

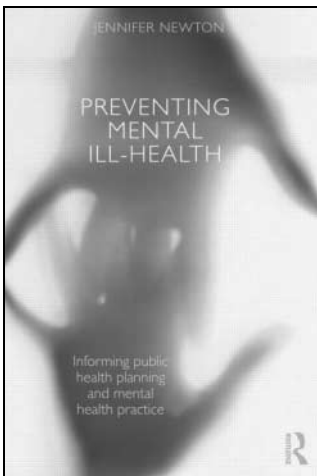
Reviews

Preventing Mental Ill-Health: Informing Public Health Planning and Mental Health Practice

Jennifer Newton

Routledge, 2012, US\$47.95 (pb), 280 pp.

ISBN: 9780415455411



This book covers an ambitious breadth of material concerning the definition, determinants and interventions for prevention of mental ill health. The sheer scale of material covered means that the reader should not expect an in-depth critique of all the evidence presented and this can pose questions around the methodology and conclusions of studies. The author notes that she is an agnostic entering the houses of such new religions as

biological psychiatry and positive psychology. Their differing perspectives occasionally lead to a conflict in argument, which is not always resolved. Psychiatric labels are defended for their contribution to research, while later it is reported that improved understanding of schizophrenia has derived from breaking the diagnosis down into constituent symptoms.

My favourite statistic from the book is the reported finding that 2.4% of women from a Basque-speaking rural area screened positive for depression compared with 11% of women in a Spanish-speaking village in the Basque region. The degree of integration in each community is cited as an explanation, echoing the famous theories of Emile Durkheim around suicides and social cohesion.

Despite a thought-provoking chapter on 'society, status and participation', the focus of the book is very much on the individual's place within society. There is a good discussion of negative consequences of housing policy and a look at unemployment and inequality, but in terms of social determinants of mental health, I was left wondering how to build societies with the kind of integration that seems so protective. For the individual, the take-home message is that what matters is to feel loved, safe, valued and in control.

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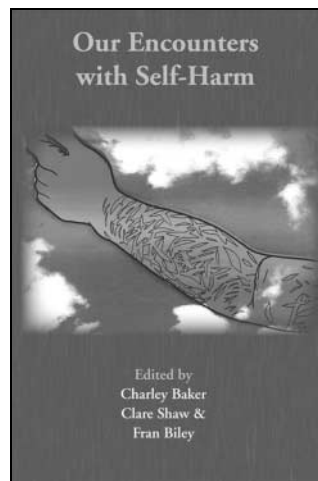
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Our Encounters with Self-Harm

Edited by Charley Baker, Clare Shaw and Fran Biley

PCCS Books, 2013, £18.00, pb, 229 pp.

ISBN: 9781906254636



When I was working as a junior doctor in accident and emergency, one of my favourite jobs was suturing. A pleasant break from the constant decision-making, an opportunity to do something practical and almost artistic, and most of all a chance to just sit down and chat with the patient as I stitched. Despite this, one of my least favourite tasks was patching up those who had self-harmed. Something about the sight of the self-inflicted wounds upset me far more than the most

horrendous accidental injuries; I tried to still be warm and not allow the distress and disgust I felt show, but I did not know what to say and we would often sit in silence as I worked. I had never been taught about

non-suicidal self-harm, what it serves, how to approach it, anything. It was not until I began my psychiatric training that I began to understand it, and became retrospectively frustrated with how I had felt and responded to it earlier in my career. I now ensure I cover this subject in some depth with my medical students, to try to avoid them feeling about self-harm the way that I used to. Alternatively, I could just make them read this book.

Our Encounters with Self-Harm is made up of 37 pithy chapters by different authors. The majority are written by those who have, or still do, self-harm, and others are by family members and professionals (the last of which I found the least educational; an interesting reminder not to dismiss personal accounts in an era where quantitative research often feels the only thing that counts). Most take the form of a piece of prose about the writer's personal experience, followed by a short bullet-point list of thoughts that they would like the reader to take away from it.

These pieces are brave, articulate, occasionally harrowing, and frequently illuminating. Since it is an anthology, unsurprisingly there is a certain amount of repetition within the book. This is no complaint; it serves to reinforce the most common themes such as: accept that this is my coping mechanism, find out what it means to me, look beyond the act of self-harm to treat the person behind it with kindness. Meanwhile, the divergences remind us of other key points such as not making assumptions and remembering that 'everyone who self-harms is an individual, so everyone's self-harm has individual meaning'.