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DUTTON

Good Reasons
for Bad Feelings
Insights from the Frontier of Evolutionary Psychiatry
Randolph M. Nesse, MD

"An ingenious exploration of how Darwinian evolution explains mental disorders." **—*Kirkus Reviews* (starred review)**

"Nesse (*Why We Get Sick*), director of the Center for Evolutionary Medicine at Arizona State University, thought-provokingly comments on modern medicine's continuing difficulties in treating mental illness… Nesse fully meets his modest but laudable goal of providing a conversation-starter on why mental illness should be viewed from an evolutionary perspective." **—*Publishers Weekly***

"Important and fascinating…The future of clinical psychology is likely to be embedded in the integration of this [Nesse's] type of evolutionary theoretical framework." **—*Nature***

"To quote a renowned geneticist, 'Nothing in biology makes sense except in the light of evolution.' A quarter century ago, Randolph Nesse bravely helped apply this dictum to medicine. Now, in *Good Reasons for Bad Feelings*, he tackles the deeper evolutionary question of why we, our minds, and our brains are so vulnerable to mental illness. He navigates the dangers of either too much or too little adaptationism, deftly handles the false dichotomy between psychological and biological perspectives, and bridges abstract intellectualizing with pressing clinical need. This is a wise, accessible, highly readable exploration of an issue that goes to the heart of human existence."
—Robert M. Sapolsky, author of *Behave*

"Randolph Nesse is one of the key architects of evolutionary medicine. He's been an inspiration to a generation of scientists who explore evolution to understand why we get sick from diseases ranging from cancer to obesity to infectious diseases. Now Nesse has turned his attention from the body to the mind, in a provocative book full of intriguing explanations about human nature in all its strengths and weaknesses." **—Carl Zimmer, author of *She Has Her Mother's Laugh: The Powers, Perversions, and Potential of Heredity***
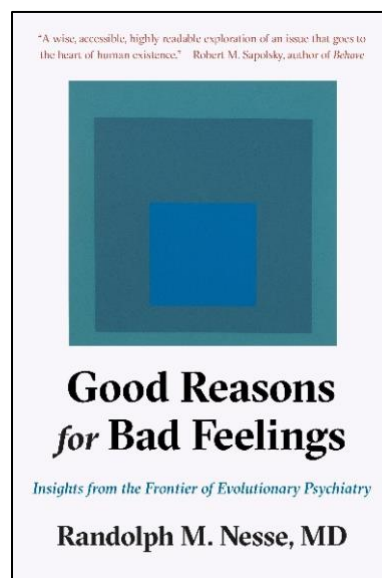
From the co-founder of the field of evolutionary medicine, launched twenty years ago with his coauthored book *Why We Get Sick,* comes a new, landmark work on why humans are vulnerable to so many mental disorders: **GOOD REASONS FOR BAD FEELINGS: *Insights from the Frontier of Evolutionary Psychiatry* (Dutton; February 12, 2019)**, by Randolph M. Nesse, MD.

On any given day, 350 million people suffer from a mood disorder that makes them miserable, unable to work, and for some, unable to go on living. Anxiety, addiction, eating disorders, and schizophrenia are additional plagues on our species. Slow progress in finding causes and cures has inspired a growing chorus of calls for new approaches. **GOOD REASONS FOR BAD FEELINGS** questions, not just *why* some people get sick, but why natural selection left all of us so vulnerable to mental illness.

The limits of natural selection offer one kind of answer, but several others are equally important. Our environments are vastly different from those we evolved in, making us vulnerable to addiction and eating disorders. Bad feelings like anxiety and low mood are, like pain and cough, useful in certain situations, but they often help our genes, not us—and, like smoke detectors, they are prone to false alarms. Social anxiety is nearly universal because our ancestors who cared what others thought about them did better than other people. Guilt makes morality possible, and grief is the nearly unbearable price of love. Recognizing the evolutionary origins of such symptoms helps to distinguish them from diseases. Trying to understand an emotion requires understanding individuals as individuals.

Some of the topics that Randolph M. Nesse, MD discusses in this game-changing book include:

- **How emotions were shaped to benefit our genes, not our health or happiness.** Jealousy increases fitness, even as it wrecks lives; it hurts to hear babies cry, so parents tend to them; sexual feelings encourage people to do positive things for their genes but disastrous for their physical, social, and financial lives.

- **How the smoke detector principle explains useless anxiety.** Should you run if you hear a noise that could be a lion? The cost of running is likely to be small compared to the cost of not running if a lion is really there, proving that false alarms are normal and necessary.

- **Why we pay the price for deep, meaningful relationships.** Grief and guilt are the price of love and goodness. They exist because we have been domesticated over thousands of years by individuals choosing partners and friends who are honest, trustworthy, kind and generous. If we worry about what others think of us, the pain of loss can be the price of deep relationships.

- **Why addiction is an unavoidable consequence of our ability to learn.** We adapt our behavior as a function of our experiences. Drugs our ancestors never encountered can hijack our systems, and dramatically effect some of us as a result.

- **Why eating disorders are common.** Many studies ask why certain individuals are prone to eating disorders but Nesse asks a different question: how do mechanisms that evolved to cope with famine generate uncontrolled eating in modern environments?

- **Why genes for schizophrenia and autism persist.** Some are mutations, but others keep a system close to a fitness peak, despite the risk of catastrophic mental failure.

- **Why it is usually safe to relieve emotional pain, even when it is normal.** Sometimes painful emotions help us, but often they are excessive or useless. An evolutionary perspective encourages respect for our emotions, but seeks to find new strategies for prevention and treatment.

Conversational, digestible, and packed with fascinating case studies, **GOOD REASONS FOR BAD FEELINGS** describes why natural selection has left us vulnerable to mental disorders, calling on all of us to rethink our understanding of mental health and our approach, both personal and societal, to addressing mental illness and negative emotions.

About the Author:

Randolph M. Nesse, MD, is a founder of the field of evolutionary medicine and co-author with George C. Williams of *Why We Get Sick*. He served for many years as Professor of Psychiatry, Professor of Psychology and Research Professor at the University of Michigan. He currently is the Founding Director of the Center for Evolution & Medicine at Arizona State University where he is also a Foundation Professor in the School of Life Sciences. He is a Fellow of the Association for Psychological Science, a distinguished Life Fellow of the American Psychiatric Association, and an elected Fellow of the AAAS.

Good Reasons for Bad Feelings
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More Praise for
Good Reasons *for* Bad Feelings

"A book as wise and illuminating as it is relevant to our daily lives."
**—Sarah Blaffer Hrdy, Professor Emerita of Anthropology, UC Davis,
author of *The Woman that Never Evolved* and *Mother Nature***

"Those powerful feelings that fill our day, that give us the oomph to act one way or another are the guardrails to living and this wonderful books explains all of them. Randolph Nesse has done it again."
—Michael S. Gazzaniga, Director, Sage Center, UC Santa Barbara, author of *Tales from Both Sides of the Brain*

"Randolph Nesse, who trained psychiatrists for many years, has for a quarter century been a key leader of evolutionary medicine. *Good Reasons for Bad Feelings* integrates these two strands of his life and thought in a readable, insightful book, as much a philosophy of emotions as it is a new window on mental illness. All who want to know themselves should read it."
**—Melvin Konner, Dobbs Professor of Anthropology, Emory University,
author of *The Tangled Wing***

"Clear and engaging, and the narrative reflects a masterful blend of history, novel ideas, and clinical experience in an insightful and coherent manner. I hope it is widely read and discussed."
**—Eric Charnov, Distinguished Professor Emeritus of Evolutionary Ecology,
University of Utah, MacArthur Fellow**

"This will become a treasured classic; not just for clinicians but for all those interested in how to facilitate well-being and create more moral communities and societies."**—Professor Paul Gilbert OBE,
author of *Compassionate Mind*, and *Living like Crazy***

"'Why am I feeling bad?' This is the first burning question of everyone who suffers. This accessible new book will be an essential tool to help patients, their loved ones, and treating professionals arrive at more satisfying answers." **—Jonathan Rottenberg, Professor of Psychology,
University of South Florida, author of *The Depths***

"A bold book that would have made Darwin proud. Cutting-edge and compassionate at the same time."
**—Lee Dugatkin, Professor of Biology, University of Louisville,
co-author of *How to Tame a Fox and Build a Dog***

"A masterful, groundbreaking book that persuasively challenges standard clinical wisdom and provides a roadmap for the transformation of our conceptually confused psychiatric nosology. With crystal clarity, Nesse reviews what we know of our biologically designed emotions and argues for unflinching acceptance of our evolved nature as a baseline for understanding both normal and disordered suffering... Anyone interested in mental health—laypeople, students, clinicians, and scholars— will be grateful for the novel insights to be gained from this important book."
**—Jerome C. Wakefield, Professor of Psychiatry, New York University,
co-author of *The Loss of Sadness***

"What is the nature of suffering, its origin and its adaptive significance? *Good Reasons for Bad Feelings* may well become a legend, as it is a book about psychology, psychiatry, biology and philosophy that is also a good read, and it opens the door to deep questions in a manner that is tender, quizzical, and industrious." **—Judith Eve Lipton, MD, co-author of *Strength Through Peace***

"Two sets of ideas inform this fine book: one, the cold-hearted logic of natural selection; the other, the practical wisdom of a compassionate psychiatrist. The tension is palpable. The result is riveting."
**— Nicholas Humphrey, Emeritus Professor of Psychology, London School of Economics,
author of *Soul Dust***

"Very engagingly written for the general reader, Nesse's book is hugely important for the future of mental health care, and Nesse is the pre-eminent person to write it. It provides a personalized and lively but well documented treatise on how we humans function as we do and on needed changes in the way psychiatry thinks about troublesome mental experiences and behavior. It draws on an impressive range of knowledge, from not only psychiatry, including extensive case descriptions, but also psychology, biology, philosophy, and humanistic literature. Many readers will find it hard to put the book down." **—Eric Klinger, Emeritus Professor of Psychology, University of Minnesota**

"*Good Reasons for Bad Feelings* by Randy Nesse is a delightful book. It is insightful about the human condition, sanguine and not over-stated. And it is written in a straight-forward and delightful manner, personal and professional, and with humor. Neese is one of the originators of the field of evolutionary medicine. This is a welcome book in evolutionary psychiatry and on the biological basis of the emotions and our cultural evolution." **—Jay Schulkin, Research Professor of Neuroscience, Georgetown University**

"In *Good Reasons for Bad Feelings*, leading evolutionary theorist, psychiatrist Randolph Nesse, begs us to ask the right question: Why did natural selection make us so prone to mental disorders of so many kinds and intensities? It is no exaggeration to say that he opens the door to a new paradigm in thinking about human beings and their conflicted lives. A pathbreaking book by a man who is truly humane and caring. A privilege to share time with him." **—Michael Ruse, Werkmeister Professor of Philosophy, Florida State University, author of *On Purpose***

"How did we end up recognizing that every system in the body has a function shaped by evolutionary selection and yet thinking that systems in the mind do not? How did physical and mental health drift so far apart? Randolph Nesse explains, in this highly readable book, how 'symptoms' in psychiatry should be seen in their evolutionary context, and that anxiety and depression for example have functions, just as do inflammation, blood clotting, or a cough. Nesse is a pioneer of evolutionary psychiatry, which has the potential to revolutionize mental health care." **—Simon Baron-Cohen, Professor of Developmental Psychopathology, Cambridge University**

"This book sets out to show how evolution underpins (or should underpin) psychiatry. In doing so, it will surely change the face of medicine -- and deservedly so." **—Robin Dunbar, Emeritus Professor of Evolutionary Psychology, University of Oxford**

"Randy Nesse has brought a new and important synthesis to the study of illnesses that psychiatrists deal in. This engagingly accessible, pioneering book provides a wide range of answers for how something as maladaptive as bipolar disorders could have evolved. It provides a wide range of answers for why natural selection has left us vulnerable to so many mental disorders, and the "mystery of missing heredity" is identified as a key problem. Nesse shows that by taking into account complex pleiotropic effects, natural selection may push some useful trait close to a fitness peak near a "cliff edge" despite the disabling consequences for a few individuals who go over the edge. Thus a gene may be useful to many, but with bad luck contribute to victimizing the few. This complex problem surely will yield to further research." **—Christopher Boehm, Professor of Biological Sciences, USC Dornsife**