

It's All Good (Unless it's Not)-Mental Health Tips and Self-Care Strategies for Undergrad Years

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Book Review/Recension d'ouvrage

It's All Good (Unless it's Not)-Mental Health Tips and Self-Care Strategies for Undergrad Years

by Nicole Malette

UBC Press, 2020, 148 pages (paperback)

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It's All Good (Unless It's Not): Mental Health Tips and Self-Care Strategies for Your Undergrad Years is a realistic illumination of students' experience within post-secondary institutions. Author Nicole Malette sets the stage by describing how her excitement for post-secondary education changed as her mental health declined due to obstacles like creating social relationships and maintaining good grades – an experience shared by many. Throughout the book, Malette reminds readers that the college and university experience can still be fun and rewarding despite these challenges (pg. 6).

Every individual's experience is different, as each person is coming from a different background with various sets of emotions, values, and beliefs. Malette highlights these differences by referring to research and stories about the challenges and successes from specific groups of students including the LGBT2SQIA+, First-generation, Indigenous, racialized, and international students. She discusses the stigma and misbeliefs associated with mental illness, whereby those experiencing it may be labelled as lazy, untrustworthy, or attention-seeking (pg. 119), and that the shame associated with these stigmas can disincline individuals from seeking assistance, causing them to suffer alone and become hopeless.

Malette provides students with self-care tips and strategies so that they can be the healthiest version of themselves as they go about their personal and academic lives. Malette tells readers right at the beginning what to expect as they move through each chapter and navigate the provided quick tips, quick facts, personal stories, and “getting help” features. Most importantly, Malette stresses how important it is for students to realize they are not alone in their struggles. When students start to notice symptoms, signs, and feelings of mental illness or mental health problems they should not be afraid to talk to someone. Seeking help does not mean that individuals will never deal with these problems again, but rather that they will have a support system to help them move through their challenges and strive for success.

Before going into my views on the work I want to acknowledge my opinions on just the title and book cover itself, from there I will go deeper into my overall view and feelings surround Malette’s work. What first grabbed my attention was the title itself, *It’s All Good (Unless It’s Not) Mental Tips and Self Care Strategies for your Undergrad Years*. The title is thought-provoking and immediately leads you to question moments during your social, work, academic, and personal life that were challenging to you. The book cover is brightly coloured and the title invites readers who are attending university or college.

Malette’s writing balances references to research with her own voice and experience as well as the voices of others. In Chapter 3, “Understanding Mental Health” Malette states, “Being mindful and living in the moment can be hard, particularly when you are a university student and life is moving at warp speed” (pg. 50). Malette understands that post-secondary students have a lot to manage on top of academics and a social life, and that each student is coming from a different background and experiences stress differently. Malette discusses the role of genetics and biology in the development and manifestation of mental illness, such as how female students are more likely to experience anxiety or eating disorders while male students are more likely to experience depression and experience substance abuse issues (pg. 45). Additional personality factors such as fearfulness, low self-esteem or social anxiety, along with environmental factors, can increase the risk of experiencing mental illness (pg. 46). Malette emphasizes that many of the factors and influences that can contribute to mental illness are not within individuals’ control (pg. 48).

While I found the tips and strategies Malette offers to be helpful, I sometimes found myself wanting more. For example, she explains that male students are often

more uncomfortable in disclosing their emotions than are females due to the notion that seeking help goes against socially constructed norms, a phenomenon that can be further complicated by aspects of toxic masculinity (pg. 45). However, she neither supports this with research studies nor experiential narratives. As a result, I feel what I got out of that section to be limited. In Chapter 2 “Valuing and Supporting Diversity” and Chapter 8 “Recognizing The Signs of Mental Illness” Malette looks at specific groups of students including First-Generation, Racialized, International, and LBTSQIA+. Though she includes a significant amount of facts backed by research, the absence of students’ personal narratives leaves it coming across as dry. While research-based facts give arguments a foundation, it is personal narratives with which readers can most easily connect.

Overall, despite there being times when I was left wanting more, I find most of the chapters presented clear arguments and were interesting to read. Malette provides the reader with many helpful resources. I enjoyed this book and I would recommend it to students currently attending post secondary or those interested in attending. On a scale from 1 through 10, I would rate it an 8 based its professional execution and “wow” factor.