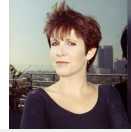


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How Carrie Fisher Championed Mental Health



More than just a movie star or a famous wit, the actress and writer used her illness to demystify taboo subjects and encourage others to seek help



Carrie Fisher wrote brutally honest books about her struggle with addiction and mental health. Getty

By Laura Barcella

5 minutes ago



"If you claim something, you can own it," Carrie Fisher **told *Vanity Fair* in 2009**. "But if you have it as a shameful secret, you're fucked."

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Best known for her role as an intergalactic princess, Fisher was a screenwriter, author and memoirist with a wise – and wicked – sense of humor



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into dark personal terrain rarely tapped by female celebrities – at least not with such alacrity. The bulk of her work centers on addiction, recovery, mental illness, fraught family relationships and the grime and glamour of a sexist Hollywood. (She once told the *Los Angeles Times* that **Dorothy Parker was her teen idol**, which, well, makes sense.) It was Fisher's willingness to tackle difficult subjects with wit and transparency that helped transform her into a bona fide role model, especially for people afflicted with mental illness.

ADVERTISING

Fisher certainly wasn't the first writer to spin her own pain into "cathartic" art – but she was among the first female celebrities to do it with such enthusiastic humor about topics typically viewed as both taboo and unfeminine. Fisher embraced her illnesses – bipolar



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dogs that prompt onlookers to spontaneously lose their minds with glee (Gary!).

She was a striking model of a successful woman committed to conquering her demons simply by accepting them, airing them, and ultimately trudging onward. A well-documented addict – she admitted to dabbling with a variety of drugs, including cocaine on the set of *The Empire Strikes Back* – Fisher was the daughter of Debbie Reynolds and Eddie Fisher, a glamorous "product of Hollywood in-breeding," as she put it. Her father had his own struggles, recounting a decades-long addiction in his 1999 memoir, *Been There, Done That*. (In the book he also trashed ex-wife Reynolds, spurring Carrie to threaten to change her last name; the father and daughter later mended fences, with Carrie saying of

Eddie in 2010, "He's not the sort of bastion of good judgment, but he's really fun.")

First diagnosed with bipolar disorder in her mid-twenties, Fisher refused to accept the diagnosis until she got sober at 28, checking herself into a 30-day rehab after a near-fatal overdose. ("Only then was I able to see nothing else could explain away my behavior," she later wrote.) In 12-step groups she came to find solace in the stories of others, though she didn't enjoy the meetings at first. She poked fun at both recovery culture and her own youthful resistance to it in her first novel, 1987's semi-autobiographical *Postcards from the Edge*, which chronicles the rehab stay and personal relationships of a 30-year-old narrator named Suzanne Vale. "I'll stay [in rehab,]" she



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covers everything from Fisher's bizarre Hollywood childhood (Elizabeth Taylor was her stepmom), to her first marriage to Paul Simon, to anecdotes like waking up to find a friend dead in bed beside her. But the most fascinating aspect of that book is Fisher's writing about why she opted to try electroconvulsive therapy (ECT), a still-stigmatized though highly effective treatment for depression.

Though she doesn't go into great detail about the procedure itself, she told Oprah in 2011, "They put you to sleep. They give you a medication so there are no more convulsions or anything ... It's over very quickly and you go home and take a nap." Her honesty in disclosing that she had the therapy at all, as well as her frank take on its side effects and benefits, helped shed a more nuanced light on a treatment that's been commonly judged as barbaric since its 1938

inception. But for Fisher, ECT was quite effective, and ultimately worth it: "Some of my memories will never return. They are lost – along with the crippling feeling of defeat and hopelessness. Not a tremendous price to pay."

Fisher's legacy is towering not just for her creative output, but for the work she did around demystifying mental health. As she wrote in her *final Guardian* column to a young woman trying to come to grips with her own bipolar disorder, "You can let it all fall down and feel defeated and hopeless and that you're done. Move through those feelings and meet me on the other side. As your bipolar sister, I'll be watching."

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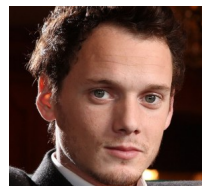


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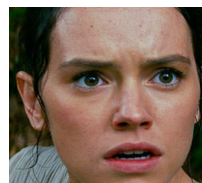
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