

Shira Hassan



Saving Our Own Lives

*A Liberatory Practice
of Harm Reduction*

Forewords by

adrienne maree brown & Tourmaline

Afterword by **Rosario Dawson**

Praise for *Saving Our Own Lives*

“*Saving Our Own Lives* is rooted in Shira Hassan’s extensive experience in and commitment to harm reduction as a liberatory practice. This is a book grounded in deep love for those who are most marginalized in our society, and it respectfully documents their stories and emancipatory analyses. This open-hearted book is illuminating, informative, and inspiring. It will have a forever place on my bookshelf.” —**Mariame Kaba**, author of *We Do This 'Til We Free Us*

“This vital book is a spark, a balm, an agitation, a blessing, a celebration. Through narrative and research and conversation and reflection, *Saving Our Own Lives* tears down the myths perpetuated by the medical-industrial complex and prison-industrial complex and shows us how communities have been building ways to survive and heal in spite of—and against—these systems. Shira Hassan’s book is at once expansive and personal, far-reaching and like coming home. I’m going to return to it again and again, and you will too.” —**Maya Schenwar**, coauthor of *Prison by Any Other Name* and editor-in-chief of *Truthout*

“Grounded, brilliant, and generous, *Saving Our Own Lives* offers key tools, histories, testimony, and analysis to deepen our everyday work to support ourselves and our beloved communities. As always, deep gratitude to the visionary Shira Hassan for this luminescent collection, resplendent with the power to shift hearts and minds. A must-read for organizers, educators, and all of us working to do more than struggle and survive. —**Erica R. Meiners**, coauthor of *Abolition. Feminism. Now.*

“This brilliantly moving book—at once a generous love letter to our freedom movements and an urgent demand for radical, transformative work—will inspire readers not only to think about harm reduction differently but to actually live in ways that reflect a commitment to its liberatory potential.

Shira Hassan has brought together an amazing chorus of voices that includes freedom fighters, political educators, cultural workers, BIPOC leaders, and Disability Justice activists, whose analyses and reflections offer exactly the kind of collective wisdom and encouragement that we need right now. Indeed, the possibility of a radical, queer, abolitionist future is closer because Shira Hassan has so beautifully helped us understand the potential for freedom when we engage in a process of saving our own lives.” —**Beth E. Richie**, coauthor of *Abolition. Feminism. Now.*

“*Saving Our Own Lives* is one of the most important books that I have read in a long time. Shira Hassan defines and emphasizes the necessary intersections of multiple growing movements for Reproductive Justice, Transformative Justice, Disability Justice, anti-criminalization of sex work, Healing Justice, and abolition. This is the first book that has explicitly brought our movements together to highlight the importance of our shared analyses and commitments. *Saving Our Own Lives* is also a tribute to leaders, organizers, care workers, and icons who have long been at the forefront of liberatory struggles but have been historically neglected or deemed disposable by mainstream and leftist movements. This book weaves together painful stories, astute political insights, research, theory, and lived experiences to remind readers of the importance of community and our commitments to one another. For those of us who have been at the outskirts of multiple spaces and places, this is a guide, an affirmation book, a welcome mirror, an entire embrace. This book reminds us that the power has always been with us, and it welcomes everyone else to learn from and to join us.” —**Connie Wun**, cofounder of AAPI Women Lead

“With *Saving Our Own Lives*, Shira Hassan has yet again provided an immensely practical, grounded, inspiring, indispensable tool for our struggles. This book will introduce a whole new generation of organizers who got involved in anti-police mobilizing and COVID mutual aid projects to the history, principles, and practices of Liberatory Harm Reduction, which are essential for ensuring this work resists paternalistic charity dynamics, brings everyone along, and actually builds the new world we

need rather than just tinkering with the broken institutions that currently dominate us. *Saving Our Own Lives* is packed with compelling stories that show what Liberatory Harm Reduction is and what it can do, and what tensions surround its practice that need to be attended to with care by its practitioners. Shira shares her particular wisdom, gleaned from years of practice in communities most harmed by policing and coercive social services and healthcare models, showing paths forward that generate community-based solutions that we can all start working on right now. This book is easy to read and ready to inspire us all as we take the difficult and urgent next steps confronting the unfolding crises of our times.” —**Dean Spade**, author of *Mutual Aid*

“*Saving Our Own Lives* is a courageous, insightful, and vulnerable offering from Shira Hassan, pulled from three decades of her life and movement history. Part narrative of how she saved her own life along with those of many others, part handbook on how practicing harm reduction creates liberatory and resilient movements, and part history lesson illustrating the role of harm reduction for decades past and decades to come, this book is an essential read, as oppressed communities are co-figuring how to survive these times together.” —**Ejeris Dixon**, executive director of Vision Change Win

“As someone who has had the privilege of learning from Shira Hassan and her community of Liberatory Harm Reductionists, I know what an incredible gift it is that now the rest of the world can too. *Saving Our Own Lives* fiercely reclaims the roots of harm reduction in disabled, Indigenous, Black, queer, trans, sex working, drug using, and migrant communities, and challenges conventional wisdoms around treatment, service provision, violence, trauma, survival, resilience, empowerment, and change in ways that are absolutely essential, in the current moment and to build the futures we want. Whether we are looking for lessons on how to tackle the opioid crisis, interrupt and heal from violence, or ensure Reproductive Justice for all, the chorus of voices gathered in this volume offers incisive, insightful, and practical real talk from the front lines. Simultaneously irreverent and

serious as a heart attack, *Saving Our Own Lives* tells it like it is and as it needs to be if we are all going to survive what is unfolding now and what is to come.” —**Andrea J. Ritchie**, cofounder of Interrupting Criminalization and coauthor of *No More Police*

“*Saving Our Own Lives* is truly a priceless gift to the world. Each chapter or revolutionary love note recounts the beautiful, brilliant, and, at times, painful histories of the family of Black, Indigenous, and People of Color organizers, people in the sex trade, sex workers, young people, queer people, trans people, and those whose street-based strategies for survival and love created what we now know as ‘harm reduction.’ There are so many lessons on each and every page, all exquisitely written to document stories that we should already know and principles of liberation that we should be practicing every day. This book should be read page by page by everyone and held close at hand for constant reminders of those to whom we owe so much. Shira Hassan, in collaboration with her revolutionary harm reduction family, has created an incredible book that has such relevance to our continued co-creation of a liberatory abolitionist future.” —**Mimi Kim**, founder of Creative Interventions

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Edited by Deana G. Lewis

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For Miss Major. For Chloe. For Kelly. For Jada Safari. For all of Young Women's Empowerment Project past, present, and future.

I am here because the part of me that wanted to survive joined forces with other people who wanted us to survive—my guides were the aunties and uncles of street youth, who were street youth themselves, who believed that building us up—building our individual and collective power—is a resilience practice and is the key to our cultural, political and individual survival. The gift of being able and of wanting to write this book came directly through the investments my community made in me when I was a young person. And this book, in turn, is my gift back to the community that created Liberatory Harm Reduction, who saved me, who taught us how to save our own lives. And you.

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Applying Liberatory Harm Reduction to Mental Health and Psychiatric Medication

This chapter has been excerpted from the Harm Reduction Guide for Coming off Psychiatric Drugs by the Icarus Project and Freedom Center.

Absolutist approaches to drug and sex education teach abstinence, “just say no,” and one way for everyone. These work for some people, but not most, and if you don’t follow the model you can end up being judged, not helped.

“Harm reduction” is different: pragmatic, not dogmatic. Harm reduction is an international movement in community health education that recognizes there is no single solution for each person, no universal standard of “success” or “failure.” Getting rid of the problem is not necessarily the only way. Instead, harm reduction accepts where people are at and educates them to make informed choices and calculated trade-offs that reduce risk and increase wellness. People need information, options, resources, and support so they can move towards healthier living—at their own pace and on their own terms.

Applying harm reduction philosophy to mental health is a new but growing approach. It means not always trying to eliminate “symptoms” or discontinue all medications. It recognizes that people are already taking psychiatric drugs, already trying to come off them, and already living with symptoms—and that in this complicated reality people need true help, not judgment. Harm reduction encourages balancing the different risks

involved: the harm from extreme states, as well as the harm from treatments such as adverse drug effects, disempowering labels, and traumatic hospitalization.

Making harm reduction decisions means looking honestly at all sides of the equation: how drugs might help a life that feels out of control, how risky those same drugs might be, and the role of options and alternatives. Any decisions become a process of experimentation and learning, including learning from your own mistakes and changing your goals along the way. Harm reduction accepts all this, believing that the essence of any healthy life is the capacity to be empowered.

*Everyone's
experience is
different.*

There is no formula for coming off psychiatric drugs. What there is, and what this guide presents, is some common experience, basic research, and important information that can potentially make the process less difficult. Many people successfully come off psychiatric drugs, with or without guidance, while others find it very hard. Many continue on psychiatric drugs because the benefits are greater than the drawbacks. But many people end up staying on psychiatric drugs without ever exploring options, just because they don't know any other way.

When we've relied only on doctors, television, and mainstream sources, it might seem impossible to imagine dealing with our emotional extremes without psychiatric drugs. Maybe we've never heard of anyone going through what we go through without medications. Maybe a prescription was the beginning of people taking our need for help seriously, and medications feel like the only way to recognize that our problems are severe and out of control. And when everyone around us has come to view medication as essential to our survival, considering a new path can feel too risky to even try.

Many of us get help from psychiatric drugs but might not understand how they really work or what the other options are. Some of us never found medications useful, or medications even made our problems worse, and we are ready to try living without them. Sometimes people are torn between the risks of staying on and the risks of going off, or we take multiple drugs and suspect we don't need all of them. Others may want to go off but it's not the right time, or may have tried in the past, experienced a return of frightening symptoms, and decided to go back on for now.

Our paths to healing are unique. Some of us don't need to make any life changes, letting time and patience make change for us. Others may need to make big shifts in nutrition, work, family life, or relationships; we may need to focus more on self-care, expression, art, and creativity; adopt other approaches like peer support, therapy, herbalism, acupuncture, or homeopathy; or find new life interests like going to school or connecting with nature. We may discover that the first step is getting restful sleep; we may need structure to help get us motivated; or to stop taking any recreational drugs or alcohol. Our priorities might be to find a home or a new job; we may need to establish stronger support networks of trusted friends; or it may be important to speak up with greater honesty and vulnerability about what we are going through.

The process might feel mysterious and arbitrary, and an attitude of acceptance and patience is vital. Learning means trial and error.

*Because each of us is unique,
it's as if we are navigating
through a labyrinth, getting lost
and finding our way again,
making our own map as we go.*

Looking Critically at “Mental Disorders” and Psychiatry

Doctors put people on psychiatric medications for experiences labeled “mental disorders:” extreme emotional distress, overwhelming suffering, ARWR mood swings, unusual beliefs, disruptive behaviors, and mysterious states of madness. Currently millions of people worldwide, including infants and elders, take psychiatric drugs when they are diagnosed with bipolar disorder, schizophrenia, psychosis, depression, anxiety, attention deficit, obsessive-compulsive, or post-traumatic stress [disorders]. The numbers are climbing every day.

For many people, psychiatric drugs are very useful. Putting the brakes on a life out of control, being able to function at work, school, and in relationships, getting to sleep, and keeping a lid on emotional extremes can all feel lifesaving. The sense of relief is sometimes dramatic, and the medications can stir very powerful emotions, and even feelings of salvation. At the same time, the help psychiatric drugs offer many people can leave little room to see more to the picture: others experience these drugs as negative, harmful, and even life-threatening. As a result, it is rare in society to find a clear understanding of how and why these drugs work, or an honest discussion of risks, alternatives, and how to come off them if people want to.

Many doctors and TV ads tell people that psychiatric medication is necessary for a biological illness, just like insulin for diabetes. They promote the idea that the drugs correct chemical imbalances and treat brain abnormalities. The truth is different, however. “Biology” and “chemical imbalances” have become simplistic sound bites to persuade people to put their faith in doctors and quick fixes. These words are in fact much more complicated and unclear. Biological factors (such as nutrition, rest, and food allergies) affect everything we experience: biological “cause” or “basis” plants the belief that medication is the key to solving our problems. To say something has a biological cause, basis, or underpinning can give a message that the solution must always be a medical one and that “treatment” has to include psychiatric drugs. Once people have a diagnosis and start taking medication, it is easy to think of the medications as physically necessary for survival.

Not only is there no solid science behind viewing mental disorders as simple malfunctions of biology “corrected” by drugs, but many people with even the most severe diagnosis of schizophrenia or bipolar go on to recover completely without medication. The experiences that get labeled mental disorders are not “incurable” or always “lifelong”: they are more mysterious and unpredictable. For some people, psychiatric drugs are helpful tools that change consciousness in useful ways, but they are not medically necessary treatments for illness. Once you acknowledge this, more options become thinkable. And the potential risks of psychiatric drugs come under greater scrutiny, because they are very serious—including chronic illness, mental impairment, dependency, worse psychiatric symptoms, and even risk of early death.

Universal Declaration of Mental Rights and Freedoms

1. That all human beings are created different. That every human being has the right to be mentally free and independent.
2. That every human being has the right to feel, see, hear, sense, imagine, believe, or experience anything at all, in any way, at any time.
3. That every human being has the right to behave in any way that does not harm others or break fair and just laws.
4. That no human being shall be subjected without consent to incarceration, restraint, punishment, or psychological or medical intervention in an attempt to control, repress, or alter the individual’s thoughts, feelings or experiences.

Psychiatric medications have become a multibillion-dollar industry like Big Oil and military spending, and companies have incentive and means to cover up facts about their products. If you look more carefully into the research and examine closely the claims of the mental health system, you

will discover a very different picture than what pill companies and many doctors lead us to believe. Companies actively suppress accurate assessments of drug risks, mislead patients about how controversial mental disorder theories are, promote a false understanding of how psychiatric drugs really work, keep research into alternative approaches unfunded and unpublicized, and obscure the role of trauma and oppression in mental suffering. For much of the mental health system, it's one-size-fits-all, regardless of the human cost: scandals are growing, and the fraud and corruption surrounding some psychiatric drugs are reaching tobacco-industry proportions.

In this complicated cultural environment, people are looking for accurate information about possible risks and benefits so they can make their own decisions. Too often, people who need help reducing and getting off these drugs are left without support or guidance. Sometimes they are even treated as if the desire to go off the drugs is itself a sign of mental illness—and a need for more drugs.

In discussing “risks” and “dangers,” it is important to understand that all life involves risk: each of us makes decisions every day to take acceptable risks, such as driving a car, working in a stressful job, or drinking alcohol. It may not be possible to predict exactly how the risks will affect us, or to avoid the risks entirely, but it is important to know as much as we can about what the risks are. Looking at the risks of drug treatment also means looking at the risks of emotional distress/“psychosis” itself, and making the best decision for you. Maybe psychiatric drugs are the best option given your circumstances and situation, or maybe you want to try to reduce or come off. This guide is not intended to persuade you one way or the other, but to help educate you about your options if you decide to explore going off psychiatric drugs.

Because of pro-drug bias, there has been very little research on psychiatric drug withdrawal. We based this guide on the best available information, including excellent sources from the UK, and worked with a group of health professional advisors including psychiatric doctors, nurses, and alternative practitioners, all of whom have clinical experience helping people come off drugs. We also draw on the collective wisdom of an

international network of survivors, allies, colleagues, activists, and healers who are connected with the Freedom Center and the Icarus Project, as well as websites such as Beyond Meds. *We encourage you to use this guide not as the definitive resource but as a reference point to start your own research and learning.* And we hope that you will share what you have learned with others and contribute to future editions.

About the Author

Shira Hassan is the founder of Just Practice, a capacity-building project for organizations and community members, activists, and leaders working at the intersection of Transformative Justice, harm reduction and collective liberation. She is the former executive director of the Young Women's Empowerment Project, an organizing and grassroots-movement-building project led by and for young People of Color that have current or former experience in the sex trade and street economies. A lifelong harm reductionist and prison abolitionist, Shira is the coauthor, with Mariame Kaba, of *Fumbling Towards Repair: A Workbook for Community Accountability Facilitators*. Shira's work has been discussed on outlets including National Public Radio, the *New York Times*, the *Nation*, *In These Times*, *Bill Moyers*, *Everyday Feminism*, *Bitch Media*, *TruthOut*, and *Colorlines*.

At a political moment when mutual aid and harm reduction are more important than ever, this book is an inspiration and a catalyst for radical transformation of our world.

“This is a book grounded in deep love for those who are most marginalized in our society, and it respectfully documents their stories and emancipatory analyses. This open-hearted book is illuminating, informative, and inspiring. It will have a forever-place on my bookshelf.”

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A lifelong harm reductionist and prison abolitionist, **Shira Hassan** has organized alongside sex workers and drug users since 1992. She is the coauthor, with Mariame Kaba, of *Fumbling Towards Repair*.