

# 'Prozac Nation' helped normalize mental illness. At what cost?

Elizabeth Wurtzel's memoir, published 30 years ago, changed the way we think about depression and mental health, for better and worse.

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Author Elizabeth Wurtzel, who wrote "Prozac Nation." (Neville Elder/Corbis/Getty Images)

Guest column by Laura Delano

Elizabeth Wurtzel's "Prozac Nation" had been out for three years when I was put on Prozac, at age 14. "Prozac Diary," by Lauren Slater, would come out a year later. Wurtzel and Slater joined a wave of books about living with a psychiatric diagnosis: William Styron's "Darkness Visible" (1990), Patty Duke's "A Brilliant Madness" (1992), Susanna Kaysen's "Girl, Interrupted" (1993), Kay Redfield Jamison's "An Unquiet Mind" (1995).

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[“Ours is the era of autopathography,”](#) Peter Kramer, author of the 1993 bestseller “Listening to Prozac,” wrote at the time about Wurtzel and other mental-illness memoirists. “A psychiatrist should be more grateful. The sheer number of these books helps to combat stigma.”

Put another way, the sheer number of these books helped more people proactively seek out more psychiatric treatment. The '90s had already been designated the [“Decade of the Brain”](#) in a Joint House Resolution in 1989, the same year that Wurtzel graduated from Harvard as one of the earliest Prozac-takers.

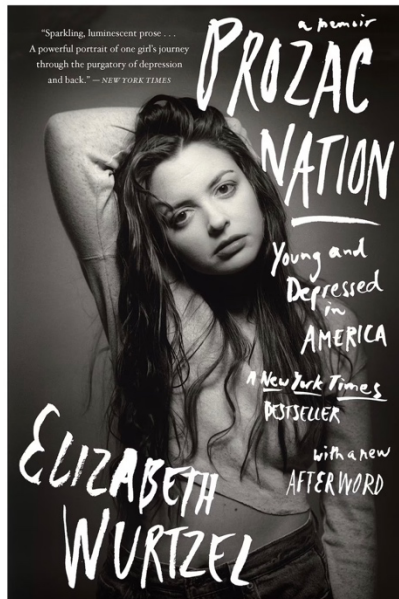
In the 30 years since “Prozac Nation” came out, the number of American children and adults seeking help from the mental health industry has skyrocketed. According to the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, [nearly 1 in 4 American adults](#) and 1 in 3 children between the ages of 12-17 (that’s 8.2 million kids) were given some kind of mental health treatment in 2022 and 2023.

While many people feel helped by mental health care, including meds, rates of suffering have only climbed. In 2021, [according to the CDC](#), 30 percent of high school girls seriously considered killing themselves. Today, [more than 40 percent of women](#) between the ages of 18-25 meet the criteria for a psychiatric diagnosis.

I first read “Prozac Nation” in 2005. I was 21 and had just returned to Harvard after taking two semesters off, during which time I had tried desperately and unsuccessfully to address my suicidal feelings and overwhelming dysfunction. First, I naively stopped my psych meds cold turkey; months later, I admitted myself to a psychiatric ward; there, I eagerly started what I’d been reassured would be a more effective pharmaceutical regimen of antidepressant, mood stabilizer and benzodiazepine; afterward, I attended months of individual and group therapy. Back on campus I faced the prospect that I didn’t feel any better. The meds weren’t working. Therapy hadn’t gotten me anywhere, either — and all the psych ward had done was give me a brief respite from the real world.

And then I remembered that Wurtzel had made it through Harvard despite all her issues. I wondered, *How did she manage to do it without killing herself?* “I have this palpable, absolute sense that I’m cracking up, that there’s really no good reason, and that — even worse — there’s nothing I can do about it,”

Wurtzel wrote in the prologue before going on to detail an adolescence frighteningly similar to mine: razor blades and blood; the exhausting performance of normal; the panic upon recognizing, in her words, “that I could not even fake being the old Lizzy anymore.”



Prozac Nation: Young and Depressed in America  
by Elizabeth Wurtzel (Mariner)

Reading “Prozac Nation” felt as if I were reading my own story, as if Wurtzel and I were both trapped in the same meta-realm where the mind exists detached from the self, forever sentenced to endlessly analyze its performance in the tragic theater of life. “I can’t believe that even here, even in an institution that seems bigger and better and beyond God the Father, I am still utterly and absolutely just me,” Wurtzel laments of Harvard and her own nature.

*Someone else out there is as messed up as I am, it dawned on me, and far from hiding in shame, she’s published an entire book about it.*

Wurtzel was not the first to alchemize the raw stuff of internal breakdown into memoir. In her 1892 semiautobiographical short story, “The Yellow Wallpaper,” Charlotte Perkins Gilman chronicled her descent into madness after her physician-husband forced her to stay in an upstairs room for months, separated from her baby, insistent she take a so-called rest cure. There were the fictionalized accounts of the 1960s: “The Bell Jar,” written by Sylvia Plath, initially under the pen name Victoria Lucas, and Joanne Greenberg’s novel, “I Never Promised You a Rose Garden,” written under the pseudonym Hannah Green.

But Wurtzel was different. She didn't hide behind a pen name or sugarcoat her story. There she was on the cover, an eyeliner-laden, provocative "twentynothing" woman, "the kind of person who would sleep through her octogenarian grandparents' visit after they have driven five hundred miles in one day just to see her."



Charlotte Perkins Gilman. (Library of Congress)



Sylvia Plath. (Everett/Shutterstock)

Wurtzel talked about embracing medicalized pain, professionalized help and pharmaceutical cures at a time when this story had never been told to young people. She made it seem cool to take meds and see shrinks. In many ways, her book was a walking advertisement for the benefits of reducing the struggles and complexities of what it means to be a thinking, feeling human into a diagnosis with a pharmaceutical cure.

"At two or three dollars a pill, at the rate of two pills a day, over a span of six years," Wurtzel wrote, "I feel that I have already mortgaged my life to Eli Lilly." She acknowledged the business model at play here, but didn't question whether it was in her best interests to remain a steady customer of pharmaceutical products for the long haul. "For the \$11,000 worth of business I've given the company, I wouldn't mind believing that they're doing a little bit of public service."

With aplomb, Wurtzel articulated loud and clear what had previously been my shameful, private hellscape: self-obsessed, self-indulgent misery. "I am constantly standing several feet away from myself, watching as I do or say or feel something that I don't want or don't like at all, and still I can't stop it," Wurtzel explained. "I wonder what I will have to do to convince some medical doctor that I am really and truly imbalanced, that there's no other explanation for the way my head feels all the time."

Whether it was Wurtzel's intention, "Prozac Nation" beckoned readers to join her in shedding the shame we felt about the things we thought and the emotions we felt and the ways we behaved. The book, subtitled "Young and Depressed in America," inspired girls and women everywhere to wear our suffering on our sleeves: We weren't bad or lazy or stupid; we were sick, and the meaning that we were seeking had been right in front of us all along in psychiatric patienthood. By leaning into personal defect as destiny, we'd finally get what we'd been searching for: feeling seen, and heard, and special. Feeling like we belonged somewhere.

After graduating from Harvard as an unquestioning believer in psychiatric orthodoxy, [I spent my 20s deepening this faith](#). The only people I trusted to provide me with meaningful input on my life had letters after their names and were paid to listen to me. I focused most of my daily attention on my internal experience — what emotions I was feeling, the thoughts I was having, what they might indicate about the state of my growing list of brain pathologies — and diligently reported any changes to my doctor.

With each passing year, as I took more meds and saw more specialists and admitted myself to more programs and had further hospitalizations and got progressively more dysfunctional along the way, I was told that my illness had progressed to the point of being "treatment resistant" and that I should set realistic expectations about what I could expect to accomplish in my life. I kept my focus on getting better mental health treatment — which I'd conflated with taking care of myself. Even my capacity for courage was psychiatrized: how *brave* I was to tell someone when I was in that suicidal wave. How *strong* I was for deciding to enroll myself in that new intensive outpatient program. The idea of lifestyle changes felt absurd, even insulting: removing processed foods and sugar, getting better sleep, not drinking so much alcohol, spending time outside in nature, cultivating contemplative practices, getting exercise, being of service, to name a few. *How dare you suggest sunlight to me; I have a serious brain disease. Do you not understand this?*

I surrendered any sense of personal responsibility and accountability, translating my inconsiderate or outright immoral behaviors into symptoms of my condition, and therefore not my fault. I stopped thinking that I could grow and change, or that my future held meaningful options, because I was taught to believe that I was fated to my biology. I came to equate my intense emotional pain with abnormality, believing my struggles meant something was wrong with me. The medicalized ideology of "mental illness" and "mental health"



stripped my emotions of meaning and context, so it became illogical to step back and ask myself, “What’s happening to you, around you, and inside of you, Laura, that might be shaping how you feel and think?” The reason for my mental and emotional anguish was simple: It was the unfortunate by-product of my abnormal brain.

How many other people have constructed the same fatalistic story of self that I once believed in? (Wurtzel, for one. “In a strange way,” she writes. “I had fallen in love with my depression.”) How many people, right now, are heading down the same psychiatrized path that I spent the most formative years of my life walking down, convinced it’s the only way to obtain peace of mind? The “Prozac Nation” era of the past 30 years has been founded on this decontextualization and individualization of pain. We have been trained to translate any unpleasant sensation (be it physical, mental or emotional) from a meaningful response occurring in our relationship to the world around us, to a meaningless, sterile symptom to be obliterated with some kind of medical or clinical intervention. If the medicalized template of self-understanding that Wurtzel constructed in “Prozac Nation” had been a truly beneficial story to us as individuals, communities and a society, wouldn’t we be having an epidemic of well-being right now rather than one of so-called mental illness?

It’s a revolutionary act now to stay present with one’s emotional pain — to listen to it (rather than Prozac), to feel it all. To talk about breakdowns and despair and angst and paranoia and madness as indicative of how vital, how alive, how in touch we are with the incredibly dysfunctional social order. As Erich Fromm put it to Aldous Huxley in Huxley’s 1958 book “Brave New World Revisited”: “Symptoms as such are not our enemy, but our friend; where there are symptoms there is conflict, and conflict always indicates that the forces of life which strive for integration and happiness are still fighting.”

Just [after Wurtzel’s death in 2020 at age 52 of breast cancer](#), a quote from “Prozac Nation” resurfaced: “That is all I want in life: for this pain to seem purposeful.” I often wonder what it would be like to sit down with her now and ask her if it was.

*Laura Delano is the author of “[Unshrunk: A Story of Psychiatric Treatment Resistance](#),” which will be out in March. She is also the founder of [Inner Compass Initiative](#), a charitable organization that helps people make more informed choices about psychiatric drugs, diagnoses and drug withdrawal.*

<https://www.washingtonpost.com/books/2024/12/12/prozac-nation-wurtzel-anniversary/>