

*I'm fine: A frank and honest account of a teenager's struggle*

Aeryn and Ellen Bond

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*Reviewed by Jill Yates*

As the sub-title suggests this book tells the story of Aeryn, her struggles with depression, self-harm and eventual suicide at age sixteen years and her mother Ellen's efforts to support her prior to her death and the devastating aftermath that followed. It is a heart wrenching emotionally charged personal account of the undeniable authentic lived experiences of the co-authors and should be read in this context. It is not an academic text underpinned by theory. With its themes of depression, suicide and grief the book both captivates and challenges the reader's own experiences and feelings which may mean stepping away at times to reflect on the written words and what they represent.

Mother and daughter co-authored the book by including Aeryn's diary entries, poetry and drawings alongside Ellen's accounts of life during Aeryn's period of depression and since she took her own life. A strength of the book is that the reader is given opportunity to share in this life story that is filled with a range of strong emotions, through the honest and emotive writings of both authors. It invites the reader to meet Aeryn, Ellen and their family and to be part of their journey with which it is impossible not to sympathise. The book is well written in a style that brings Aeryn's words to the page with alternate chapters from her personal diaries that clearly demonstrate the hold that depression had on her life and the eventual decline in her emotional wellbeing. Ellen's parallel chapters bring together Aeryn's world with family life and her attempts to seek help and support for Aeryn but also invokes in the reader feelings of frustration, sadness and finally devastation at the loss of Aeryn.

Ellen's aim in writing this book is to ensure that her daughter did not merely become a suicide statistic but wanted her voice heard. When Aeryn was alive, she had believed that one day they would write about recovery, to help others in similar situations, but hopes that by telling Aeryn's story might prevent such a tragedy happening to other families. Given the heightened awareness of young people's mental health across the world since the pandemic, the content is of international concern and would indicate that 'I'm Fine' can attract a global audience. Overall, this book is appropriate for

any parent and young person particularly those experiencing depression, participating in self-harm or has suicidal thoughts. It is an excellent text for professionals working with children and young people, including teachers, social workers, nurses, counsellors, and mental health workers. This would be a welcome text for students of all these professions to explore its key themes, and theories of depression, suicide and grief and to explore good practices in professional roles.

The book gives incidental insight into lack of mental health resources for young people and a system that failed Aeryn. Throughout the book there are striking examples where a professional delivers a throw away, thoughtless comment or makes assumptions with damaging consequences as evidenced in the writings of both authors. This apparent lack of empathy highlights the importance of compassion and humanity in these professional roles. Without negating these as true experiences, it is important to acknowledge that the reader might interpret the co-authors' views as biased or distorted by the intensity of their emotions. Whilst the criticisms of various professionals particularly the Coroner and first Child and Adult Mental Health Service worker may or may not be justified, the book is written from the family's perspective and the authors' subjectivity can deter objective reflection on the professionals' roles and their rights of reply.

This book has ensured that Aeryn's voice has been heard, leaving a legacy of her poetry, drawings and diaries from which others can learn. Although not an academic text, I would sincerely recommend this book to practice educators and mentors to discuss with their student social workers, teachers or counsellors. Aeryn's writing provides a genuine experience of appearing smiling or 'ok' whilst her depression had become all-consuming, the difficulty in sharing and describing the impact of depression and feelings of low self-worth and rejection whilst her mother Ellen's words are delivered with such powerful authenticity of the horror of finding her daughter and surviving the devastating loss and ensuing grief.

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