



Learning &  
Education

### Book Review: Why Has Nobody Told Me This Before?

Journal:	<i>Academy of Management Learning &amp; Education</i>
Manuscript ID	AMLE-2022-0097-BRR
Manuscript Type:	Book & Resource Reviews
Submission Keywords:	Faculty Development and Mentoring, Integrated learning, Lifelong development and learning
Abstract:	<p>Reported incidents of mental health issues at universities have soared – not just amongst students but also amongst faculty and staff. Although this was a pattern pre-pandemic, the impact of successive lockdowns and COVID-related restrictions have further impacted the mental health and wellbeing of our campus communities. Academic faculty are often in the frontline of providing immediate help to students, whilst dealing with workplace-related stress and the effects of the pandemic themselves. Academics in business schools are not mental health specialists; publicly-funded mental health services are significantly over-subscribed in the UK and many students cannot afford private services. It is into this gap, therefore, that Dr Julie Smith's work steps. The thesis of her book is to introduce advice and concepts that the author uses in her clinical therapeutic practice to an audience that might not be able to access psychotherapy. This is a book that is not only useful but is also realistic about the world in which we live and the desire of people to lead a meaningful life. Ultimately if we are to support faculty, staff and students in managing mental health and wellbeing then resources such as this one can be helpful.</p>

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**Book Review: *Why Has Nobody Told Me This Before?***

By Dr. Julie Smith, New York: HarperCollins 2022, 368 pages, hardcover

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Reported incidents of mental health issues at universities have soared – not just amongst students but also amongst faculty and staff. Although this was a pattern pre-pandemic, the impact of successive lockdowns and COVID-related restrictions have further impacted the mental health and wellbeing of our campus communities. Academic faculty are often in the frontline of providing immediate help to students, whilst dealing with workplace-related stress and the effects of the pandemic themselves. Universities UK, the collective voice of universities in England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, created the Stepchange framework to support the implementation of a “whole university approach” to adopting mental health as a strategic priority. Stepchange (2021), first developed in 2017 and recently refreshed, is aligned with the Student Minds University Health Charter (2019), which provides an evidence-informed approach to encourage UK universities to make mental health a priority (Student Minds, 2019; Universities UK, 2021). Part of the Charter Framework is the recommendation that staff (both academic and professional services) and students are facilitated in developing “...insight, understanding and skills to manage and maintain their own wellbeing” (Universities UK, 2021).

This, then, raises the question of how best to achieve this. Academics in business schools are not mental health specialists; publicly-funded mental health services are significantly over-subscribed in the UK and many students cannot afford private services. It is into this gap, therefore, that Dr Julie Smith’s work steps. The thesis of her book is to introduce advice and

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3 concepts that the author uses in her clinical therapeutic practice to an audience that might not be  
4 able to access psychotherapy. Furthermore, the author makes the point at the beginning that this  
5 book is actually about “life advice” and much of what is included is not necessarily therapeutic  
6 in nature but is helpful for everyday living. In this regard, the book definitely delivers. It takes  
7 could be described as being a “coaching approach”, whereby the author recognises that with  
8 some guidance, individuals can make a significant difference to their own quality of life  
9 themselves. Not only does this enable us as faculty and staff to adopt tools and techniques to  
10 help ourselves, but there is much in this book that we can integrate in our work with our students.  
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22 The market is full of self-help books on depression, anxiety, motivation, dealing with  
23 grief, how to deal with mental health broadly and of course, how to live a better life. There are  
24 also many books that cover cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT) techniques, including in  
25 workbook styles such as that found in “Mind over Mood” (Greenberger & Padesky, 2015). What  
26 makes Dr Smith’s book stand out, however, is its accessibility and its grounding in reality. Near  
27 the beginning, the author recognises the limitations of CBT in trying to control thoughts when  
28 people do genuinely live lives of hardship – and this is something that is largely under-  
29 recognised in many CBT texts self-help books. The tone is not only practical but also  
30 compassionate and this plus the content and structure of the text makes it a useful addition for  
31 Business School staff.  
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46 *Why Has Nobody Told Me This Before?* is structured into 8 sections – each one dealing  
47 with a significant area that can cause poor mental health. The first section introduces some basic  
48 tools and is a good place to start for anyone who is really struggling to find some immediate  
49 support and help. In particular, Chapter 3 refers to the importance of keeping the basics in order  
50 – such as sleep, diet and exercise – but in a reasoned and moderate tone that will help anyone  
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3 with perfectionist tendencies to find a practical and realistic way of helping themselves  
4 immediately. Whilst there are whole books dedicated to the importance of good sleep (see  
5 Matthew Walker's *Why We Sleep* as an excellent example (Walker, 2017)), it is still a topic that  
6 is largely overlooked in self-help books, probably because it seems so simple but is actually  
7 incredibly complex. Many self-help books simply list a number of things to be done in order to  
8 improve sleep, leaving the reader with a sense that the author is so bewildered by the topic to  
9 know where to start and how best to advise, thus leaving the subject neglected and the reader  
10 with the impression that actually, it is not that important after all. As such, Dr Smith's book  
11 comes as a breath of fresh air with its practical and grounded approach to improving sleep, as  
12 well as the prominence of this as a key factor in supporting better mental health and wellbeing.  
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27 The chapters in Section 1 are short and to the point, which is helpful for anyone who is in  
28 immediate distress and requires straightforward tools for rescue, rather than an academic tome on  
29 neuroscience. The length of the chapters and the inclusion of toolkits and summaries makes the  
30 first part particularly useful for anyone with depression or anxiety-related disorders who may  
31 have a restricted attention span for reading and processing information. These are the sections  
32 that faculty and staff can use themselves when feeling stressed or overwhelmed, and they are  
33 also the sections that students can be directed to as a first port of call.  
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44 As the book progresses, some of the chapters become longer as they deal with more  
45 complex issues and cover more detail. Topics such as motivation, emotional pain, grief, self-  
46 doubt, fear and stress are all covered in a sensitive tone, with practical advice and a grounding in  
47 the real world of the complex and fast-paced lives that many people lead. The Covid-19  
48 pandemic is a constant thread throughout the book and ties together the many and various losses  
49 that have been experienced during this time.  
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3 This is a book that is not only useful but is also realistic about the world in which we live  
4 and the desire of people to lead a meaningful life. Fundamentally the book achieves a balance  
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6 between encouraging resilience and self-compassion, with regular habit-forming and  
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8 perseverance, and rest and the need for “replenishment”. In particular, the use of the word  
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10 “replenishment” instead of “rest” may be a strategically important one that in that it reinforces  
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12 the need for periods of time that refuel us to deal with what lies ahead. The term “rest” is too  
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14 often interpreted as laziness in the academic context, whereas “replenishment” reminds the  
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16 reader that our resources are finite and need to be refilled periodically.  
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22 The book’s main strengths are the wide-range of topics that are dealt with, the tone which  
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24 is very accessible and the short length of chapters which help people who need immediate  
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26 support in times of distress. The short length of chapters is also a negative, however, as there is  
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28 little linkage between chapters and themes and topics can come across as being truncated and  
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30 staccato in tone. I found myself wanting to know how one topic was related to the next and  
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32 being disappointed when this was not clear. On the other hand, it is clearly stated up front that  
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34 the book is intended for people to dip in and out of rather than to read continuously and when  
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36 reflecting on its potential usage, I could see how I could use it with both staff and students in an  
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38 academic setting due to its structure.  
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44 Following the Covid-19 pandemic, the increase in volume of poor student mental health  
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46 and wellbeing in academia is becoming overwhelming and is unlikely to reduce any time soon.  
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48 At the same time, there is less consideration given to the struggles of faculty and staff, although  
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50 existing evidence indicates that this is no less of an emergency for our universities (Morrish,  
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52 2019). As such, it is important to consider what roles books such as *Why Has Nobody Told Me*  
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54 *This Before?* can play. Books like these are not the answer to the systemic and structural  
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3 problems that we have but in the absence of wholesale solutions, they can provide a very useful  
4 sticking plaster and may actually contribute more if used strategically. It is worth considering  
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6 weaving some of the guidance and toolkits into classes with stressed students – particularly the  
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8 section on how to make stress work for you. I can also see the value of using some of the  
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10 material provided to structure early classes with students to bring some self-awareness early in  
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12 their studies as a prophylactic to problems further on. This is also a good read for faculty and  
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14 staff. The sections on perfectionism and self-doubt could be particularly helpful for faculty at all  
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16 stages.  
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23 Ultimately if we are to support faculty, staff and students in developing insight and skills  
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25 in understanding and managing mental health and wellbeing then resources such as this one can  
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27 be helpful. Dr Smith's accessible tone and approach to the importance of metacognition gives us  
28  
29 a guide for embedding support into our interactions with our colleagues and students, as well as  
30  
31 an immediate source of help in crisis situations. We cannot, of course, remove the pain that  
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33 COVID has caused. Neither can we easily solve the underlying causes of stress and suffering in  
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35 our universities and in our complex lives. We can however take on board some of the advice  
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37 provided here and use it to enable better awareness and skills for managing our mental health and  
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39 supporting our students in doing the same  
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