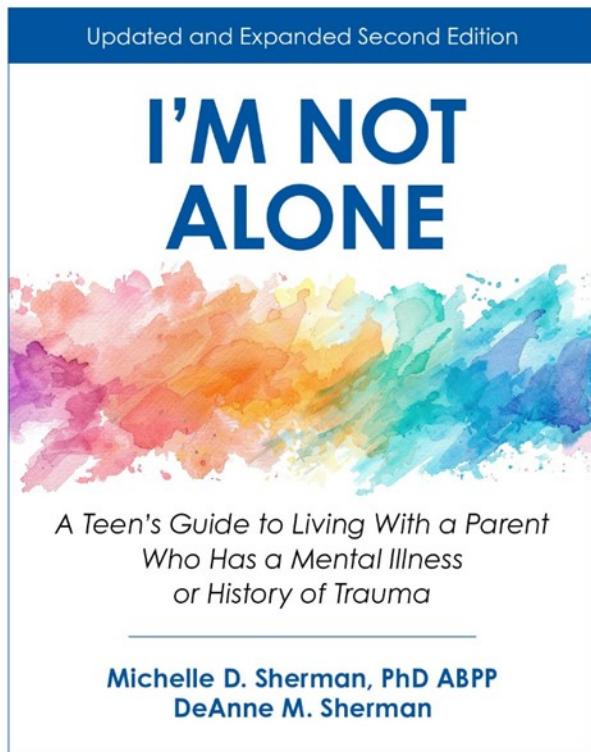


Book Review: I am Not Alone

Taylor Zurlinden



My first foray into military psychology actually involved military children. My team and I conducted qualitative interviews with military children who were now college students. It was eye-opening to see the significant discrepancies between an “idyllic adventure-filled” experience, and “we walked on egg-shells.” As you might imagine, mental illness in one or both parents were the primary factor driving this divergence. This solidified my desire to be a military psychologist, as I could have a profound impact on more than just the patient I was directly treating. Thus, I was eager when I was asked to review “I Am Not Alone” by Michelle and DeAnne Sherman, their book for teenagers coping with a parent experiencing significant mental illness.

Overall, what I find most helpful about this book is that it focuses on 1) the specific situation that teens may find themselves in (i.e. roles they may fulfill in their family and common reactions) and 2) the factors actually in their control. First off, helping normalize the reactions of teens in these challenging situations goes a long way towards reducing unnecessary stress. Knowing that while each person’s experience is unique, there are still some common patterns that others may experience as well, helps teens truly feel that they may not be completely alone. Additionally, the emphasis on agency, whether that is when discussing support systems and disclosure or healthy habits, reminds teens that despite so much being out of their control, there are still some important things they *can* control.

Ending the book with an acknowledgement of the risk of developing a MH condition may seem odd, but I appreciate the inclusion. I cannot count the number of times someone has come into the clinic experiencing objectively normal stressors (i.e. adjusting to a small rural base, the stress of shift work), terrified that something more serious is developing due to a family MH history. Children are often not educated on the various factors that cause mental illness (bio/psycho/social) so they are left to fill in their own blanks (100% inheritable). To further muddy the waters, social media/friends/television may not always provide accurate information, and children may develop skewed views of causality. Having this clear discussion about a topic that teens will inevitably hear and worry about, in an evidence-based manner is important. Additionally, following the risks section by immediately discussing mitigating strategies, ensures that that take home message is, “risks exist, but you can still do something to help” instead of, “I’m just a ticking time bomb.”

Once again, the Shermans have developed a practical and educational resource for a community desperately in need of increased support.

Disclaimer: The opinions herein are the views of the author and not the official views of the Departments of the Air Force or Defense.