



England footballer Fran Kirby featured in a 2023 campaign calling for support for women experiencing suicidal thoughts.

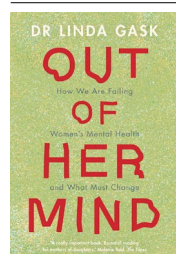
How to beat the biases harming women's mental health

A commanding examination of the factors that play into women's mental ill health should prompt soul searching. **By Antonella Santuccione Chadha**

Psychoanalyst Sigmund Freud argued in the 1890s that women's symptoms of 'neurosis' and 'hysteria' stemmed not from trauma – from being victims of sexual abuse or physical violence, for instance – but from their own "desire to be seduced". This perception led physicians and psychologists to routinely dismiss legitimate symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) in women. Nearly 130 years on, the same presumption is still often evident.

This is one example of the many deep-seated

biases in the field of mental and brain health that psychiatrist Linda Gask meticulously exposes and dismantles in *Out of Her Mind*.



Out of Her Mind: How We Are Failing Women's Mental Health and What Must Change
Linda Gask
Cambridge Univ. Press
(2024)

From eating disorders and maternal mental illnesses to menopause and age-related dementia, the misconception that women frequently fabricate or exaggerate their symptoms has persisted for centuries. Doctors and nurses, Gask asserts, "hope women will just shut up and go away, but it isn't clear how women have to behave to be taken more seriously". The result is poor health – and even loss of life – for women, and huge costs for society and health-care systems.

Gask provides a powerful wake-up call, as she advocates for a future in which women's



ALEXANDER KALKA/NURPHOTO VIA GETTY

Social media can harm young women's self esteem, especially through societal pressure.

mental health – including the health of transgender women and other LGBT+ people – is addressed with the nuance and care it deserves. The voices of women who have experienced discrimination are a key element of her work, allowing readers to empathize with those who have faced violence and abuse, been disbelieved when describing their pain, fears and sorrows, and even been ridiculed or marginalized when accessing care.

Unfair expectations

Gask begins by examining societal expectations about how “young women should behave”, and how these shape girls’ mental health from an early age. Conventional family roles often place caring responsibilities on women, which can affect their psychological well-being, emotional health and professional development as they neglect themselves to please or care for others.

One young woman Gask speaks to says that when her brother was diagnosed with a mental illness, she was expected to be the family’s “emotional switchboard”. That meant helping family members to cope with their feelings while also managing the cooking and cleaning. She feels that these expectations would never have been placed on her brother, and that they are part of the reason she developed anxiety.

One direct consequence of societal pressures – in particular the pressure to strive for a ‘perfect’ body shape and weight – can be a change in young women’s self-images. This might in part be attributable to the beauty norms perpetuated on social media. One study, for instance, has found that looking at images of the results of facial cosmetic surgery makes young women more likely to want cosmetic surgery themselves (C. E. Walker *et al. Curr. Psychol.* **40**, 3355–3364; 2021).

Gask also addresses mental-health challenges related to pregnancy, fertility issues and motherhood. This is a vital discussion. In my work, I’ve seen how the commercial business approach of reproductive health – from *in vitro* fertilization to egg freezing, sold as panaceas to infertility – can put a psychological and physical burden on those who hope to be mothers.

And post-partum depression remains heavily stigmatized, often overshadowed by societal expectations of what motherhood should be like. Suicide remains the leading cause of death among women during the perinatal period, which encompasses pregnancy and the year after childbirth.

Post-partum mental illness can come in many guises, from suicidal thoughts to bipolar disorder or psychosis. Gask treated one

woman who refused to believe she had a child, and was “screaming, singing hymns at the top of her voice, and trying to pull a sink from the wall with her bare hands”. Yet this illness is under-researched and under-treated.

The author has an interesting perspective on borderline personality disorder. She contends that this label is too often applied to ‘complicated’ women, when their symptoms – which might include instability in interpersonal relationships, self-image issues, impulsivity and self-harming – are too complex for others to manage. People are often diagnosed in this way after, for example, having been the victim of sexual abuse or trapped in coercive relationships. Rather than being labelled with a personality disorder, which often goes untreated, women should be listened to and helped to find their own ways to heal, Gask proposes.

Intersectional disadvantage

Mental-health outcomes are worse for women of colour than for their white counterparts. A Black academic tells Gask what it’s like to be regularly followed around shops by suspicious security staff. Such daily microaggressions, built up over a lifetime and take an emotional toll. Black women in the United States, notes the author, are 34% more likely to experience PTSD and depression than are white women.

In the United Kingdom, Black women are more likely than white ones to experience mental illness and less likely to be undergoing treatment, but are more likely to be detained under the UK Mental Health Act.

Such inequities underscore the urgent need to remove biases from medicine and to redesign health-care systems with ethnicity and cultural differences in mind. In the era of precision medicine, big data and artificial intelligence, the tools are at hand. In research, too, better representation is needed – 2020 data from the US Food and Drug Administration show that Black and Asian people make up just 14% of participants in clinical trials (B. E. Bierer *et al. Cell Rep. Med.* 7, 100553; 2022).

Gask's critique is sharply focused and well supported by research, making her argument difficult to ignore. She also provides a historical account of many of the professional women, women's organizations and movements that have worked relentlessly to ameliorate conditions over the past few decades. Women themselves have long been the major drivers of policy and societal changes benefiting women. And they still are. I've attended hundreds of meetings about women's health – and the audience often seems to be 95% women.

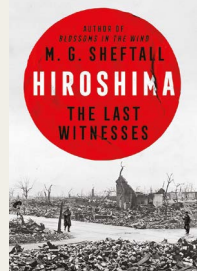
“The misconception that women frequently exaggerate their symptoms has persisted for centuries.”

Out of Her Mind ably demonstrates how societal constructs, inequities and injustices continue to push women to the margins in decision-making, policy and health care. It is timely, because societal awareness of brain and mental health is growing, alongside recognition of long-standing gender inequities in health care. Gask's work stands out for its combination of thorough historical research and practical recommendations for change, from boosting investments to establishing a patient-centric approach to care.

I fully endorse this call to action. Researchers, health-care providers, policymakers, women, girls and advocates should embrace this book, to drive transformative change and make health-care systems truly equitable and responsive to the diverse needs of every individual. I commend this book to anyone – regardless of gender – who wants to work toward a more inclusive, peaceful and justice-based world.

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Books in brief



Hiroshima

M. G. Sheftall *Dutton* (2024)

Born and educated in the United States, M. G. Sheftall settled in Japan in 1987 to teach modern Japanese cultural history at university. His detailed book on the 1945 US atomic bombing of Hiroshima skilfully integrates science and technology with the human aspects of this horrific event. It stands out because of its interviews with the survivors, most of whom are now over 90 years old. They found a way “to compartmentalize and process their fear, anger, sense of helplessness, and despair” that was not self-destructive.



Beautiful New Sky

Ines Geipel *Polity* (2024)

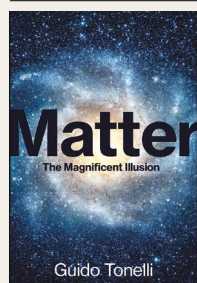
As an athlete in East Germany, Ines Geipel was subject to covert doping with performance-enhancing drugs by the Communist regime. She's now a literary academic, and her deeply researched book investigates the regime's use of covert doping in medicine and in the Soviet space programme to test cosmonauts' reactions to weightlessness. Through once-confidential military archives and interviews, she reveals that some participating scientists had served under the Nazis, perhaps explaining the programme's immorality.



The Future Loves You

Ariel Zeleznikow-Johnston *Allen Lane* (2024)

In 1773, US polymath Benjamin Franklin argued that scientists should try to invent a method of embalming such that a human could be revived in the future. He admitted “a very ardent desire to see and observe the state of America a hundred years hence”. Neuroscientist Ariel Zeleznikow-Johnston thinks that such brain preservation and revival could well become feasible. But his complex book acknowledges this proposition as “scary and disquieting” – requiring us to scrutinize our own mortality, “a deeply unpleasant task”.



Matter

Guido Tonelli *Polity* (2024)

Physicist Guido Tonelli helped to discover the Higgs boson – a particle that has rest mass but is not matter. “The illusion that the fundamental components of matter are something solid and enduring has been seriously questioned by modern science,” Tonelli writes. Spanning matter's history from ancient times, when Greek philosopher Democritus proposed atomic theory, including the work of polymaths Galileo and Isaac Newton, he arrives at the standard model of particle physics. It is a well-written but challenging journey.



Understanding Dinosaur Behavior

David Hone *Princeton Univ. Press* (2024)

Dinosaur fossils reveal much about physiology, but little about behaviour, the subject of palaeontologist David Hone's authoritative book, which contains vivid colour illustrations by Gabriel Ugueto. Tracks of a theropod running next to a much larger sauropod might indicate a carnivore's predation attempt on a herbivore, but could also be the theropod chasing the other away from its young, for instance. Hone hopes to engage more ethologists – who study the behaviour of living animals – in palaeontological research. **Andrew Robinson**