

# Book Review: Polio and PTSD

Stephanie T. Machell, PsyD

## ***Polio and PTSD: One Person's Struggle with and Triumph over the Psychological Damage of a Major Childhood Illness***

by Charlene Elizabeth (Lulu Publishing Services, 2019) is a memoir focused on what the author refers to as “one large strand in the braid of my life.” She provides a spare, often harrowing description of the extreme pain of acute polio and her fear that she might die, and the ways both were intensified by isolation from those who might have provided comfort and reassurance.

Rehab provided some respite from isolation along with new discomforts in the form of Sister Kenny treatments and confinement (“I would spend the next six months confined to a space about the size of a child’s grave.”) Subsequent surgeries exacerbated her physical and emotional pain. Her parents’ reactions, especially her mother’s suggestion that she should pretend none it happened, reinforced the shame she already felt over the changes polio made to her appearance and physical abilities and further fueled the need to pass as well as the sense that she would never be loved.

Ms. Elizabeth describes how these experiences caused her to develop depression and PTSD. She identifies her own struggle around denial and ultimate acceptance of the latter diagnosis and discusses what helped (and hindered) her recovery. She is clear that while she continues to experience effects of both as well as PPS, she has been able to construct a life filled with meaning and periods of joy.

The author writes in an accessible, almost conversational, style. Polio survivors, especially those who have faced mental health challenges, will identify with her experiences. There is also much of value

for all who care for and about polio survivors, including those of us who do so professionally.

As someone who believes in and utilizes alternative and complementary medicine, I appreciated the author’s comments about its helpfulness for her, though I disagree strongly with her perspective that she (or any other polio survivor) somehow “caused” or “agreed to” her polio. And while I (obviously) agree that psychotherapy is useful for addressing the late effects of polio, I don’t believe that it follows that it might be primarily a psychological condition. As this is a memoir and not a professional treatise, the author’s hypotheses about her condition are appropriately stated and form an important part of how she has made meaning of her experiences.

At 53 pages, *Polio and PTSD* is a quick and easy read. However, I was left wanting more details about Ms. Elizabeth’s experiences. As is true for many self-published books (and increasingly so for those more traditionally published), this one would have benefitted from better editing to catch typos and other errors.

Overall, *Polio and PTSD* is a worthy addition to the polio literature. Its emphasis on psychological issues that are less often emphasized in polio narratives makes it especially important and useful. ■

