

## Sane New World, by Ruby Wax, review

Ruby Wax, a depressive who scorns fraudulent self-help books, has written a manual for mental health that's funny and well-researched, says fellow sufferer Allison Pearson.

★★★★★



Ruby Wax: The presenter has taken a master's in mindfulness-based cognitive therapy at Oxford Photo: Clara Molden



By **Allison Pearson**

7:00AM BST 22 Jun 2013

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You don't have to be mad to review this **book**, but it helps. As I opened **Ruby Wax's Sane New World**, I was sitting by my new SAD (seasonal affective disorder) lamp and hoping that its brilliant rays would blast away one of those creeping bouts of despair that settle on the sufferer like a shroud, blotting out joy and reason. Blame this sullen, soggy season. Blame bad genes. But mainly, blame yourself:

"For God's sake, get a grip, woman. Don't you know how lucky you are? You have zero right to be unhappy. Thousands are being murdered in Syria and you can't even get out of bed, you self-indulgent cow. What happened to that fitness regime you promised you'd start, eh? No self-control, that's your problem. And you haven't replied to Jane's texts. Jane must think you're a crap friend. And she's right. It's a miracle you've got any friends left. Get up! You've got a to-do list which stretches from here to Loch Lomond. Pack the boy's bag for camp, check Twitter. The

plants on the patio are dying in their polystyrene coffins because you haven't had time to put them in pots. Poor plants must hate you. Better check those watched eBay items. You don't want to miss out on that incredible vintage (aka old, smelly and broken) deckchair, which is going to transform your life and usher in a new era of relaxation. Oh, dear God. I'm supposed to have handed in my review of Ruby Wax's book to the paper. Gah! What are you going to tell them, eh? 'Sorry, I was too depressed to review the book about depression?"

Well, that's an extract from my own personal loop tape of self-loathing and agitation. You may well have one of your own. Wax believes that we all do, though the volume of those internal critics is turned up higher in the one in four of us who suffers during our lifetime from some form of mental illness. Wax says that human beings are simply not equipped to deal with the crushing demands of 21st-century living, with its deluded update on Descartes: "I'm busy therefore I am." The figures in her book bear that out: the annual cost of mental illness in Britain is £70 billion, equal to the entire national **health** budget. Depression affects more people than all physical illnesses put together, and the black dog bites viciously early; 50 per cent of all cases occur by the age of 14. To borrow the excellent, prophetic words of Slade: "Mama, we're all crazee now." According to Wax, however, there is a remedy and its name is**mindfulness**. Instead of going out of our tiny skulls, we need to look inside and learn how to self-regulate thoughts and emotions "so you are the master and not the slave of your mind".

Uh-oh. I am allergic to fraudulent self-help books and their shameless feel-good platitudes. Luckily, so is Wax. She scorns books that give 200 pages of advice "that boil down to 'Think happy thoughts and your dreams will come true, just like Tinker Bell promised'". Instead, seeking a remedy for her own painful depression, Wax immersed herself in the hard science of the brain, taking a master's in mindfulness-based cognitive therapy at Oxford. The brain, she discovered, "is like a pliable 3lb piece of Play-doh, you can resculpt it by breaking old mental habits and creating new, more flexible ways of thinking". Brain research shows that the much-heralded multitasking actually inhibits the laying down of memories, rather than making us more productive. The wonderfully named hippocampus, which is needed for learning and memory, is only active during uninterrupted focus. Thanks, Ruby, for explaining why I can't remember where I put the damn keys. I'm not mad; I'm merely being driven mad by the struggle to juggle.

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"We'd never dream of treating our pets the way we treat ourselves," Wax writes. "We whip ourselves to keep moving like we would an old horse, until it falls over exhausted, the hooves made into glue." She knows whereof she speaks. Wax's **television** personality was characterised by a frenetic style, and you always got the feeling that, behind the gale-force chutzpah, Ruby believed that if she stopped amusing for a single moment, they would take away her beloved fame. And she was right to be afraid. One of the many so-painful-it's-hysterical revelations in this book is that Wax, who had suffered a breakdown and was in the Priory, would get out of bed and be driven by her husband to their house, where she was filming a show about

various mental illnesses. People with OCD, bulimia and bipolar disorder would pop in for tea. Wax would duly interview them with her trademark wit and perspicacity, but she didn't dare let on that she was being treated in the Priory herself, for fear of losing her job. After the camera had stopped rolling, Wax would return to the hospital and collapse into bed. "The other inmates looked at me like I was crazy (high praise from the experts)."

That sly parenthesis is a typical Wax touch. Despite her new mastery of mindfulness, the **comic** deep in her DNA can never pass up a chance for a punchline, although there is terror too in that Tourette's tic, a dread that she will come across as worthy or – heaven forbid – boring. The woman who is happy to see herself called "the poster girl for mental illness in Britain" is still in the entertaining business, even though her television career has been nicked by **Louis Theroux**. (If Wax doesn't have an effigy of Theroux in her bedroom to stick pins in, I'd be disappointed, frankly.) Sane New World constantly made me think of Fanny Brice singing about her ironic career in Funny Girl: "That's me, I just keep them in stitches, doubled in half, I'm good for a laugh. I guess it's not funny/ Life is far from sunny, when the laugh is over and the joke's on you."

Who wants the funny girl to be sad? Depression is the latest taboo, admits Wax. "People glaze over; you can see them thinking, 'Oh here she goes again, jawing on about 'the darkness'.' Well, I for one am glad that this particular funny girl is on a quest to illuminate our mutual darkness. Wax makes you laugh out loud, whether it's describing her Nazi-escaping parents ("child rearing was not their speciality") or her desperate, ill-fated appearance on Celebrity Shark Bait. The female instructor wearing a Shark Lady vest told Ruby and her fellow celebrity, **Richard E Grant**, not to worry as they were about to be lowered in a cage into shark-infested waters. "We noticed she only had two fingers," deadpans Wax. It was the nadir of her career, but she still gets the last laugh.

Wax is, to say the least, not the first to suggest a mastery of the emotions is the key to equanimity. Marcus Aurelius in the second century would have agreed, even if he might have struggled to appear on Celebrity Shark Bait. Wax's book – a manual for mental health, really – proves that neuroscience has finally caught up with what the great philosophers have been saying, on instinct and on principle, for aeons. The difference is that the philosophers couldn't know that the way we think or feel determines our wiring and our chemistry. Wax, who describes the way rage used to turn her from woman to werewolf (that makes two of us, honey), says that if you focus on something that calms you down, brain scanning shows that the areas that are responsible for calming you down become more activated. Noticing new things builds new neural pathways. Acting kind will make you kinder. The secret to happiness really does lie within ourselves, if we only can learn to tame our minds.

Wax admitted in a recent interview that she has come off one antidepressant but continues to take two other types of medication. It's a shame that she didn't go into that here, but I reckon she wanted to tell a positive can-do story to an awful lot of sad, can't-do people. Her wonderful, painfully funny and instructive book has inspired this depressive to sign up for mindfulness

training. No, really. I'm going to change myself. But, hang on, I just have to check my Twitter account.

