negative aspects uncovered. Both Jamison and Whybrow provide us with a new, insightful and interesting view of positive emotions in their fullest.

“Exuberance. Then passion for life” is a quite interesting, inspiring and authoritative book on the role of positive emotions, namely exuberance, in our life. It is wonderfully written, in an almost lyrical style, with an abundance of literary quotes and wonderful pearls by the author (some of them I cite in this review). Some may consider it a bit long, but they have to realize that this is prose, not a scientific discourse, written by a woman who, besides being a talented scientist, is also a talented woman of letters.

Richard Balon, MD
Wayne State University
Detroit, Michigan

Powerful Medicines. The Benefits, Risks, and Costs of Prescription Drugs. By Jerry Avorn, MD.; Alfred A. Knopf, New York, New York; 2004; ISBN 0-37541483-5; \$27.50 (hardcover); 448 pp.

Prescription drugs and pharmaceutical companies are getting a lot of attention lately. The Food and Drug Administration (FDA) has been issuing black box and other warnings right and left. The Congress has been discussing the pricing of medication, re-importation and reimbursement for medications. Physicians have been more and more puzzled about the prescription medication data provided by the pharmaceutical companies, and they keep looking for a more reliable source of information about prescription drugs. The media increasingly criticize the pharmaceutical industry. Finally, the public is just confused and getting angry about prices, warnings and other issues it does not fully comprehend. It is becoming obvious how little we know about the possibly lethal side effects of prescription drugs, and how imperfect the system for the detection of these side effects is. Old medications are increasingly being replaced by newer, supposedly better and safer ones. However, these new medications are frequently hardly any better than the old ones. Many of them are simply “me-too drugs.” Nevertheless, the spiraling costs of these medications place them frequently beyond the reach of many Americans. That all contrasts with lavish, though recently scaled down marketing campaigns and direct-to-consumer advertisement. In the midst of this, we all keep asking, ‘What is going on, and what could be done about it?’

Jerry Avorn, M.D., internist, geriatrician, and pharmacoepidemiologist from the Harvard Medical School and Brigham and Women's Hospital in Boston, in his book “Powerful medicines. The benefits, risks, and costs of prescription drugs”, presents a thoughtful analysis of these issues and also offers an advice how to deal with them. His book is divided into prologue and five parts — I. Benefits, II. Risks, III. Costs, IV. Information, and V. Policy.

The two chapters of Part I, as Dr. Avorn promises, “explore the surprisingly fragile nature of a seemingly simple determination: whether or not a drug works” (p. 18). The rise and fall of hormone replacement therapy clearly demonstrated the importance of randomized controlled trial. The false belief of hormone replacement therapy benefits and lack of risks was based on observations, and not on results of rigorous trials. Rigorous randomized controlled trials discredited these observations. According to Dr. Avorn, a randomized controlled trial is “the single most important development in the revolution of modern therapeutics” (p 53).

However, as we learn from the chapters in Part II, randomized controlled trials do not allow us to get all the necessary information about the long term risks and side effects of medications. That is where the discipline of Dr. Avorn — pharmacoepidemiology — enters the scene. Dr. Avorn cites the famous dictum of Paracelsus that “All medicines are poisons ... the right dose differentiates poison from a remedy”