

THE SEMICOLON: A Reader Guide for Mental Health Practitioners

Created by Britt Sayler (author of *The Semicolon*)

Main themes: depression and mental health, grief, family dynamics, and finding hope after loss. 36 pages, full colour, available in hardcover, softcover and e-book editions.

DISCLAIMER: *The Semicolon* is a picture book that depicts a child narrator struggling with depression after the loss of a parent. It can be read with children ages 5+, or individually by most adolescents and adults. In certain settings, *The Semicolon* may be useful in aiding conversations and reflections on mental health and well-being. However, the book is not a substitute for professional medical treatment nor is its author a mental health professional. This Reader Guide highlights various aspects of the book and is intended for use only by qualified mental health practitioners in facilitating discussions with patients/clients. The author shall not be held responsible for any harm resulting from the misuse of the book or reader guide in any form.



The Semicolon by Britt Sayler, illustrated by Dorota Rewerenda, & published by FriesenPress (2022). Available at www.brittsaylerbooks.com.

Who do you see?

The child narrator is not named, nor is their gender specified in the text or illustrations. The book's back matter uses gender-neutral language. This allows individual readers to perceive the character according to their own needs and experiences.

A nuanced approach to depression

The story is intentionally nuanced and plot-driven, as young readers are easily put off by books that seem preachy or didactic. The main character's depression is not stated outright but indicated, among other things, by their persistent sadness, recurring nightmare, inability to communicate aloud, and loss of interest in a previously beloved activity (soccer).

When grief becomes something else

The main character's depression is triggered by their father's passing. While grief is a normal reaction to loss, major life changes – like losing a loved one – are a common trigger of major depressive episodes. Grief and depression can both be immensely painful and have devastating impacts, but they are not the same thing. This book is informed by the knowledge that it can be unhelpful for those struggling with depression to have their experience interpreted as grief, and vice versa.

Gaining perspective on difficult thoughts & feelings

The dark thoughts, distortions and emotions associated with depression are often overwhelming in the moment. For instance, someone who is depressed might find it impossible to believe in the possibility of joyful future experiences. The line "it felt like the end; it was not" reminds readers that thoughts are not objective truths and that even intensely painful experiences do pass.

You may not be suffering alone

Page 5 of the book shows the main character's mother struggling with her own mental health, though she is shown elsewhere to be a loving parent. As the experience of depression often feels lonely and isolating, some individuals may find comfort in realizing they are not the only ones suffering. For others, gaining insight into what those around them are going through can help counter distorted thoughts and strengthen interpersonal relationships.

The hidden power of a picture book

While picture books tend to be associated with the youngest readers, this format can be useful for connecting with older children, adolescents and adults because it is highly accessible, visually engaging, and unthreatening.

A celebration of survival

This book was inspired by the semicolon tattoos of mental health advocates, many of whom battled depression – and recovered. In writing, semicolons are used "when an author could have ended their sentence but chose to keep going." For these advocates, the semicolon represents hope, resilience and, ultimately, the decision to keep going as authors of their own lives.