BOOK REVIEW

Authoritative Guide to Self-Help Resources in Mental Health. J. C. Norcross, J. W. Santrock, L. F. Campbell, T. P. Smith, R. Sommer, and E. L. Zuckerman. New York: Guilford Publications, 2000. 360 pages. ISBN 1-57230-580-0 (paperback); 1-57230-506-1 (hardback).

Self-help is big business. According to Gerald Rosen (1993) as many as 2000 self-help books are published each year. However, only a few have been evaluated empirically. This sad state of affairs is a poor response to the appeal made by Rosen (1987) that self-help books should be evaluated empirically before being sold to the general public. Additionally, the little research that has been done on do-it-yourself treatment books sometimes demonstrates major limitations in their usefulness. Yet psychologists continue to develop and market new programs with increasingly exaggerated claims; this could cause problems, especially as psychologists often use self-help books as adjuncts to their clinical practice (Starker, 1988). The good news from research (e.g. Gould & Clum, 1993) is that certain self-help programs can be quite effective. Fairburn's binge eating disorder treatment (Carter & Fairburn, 1998) and the Albany protocol for panic disorder (Barlow & Craske, 1994) are good examples. In Gould and Clum's (1993) meta-analysis, fears, depression, headaches and sleep disturbances were especially amenable to self-help approaches, sometimes with effect sizes as large as for therapist-assisted treatments.

How can busy clinicians keep up with the flood of new self-help books and know which to recommend? Guilford Press offers a solution: in an attempt to help the clinicians a guide to self-help resources in mental health has been published. The guide includes ratings and reviews of more than 600 self-help books, autobiographies and popular films. It also includes hundreds of Internet sites, and listings of online support groups. The book addresses 28 prevalent clinical disorders and life challenges – from schizophrenia, anxiety and mood disorders to career development, stress management and relaxation.

In order to determine the usefulness of the self-help resources a series of national studies were conducted over the past 7 years. The methodology consisted of a lengthy survey mailed to clinical and counselling psychologists residing throughout the USA. A total of 2500 psychologists contributed with their expertise and judgement in evaluating the books, films and Internet sites. The self-help resources were rated on a 5-point scale (-2 to $+2$). These data were converted into a 1–5 star rating (negative ratings were given a dagger). On this basis, 19% of the self-help books were rated as "very helpful" and, fortunately, only 1% as "very harmful" (e.g. the assertiveness training book *Winning Through Intimidation* by Ringer (1973) and the weight management book the *Beverly Hills Diet* by Mazel (1981). Interestingly, many of the books by Scientologist guru L. Ron Hubbard are categorized as extremely bad).

When looking more closely at a specific disorder, for example panic disorder, there are some good books that I feel are missing. This is probably because of the rating criteria. In order for a book to be included in this self-help guide the psychologists who acted as referees had to know of the book beforehand; it was their rating of previously read books that mattered. Hence, if there were good books available that had not been read by many referees (e.g. the Australian panic disorder workbook by Franklin (1996)), they would automatically receive a lower rating. Thus, a low rating does not necessarily mean that a book is less helpful than a higher rated book – only that it has not reached a wide audience. For example, an excellent book, *An End to Panic* (Zuercher-White, 1998), previously recommended in a review article (Carlbring, Westling, & Andersson, 2000) was described as "highly regarded by the psychologists in our national studies

but not well known, leading to a 3-star rating." (p. 79). Another thing that disturbed me was that this particular author's name was misspelled. Instead of Zuercher the surname appeared as Luerchen. No wonder the book was "not well known"! One wonders how many other errors this survey included.

In a perfect world all self-help books would be scrutinized in the same manner as other treatments. However, as most published books have not been evaluated, this new guide to self-help is a step in the right direction. Despite questionable inclusion criteria and a few errors I thoroughly recommend this excellent guide to self-help.

References

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