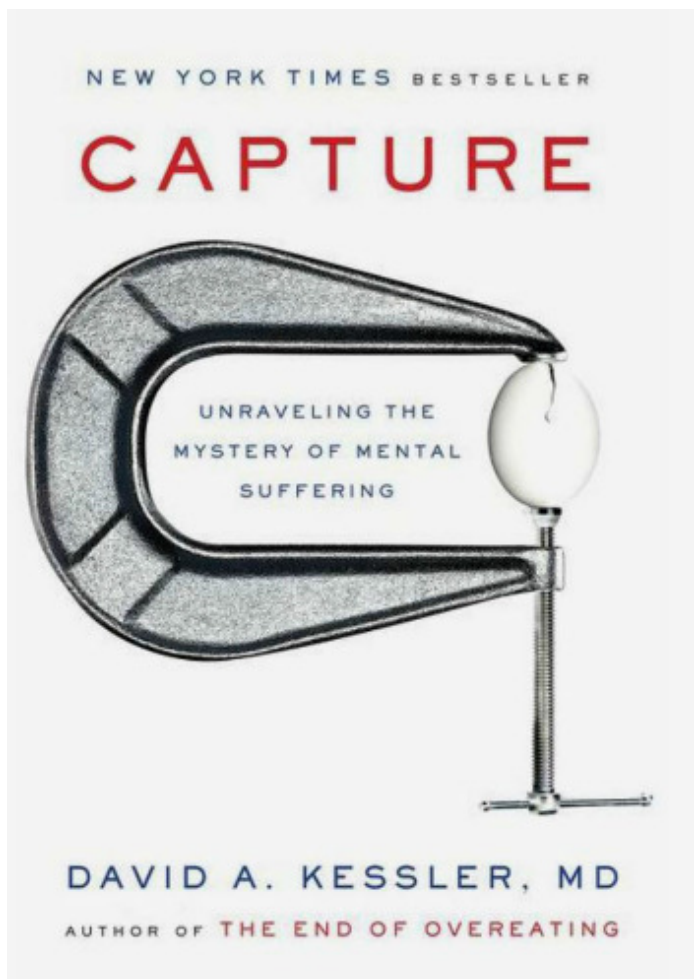


## UNRAVELING A MYSTERY

# Kessler captures what it feels like to be depressed

Posted: Sunday, October 30, 2016

*“Capture: Unraveling the Mystery of Mental Suffering” by David A. Kessler. New York: HarperWave (an imprint of HarperCollins), 2016, 416 pages, \$27.99.*



“What happens when our rational minds feel as though they’ve been hijacked by something we cannot control?” David A. Kessler asks near the beginning of “Capture: Unraveling the Mystery of Mental Suffering,” his New York Times best-seller about an innovative new theory that explains how emotional and cognitive disorders such as addiction and depression originate and metastasize. “After years of research, I have come to the conclusion that there is, in fact, a common mechanism underlying many of our emotional struggles and mental illnesses.”

“The theory of capture is composed of three basic elements: narrowing of attention, perceived lack of control, and change in affect or emotional state,” he continues. “Sometimes these elements are accompanied by an urge to act. When something commands our attention in a way that feels uncontrollable and, in turn, influences our behavior, we experience capture.”

I requested this book for review after I saw Kessler talking about it on C-SPAN’s BookTV a few weeks ago. His description of how the original idea came to him, and how he responded to several poignant questions from the audience, piqued my interest. During the segment in which he was featured, he read a couple of sections from “Capture” on David Foster Wallace, the celebrated author of “Infinite Jest” who committed suicide in 2008. The fourth chapter, “When Capture Turns on the Self,” is devoted entirely to Wallace.

“David Foster Wallace’s life offers an example of what can happen when capture is directed toward the self: when extreme sensitivity becomes striving perfectionism, which in turn evolves into relentless self-criticism and becomes coupled with an uncanny ability to analyze flaws in one’s own analysis,” he writes. “Suffering, in other words, becomes indistinguishable from our frantic attempts to evade it. Wallace was caught by this very loop, which resulted in a despair that ultimately he could not conceive of ever escaping.”

Kessler begins “Capture” with a general introduction to his theory and then proceeds through a fairly-detailed chronology of how mental illness has been conceptualized by influential thinkers

such as William James and Sigmund Freud; he even references the cognitive behavioral approach championed by Aaron Beck and Albert Ellis. Once the context has been sufficiently developed, the author then turns his attention to dissecting high-profile case studies such as the assassination of Robert Kennedy, the murder of John Lennon, the Columbine school shootings and the Sandy Hook tragedy. In each instance, he illustrates how the theory of “Capture” can be used to explain what was going on internally when each of the perpetrators decided to act upon their obsessive yet definitely delusional thoughts and feelings. He even extends his primary hypothesis to demonstrate how some individuals are more susceptible to recruitment initiatives by terrorist organizations such as the Islamic State and al-Qaida.

On the flip side, Kessler points out that the same progression by which “Capture” manifests itself negatively can be re-oriented in a more productive direction once the person understands how the process works. Among the examples he uses to show this kind of transformation are Martin Luther, the 16th century theologian and religious reformer, and Bill Wilson, who founded Alcoholics Anonymous in 1935. Both men were eventually able to channel their energies toward more positive ends. Kessler admits this kind of dramatic turnaround does not occur in a majority of cases, but he is guardedly optimistic that more people will be able to improve the quality of their lives as they become better informed about how “Capture” takes place. Still, he recognizes that the impetus for pursuing a different path usually involves reaching a threshold level of suffering, and he readily acknowledges that “people don’t reach this point until the pain caused by their capture begins to overwhelm.”

A pediatrician by training, Kessler was commissioner of the Food and Drug Administration under Presidents George H.W. Bush and Bill Clinton. His resume includes stints as dean of the medical schools at Yale as well as the University of California, San Francisco; he has degrees from Amherst College, the University of Chicago Law School and Harvard Medical School. His previous books include “The End of Overeating: Taking Control of the Insatiable North American Appetite” and “A Question of Intent: A Great American Battle with a Deadly Industry.” “Capture” is one of the most extensively-researched books I have read in recent memory, with 118 pages of source notes at the conclusion of eight chapters, which are arranged in three major sections. Kessler approaches his subject matter from multiple angles and in a very thorough and meticulous manner.

Even though Kessler is obviously a powerful intellect, his literary style is easily accessible by anyone with a rudimentary background in psychology and the basic sciences. He writes with the authority of someone who deeply understands the nature of mental illness and you get the impression he appreciates the emotional complexities associated with the conditions he is grappling with on virtually every page. It is one thing to be able to articulate the symptomology applicable to an illness such as depression; it is another to be able to convey what it actually feels like to be depressed. Kessler’s prose tends to accomplish both using a seemingly effortless but innately effective delivery.

Kessler’s intent in writing the book, as he notes in the first chapter, was as straightforward as it is lofty: “I hope to begin to unravel the mystery of mental suffering, to decipher the underpinnings of a range of intense mental afflictions – including addiction, depression, anxiety, mania, obsessive thoughts, and violent anger.” In large measure, I feel he succeeds in his quest to put forward a plausible and empirically defensible hypothesis for the mechanism behind the scourge of mental illness. Certainly, I will never view compulsive thoughts and behaviors in the same light as I did before reading “Capture.”

*Reviewed by Aaron W. Hughey, Department of Counseling and Student Affairs, Western Kentucky University.*