

# In the Land of the Sick

Professor, novelist, AIDS researcher, and physician Michael Stein's first work of non-fiction, *The Lonely Patient*, tries to understand illness from the patient's point of view.

INTERVIEW BY LINDA HEUMAN

**[Q & A] BAM** What inspired you to write *The Lonely Patient*?

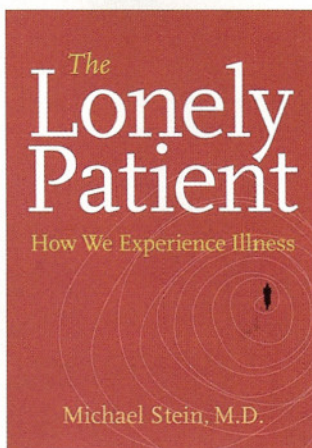
**MICHAEL STEIN** Most people don't know how to talk to sick people, and sick people have trouble talking about what they are feeling. The book is meant to offer an emotional vocabulary for sick people.

**BAM** What makes serious illness so lonely?

**MS** You are traveling apart from people and you have something that no one else can take away from you or essentially share with you. That is the existential problem: illness is an individual, not a team, sport. There is no one else you can send into the CAT scan tube to take your test.

**BAM** So illness exiles you from the ordinary, everyday experience of people who are not ill?

**MS** Yes, to some degree. Even when you are in that world and people say, "You look fine," you probably do look fine, but it doesn't mean you feel fine all the time. You think, "How do I explain to you that tomorrow I have to get radiated and you don't? There is something different about me.'"



**BAM** How helpful are such things as support groups or attitude or spiritual practice?

**MS** There are ways to mitigate [this experience] for sure. But I think loneliness is the essential experience of illness. I don't think you can ever really escape it. There is nothing you can do to stop feeling lonely except get better. As long as you have some remnant of illness, loneliness never completely goes away.

**BAM** Why does it seem so difficult to find a truly sympathetic doctor?

**MS** Imagine going to the office of a stranger, in any other setting in your life, and disclosing intimate details to somebody you know nothing about. It would be a miracle if it worked out very often. We don't date like that. We don't make job choices like that. There should be a lot of mismatching. You should feel lucky when you match, and you should move on and find another doctor when you mismatch. I also don't

think that either patient or doctor quite knows how they are going to handle an individual relationship until sickness is actually upon them. You might think that you have quite a good relationship with your doctor until you are actually ill. And then you have a different view.

**BAM** Does being a doctor have anything in common with being a writer?

**MS** As a doctor, you hear stories all day. And you hear stories on all of the great themes of literature. People come in and they talk to you about sex, and they talk to you about death, and they talk to you about loneliness, and they talk to you about their bodies, and they talk to you about what it's like to be away from home in the hospital and what it is like to go home.

Also, both doctors and writers are trying to tell a coherent story. A doctor will be presented with facts that need to be cohered in some way. And when you are writing a novel you are trying to do the same thing. You are trying to tell a coherent story. **B**

Michael Stein treated patients for years, but it wasn't until his brother-in-law developed terminal cancer that the doctor began to understand what illness feels like.

