



The Zen of SpongeBob

That SpongeBob SquarePants is always so happy you almost just want to squeeze him to death. Jealous maybe? Steven Harriman's "Absorbing SpongeBob: Ten Ways to Squeeze More Happiness Out of Life" (Berkley, \$13) offers tips for how to channel the vibe at Bikini Bottom when it comes to handling fear, getting along with others and enjoying your job, among other topics. **METRO/NC**

30 Percent of people who said they would rather be divorced than obese, according to a survey by Rudd Center for Food Policy and Obesity. **METRO/NC**

Body & Soul

The isolation of illness

'The Lonely Patient' reveals the emotional challenges of suffering from a sickness

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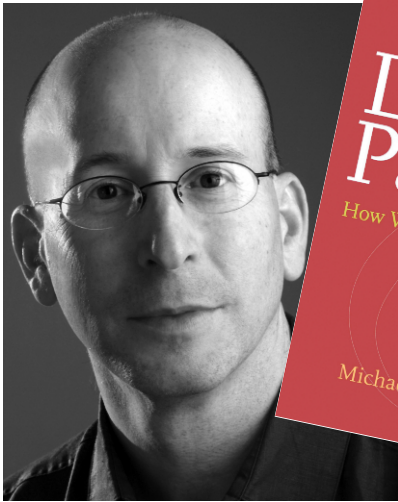
INTERVIEW. From a simple cold to the big C, being unwell reveals the body's most intimate vulnerabilities, awakens many of us to our mortality and can often devastate our connection to the world around us. In his new book, "The Lonely Patient: How We Experience Illness" (HarperCollins, \$19), Dr. Michael Stein draws from his own life and those of a few of his patients to present an eloquent and insightful memoir of malady and a handbook to understanding and dealing with the emotional isolation that can accompany illness. Metro recently spoke to Stein about what

went into writing the book.

What prompted you to write "The Lonely Patient"?

I wanted to write a book that would help patients and their families and loved ones start to talk about the difficult emotional experience of illness. All patients are lonely, although they don't come right out and say it. They can't; it's too painful and troubling to name one's loneliness. But illness, by its very nature, excludes others and leaves us alone with our body. When we're ill, we're filled with a perplexed sense of difference from what we were before and from those around us.

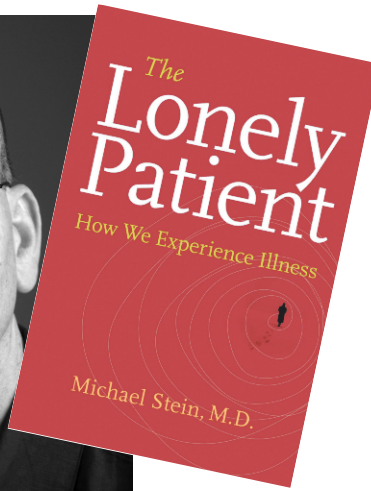
How did you come to recognize betrayal, terror, loss and loneliness as the keys to



Stein

understanding your patients' metamorphosis?

After working for 20 years with patients who have chronic illness, I believe that the body's betrayal



these four topics capture their personal experience that I know I'm on the right track here.

What do you want patients to take away from this book?

It is uncomfortable to engage in the painful experiences of someone we love. But families are so often immersed in a loved one's illness. I hope "The Lonely Patient" provides a reference for families of what the patient is going through and offers a new language that allows for deeper communication.

What do you want doctors to take away from this book?

I hope "The Lonely Patient" moves providers to ask of every ill person they treat, "What is it like for you?"

No More Drama

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Is my kid gay?

I have a 4 1/2-year-old son who plays with Barbie dolls all day long, making statements about how beautiful they are. Also, he likes all nice fashions. In general, his behavior is completely suited for a girl. Should we worry about it?
— Anonymous

Your son's behavior is part of normal development and entirely consistent with a 4 1/2-year-old's vivid imagination and creativity. There's no connection between this and homosexuality, and certainly there's nothing to worry about if he were gay. Caring for dolls and adoring their beauty shows his tender side, and this should be celebrated by you. Chances are he's imitating your nurturing behavior and showing responsibility by taking care of the doll. Although society and culture attempt to dictate what's considered "normal" for each gender, ultimately, the traits most desired are those from both genders. Ideally, a well-balanced child is what most parents want — for example, one who possesses gentleness, assertiveness, strength and sensitivity. Encourage well-roundedness in his play, and don't show alarm or make him feel bad about his behavior. Offer a variety of toys, from Barbies to a baseball and glove, and provide opportunities through play dates for him to participate in nongender-specific activities with girls and boys.

Jonathan Alpert is a licensed psychotherapist in Manhattan and Philadelphia. Have a question you want Jonathan to answer? Send an e-mail to jonathan.alpert@metro.us.

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