

*You Are Not Alone* is an illuminating guide to the inner dynamics of young people who are journeying through life in a rapidly changing world of stressful situations rarely encountered a generation ago. Veteran surgeon and certified therapist Dr Peter Mack shows us how to recognise and understand the inner voice of depression in youths, empower them with coping skills to battle life's challenges like anxiety and failure, and guide them on the path to healing.

This informative guidebook for parents, teachers and caregivers includes interviews with survivors of adolescent depression, giving insight into low self-esteem, emotional pain, self-harm and suicide, and shows how we can help our young people face life with confidence and resilience.



"Dr Mack is doing a great service to the cause of mental health education, by demystifying depression and hopefully reducing misconceptions and myths surrounding this common illness.

I warmly recommend this book."

**Associate Professor Leslie Lim**

Senior Consultant Psychiatrist

*Author of Depression: The Misunderstood Illness*

"An enlightening and easy-to-read book that has been written out of love and deep compassion for young people."

**Dr Carol Loi**

Genetic Counsellor



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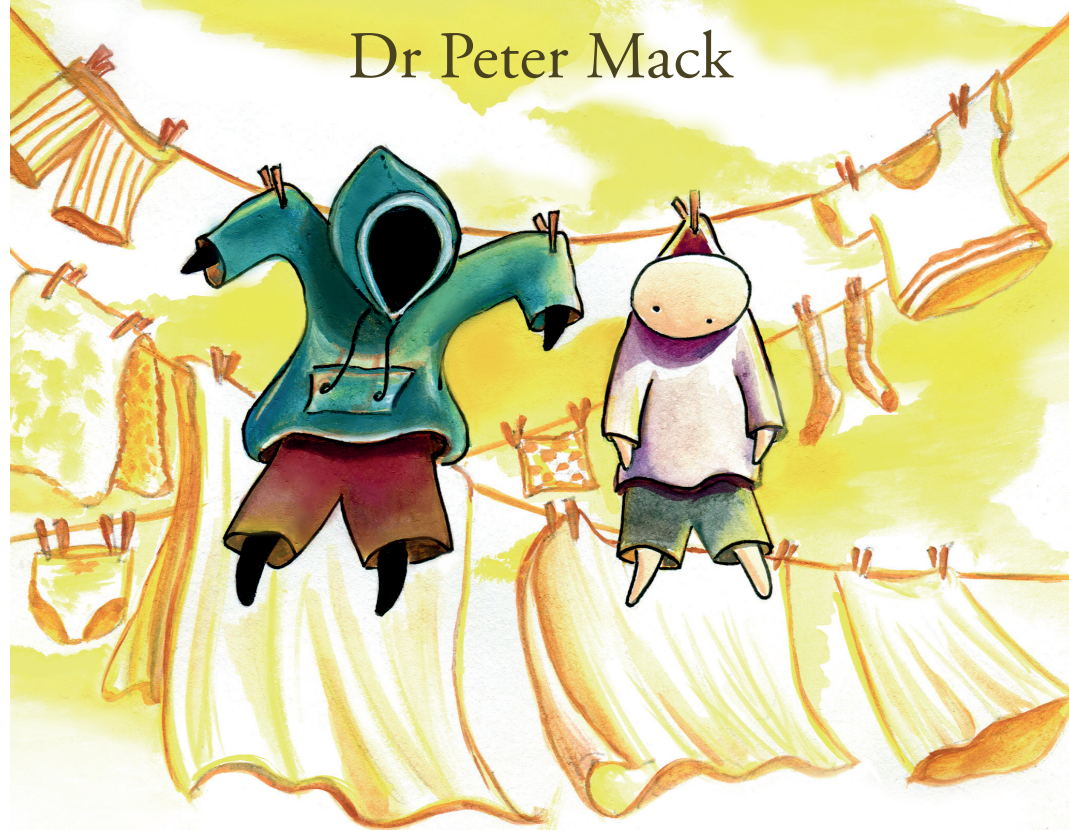


YOU ARE NOT ALONE

Dr Peter Mack

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Dr Peter Mack



*Understanding the Inner Voice  
of Depression in Young People*

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“Depression afflicts over 5% of Singaporeans in their lifetime, thus ensuring that it ranks as the most common psychiatric condition in our nation, and in the West. Dr Peter Mack, an accomplished hepatobiliary surgeon, has not only developed an interest in mental health but has also been trained in a form of psychological therapy, known as regression therapy, to help persons overcome their emotional problems. It is rare, and indeed highly commendable for a surgeon to be as psychologically minded as Dr Mack, but he is an unusually gifted and compassionate doctor, who cares not only for the physical, but the emotional aspects of the person. By giving voice to the struggles depressed subjects experience, Dr Mack is doing a great service to the cause of mental health education, by demystifying depression and hopefully reducing misconceptions and myths surrounding this common illness. I warmly recommend this book to family members, teachers, and counsellors and any others who care for the depressed.”

**Associate Professor Leslie Lim**

Senior Consultant Psychiatrist, Singapore General Hospital  
and author of *Depression: The Misunderstood Illness*

“An enlightening and easy-to-read book that has been written out of love and deep compassion for young people.”

**Carol Loi**

Genetic Counsellor

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For Olivia

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The information in this book is intended to provide a helpful guide to the subjects discussed. The ideas and advice given are the author's opinions and not intended as a substitute for consultation with or treatment by a qualified mental health professional. The names and identities of the interviewees in this book have been changed to protect their confidentiality while preserving the spirit of the work. The references provided are for informational purposes only and do not constitute endorsement of any sources.

## *Acknowledgement*

The author wishes to thank all his interviewees who have kindly agreed to contribute their stories for the purpose of this book.

## *Preface*

This book is written primarily for parents, teachers and caregivers who wish to gain a deeper understanding of the nature of teenage anxiety and depression. Parenting an anxious child is like embarking on a journey into the unknown. No matter how much we think we already know about the problem of anxiety, we still struggle to understand what is going on in our children if they are depressed. Whenever we see them in a stressed state, and not know what might push them over the edge, many of us secretly wish to have access to a control knob we can turn to lower the level of their anxiety.

Dealing with anxious children can be exasperating especially when they place extra emotional demands on their parents. I recall an incident many years ago when I was attending a Meet-the-Parents Session in the junior college where my eldest son was studying. I was then listening to a guest psychologist who was speaking on adolescent growth and developmental health. All of a sudden, from among a crowd of 200 people in the auditorium sprung a question. "Ma'am," a voice sounded desperately. "My adolescent son has stopped talking to me recently. What should



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I do?” There was a stir in the audience. Several heads turned in the direction of the lady who posed the question; the atmosphere was tense for a few moments before being gently eased by the speaker, who introduced the notion of the adolescent’s need for personal space.

The incident awakened me to the degree of emotional turmoil that a depressed child could possibly cause to his parent(s). In the years that followed, several of my colleagues who had depressed children, shared with me their agony of watching their children live in the midst of hidden anxiety and a confusing world of pain. More recently, when some mothers shared with me their concern over how their distressed school-aged children were struggling with suicidal thoughts, the idea of a book that could help these parents germinated.

As parents, we all want our children to succeed. However, when we find our children intensely preoccupied with their inner struggles while hoping for adults to understand them, we feel as desperate as they do. Gradually, we realise that we need to understand them as normal individuals who are just groping around for ways to deal with their own pain and longing for their close ones to connect with and show love to them. Unfortunately, they sometimes take up our full attention as parents and yet break our hearts with their behaviour even as we are establishing a safe haven for them to heal and grow. We thus end up bewildered as to how we can make sense of their inner struggles.

While planning this book, someone alerted me to a newspaper article of an 11-year-old schoolboy who committed suicide after

failing his school exams for the first time.<sup>1</sup> Instead of facing his parents’ disappointment, he chose to end his life by jumping from the bedroom window of a HDB apartment on the 17th level. Apparently, in his first four years in primary school, his mother had been expecting him to score at least 70/100 marks per subject for his exams, failing which she would cane his palm lightly, one stroke for every mark short of 70. However, his mother would also reward him with a gift whenever he did well. Unfortunately, this strategy now turned disastrous.

On 12 May 2016, when the boy got back the results of his mid-year exam and found that he had scored only 50 for English, 53.8 for Chinese, 12 for Higher Chinese and 20.5 for Mathematics, he turned anxious. He managed the situation by telling his mother that his results were “average”. In return, the mother bought him a kite as a gift. Four days later, he got his Science papers back and the score was only 57.5. Tension mounted as the school’s deadline for parents’ acknowledgment of results was drawing near. On 18 May, he was found lying dead at the foot of the housing block with multiple fractures. In agony, the mother exclaimed that she failed to understand why the child had chosen death as the option when her expectations were not unduly high.

I was perturbed by the story. It brought to mind the potentially serious nature of perceiving a child as a small adult and managing him by adult standards of behaviour. The stress was amplified

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<sup>1</sup> The story has been reported in the Straits Times at [www.straitstimes.com/singapore/courts-crime/death-of-boy-11-who-fell-17-floors-after-failing-his-exams-for-the-first-time](http://www.straitstimes.com/singapore/courts-crime/death-of-boy-11-who-fell-17-floors-after-failing-his-exams-for-the-first-time)





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when the little being was made to earn his love from parents who set their criteria that had to be fulfilled from their vantage point before love was meted out. The child did not understand why he had to achieve something just because his parents had the power to deliver unpleasant consequences or why he had to face shame and lose goodwill if he failed. Instead, what he was more conscious of was the fact that he had been deprived of his human dignity and goodwill each time he received punishment. After pondering over it, I decided to make *unconditional love* the starting theme of this book.

In our effort to create a nurturing environment in which children thrive, we need to understand the role of parental love in esteem building in the child. We also need to be aware of his sensitivity to failure and demoralisation in a society where the education system is overly demanding and competitive.

As I started working on the manuscript, I came to know of a depressed teenage friend. The teenager is an adopted child living in a wealthy family. Despite all the material goods that she has been bestowed with, she feels that her adopted parents have not been listening to her adequately and she does not feel loved. She chooses to believe that the root of her mental predicament lies with her being abandoned by her biological parents. As her depression deepens, she resorts to self-cutting as a way of coping.

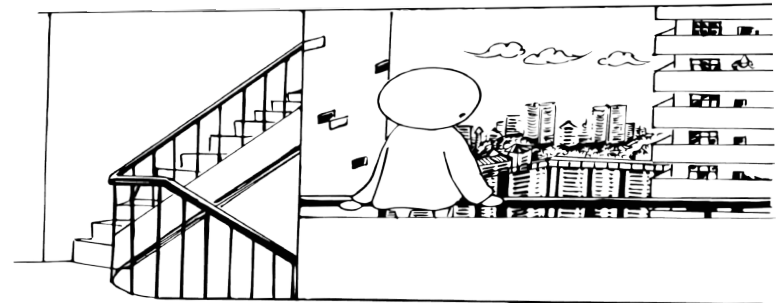
Upon hearing this story, I have further developed the subject matter of this book under an overarching theme that focuses not just on love, but also on the *inner voice of depression* in the child and how to recognise it. After all, parents are a child's most influential role model. The way they understand things, solve

problems and confront challenges will teach their child lessons. If parents are able to gain a deeper understanding of the inner workings of the child, the latter will learn to reciprocate and grow up a more empathic and resilient individual.

In our hurried pace of life, it is understandable that readers are inclined to look for quick-fix solutions laid out in an easy-to-consume book that requires minimal investment of reading time and energy. I have therefore kept this book within a reasonable length, but chosen to transcend the guide-book style to one that helps readers gain insight into the root causes of adolescent depression and how to intervene to prevent undesirable outcomes. They will understand that the process of figuring out ways to help children to manage life challenges is part of their own journey as nurturers raising children.

While the workings of the inner psyche are a complex area of knowledge, the language in this book has been intentionally kept simple and comprehensible. Wherever appropriate, I have included excerpts of my interviews with individuals who have survived their adolescent depression into adulthood and were kind enough to share their experiences and life challenges.

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## *Chapter 1*

### *Anxiety and Depression in Young People*

ANXIETY in children is a serious matter. Many of us, as parents, tend to downplay our children's anxiety with the belief that it is part of juvenile growth and tell ourselves that feeling anxious is within the norms of childhood behaviour. We assume that over time, the child will grow out of it. In the process, we overlook the important fact that children, at their age, have yet to acquire sufficient life experience to equip themselves with the skills to handle anxiety. The lack of coping skills on their part causes distress, making them feel helpless and



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vulnerable and conferring a feeling of hopelessness. In the absence of adult help, the feeling of desperation pushes them into despair and leads to depression. By the time children reach this stage, parents sometimes discover, to their horror, that some have been inflicting physical injury on themselves as a way to cope with their anxiety.

## What is Anxiety Like?

When children get anxious, they not only get nervous. In fact, every aspect of their physical, emotional and mental functioning is affected. The symptoms can be varied, from being scared of losing control of their lives to forgetting lessons taught in school. When they feel anxious, they find themselves in a tense, unsettled state of mind, or fear, as if they are anticipating a vague and threatening event to befall.

We generally understand fear to be an emotional reaction to a danger that we can identify within our immediate environment. We usually react intensely because fear tends to be specific and has the nature of an emergency. In response to the feeling of being threatened, teenagers tend to generate an anxiety that is unpleasant, objectless and diffuse in nature.

I recall having my first childhood anxiety attack in school at the age of seven. It occurred one morning out of the blue and for no apparent reason. The mental state was one of uneasy suspense due to intense agitation accompanied by tension and unexplained dread of the school environment. A part of me felt odd, strange and wrong, as if a fever was coming on. The teacher gave permission for me to leave school and return home

to rest. A subsequent thermometer reading showed a normal temperature, but the feeling of agitation and fear lasted the rest of the day. The fear appeared to have stemmed from a threat of impending danger even though the threat was not real, and I did not understand what could have triggered it.

This experience highlights the main problem in dealing with anxiety—the difficulty in determining its cause. The points of onset and triggers are seldom clear. The agitated mental state tends to be persistent and pervasive in nature. Quite often the anxious feeling lingers in the background for a long time and makes the child feel unsettled and drained. Frequently, parents would react to their child's anxiety with disbelief or suspicion or by brushing it off as part of a developmental milestone.

When a child is being overwhelmed by an anxiety attack, we need to understand that the logical part of his brain has been put on hold, while the emotional part has taken over. In such a situation, any attempt to rationalise his worry away will not be fruitful. What we can do is to give the child some tools to manage his worry.

Frequently, an anxiety attack manifests itself with physical symptoms of dizziness, sweating, lump in the throat, dry mouth, palpitations or nausea. Sometimes the symptoms are less specific such as a sinking feeling, wringing of hands or trembling of legs. These symptoms can overshadow the positive aspect of a child's life and he may feel that things are getting out of control. As such, he can be frightened, and may want the parents to know and feel exactly how he is feeling and appreciate his level of distress. This is where empathic listening helps.

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## *About the Author*



Dr Peter Mack is a medical graduate of the University of Singapore, trained in General and Hepatobiliary Surgery and holds fellowships from the Royal College of Surgeons in Edinburgh and the Royal College of Physicians and Surgeons of Glasgow, UK. He has a PhD in Medical Science from Lund University, Sweden, a MBA from the NUS Business School, a Master in Health Economics from Curtin University, Australia, and a Master in Medical Education from Dundee University, UK.

He has a personal interest in clinical psychology, healing, writing and mindfulness. He is a certified regression therapist and has published several books on healing: *Healing Deep Hurt Within*, *Life-Changing Moments in Inner Healing*, *Inner Healing Journey*, *Mirrors of the Mind*. More recently he has published a book on mental resilience and adolescent suicide, *Bend Not Break*.

## *Other titles by Dr Peter Mack*



**Bend Not Break: Learning from Loss**  
(Kinokuniya bestseller)

*Publisher* Brahm Centre, Singapore  
*Author* Dr Peter Mack

This book is based on a detailed suicide story of a teenager who has taken his own life without leaving a suicide note leaving his family members deeply grieved. With the story, the author has developed a parenting book that focuses on the challenges of adolescent growth, issues of self-identity, teenage anxiety and the need for mental resilience to arrest the development of depression and suicide. The book ends with a discourse on the use of mindfulness for developing resilience.



**Life-Changing Moments in Inner Healing**

*Publisher* From the Heart Press, UK  
*Author* Dr Peter Mack

This book describes stories of healing in four patients who had their problems resolved through regression therapy. The first patient had unexplained encounters of an unidentified lady, water phobia and nightmarish dreams. The second patient was facing a serious problem of procrastination and anger management since childhood. The third patient has problems of memory loss, and fear of success and public speaking. The fourth patient was afflicted with an irrational fear of snakes. All four patients went through transformational healing after regression therapy.