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Book Review - What it Takes to Thrive: Techniques for Severe Trauma and Stress Recovery

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*BOOK REVIEW***What it Takes to Thrive: Techniques for Severe Trauma and Stress Recovery**

John Henden

World Scientific Publishing Co Ltd, 2017, 208 pages, ISBN 9789813230217 (paperback) £25:00 (e-book available from multiple online sources including Google, Amazon and Kobo)

Review by Steve McCarthy-Grunwald

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Within the eye of a global pandemic it could be said that there is no better time to consider ways of reducing stress, anxiety, and experiences of trauma (Hagger et al., 2020). Although this book was initially published in 2017, its value today seems even more prudent for many individuals across the globe. The opening passages clearly identify how the book has been developed from a person centric position, offering advice and self-help tips and techniques for the reader to contemplate trying.

This genre of book in particular faces much criticism as to how effective they really are for readers seeking advice and guidance at a time of personal conflict and have been suggested to giving a potential false sense of an alternative to seeking professional help Bergsma (2008). Interestingly, Bergsma's study which analysed 57 best-selling psychology self-help books in the Netherlands identified that the primary aim of them all was not to alleviate the symptoms of psychological disorders, but to enhance personal strengths and functioning. Considering Henden book, he clearly notes that the design was specifically for 'survivors and practitioners alike' (Henden, 2017), and offers a jargon-free and solution-focused guide with the hope of inspiring change.

The book is arranged in a series of helpful sections covering themes such as dealing with triggers, managing flashbacks and unwelcome thoughts, what to do at times of feeling 'low', sleep disturbance, and how to live life to the full. These sections are supported by an extensive appendix which offers further clarity on dealing with trauma, which is written in a way that is useful to both practitioners and individuals experiencing trauma. What was most useful was the emphasis on removing unhelpful or disabling terminology, offering a positive frame of reference throughout for reinforcing feelings of hope and self-potential.

Each section is set out with a range of exercises varying in levels of difficulty to offer quick solutions for crisis points and more long-term ways to identify and reduce the impact of future episodes. These comprehensively described exercise are supported in many places with real life examples of how they have reassuringly helped others to overcome similar life events. Being only examples they offered a very brief outline of the person's story which at times felt 'sanitised' to the point of offering limited understanding of how the individual went about using the techniques, although it is fair to say the main purpose of the book is not the stories of survivors of trauma.

Having read over the exercises in each of the sections, there was evidence of repetition of many of the techniques, such as mindfulness, and breathing exercises. This in itself can offer some reassurance that there are a certain handful of techniques which are useful for many potential scenarios which could present, making it feel less daunting to pick up new skills. This repetition could make it appear that this was 'all there was to offer', which is not the case. A few techniques towards the latter sections were vague in detail and lacked any deeper understanding of their value such as, the recognition of the potential of using humor, or some suggestions for how to manage sleep disturbance.

What was evident is Henden has considered a range of different approaches such as creative writing, imagery and storytelling, music, exercise, routine formation and neuro-linguistic programming (Bandler & Grinder, 1975) which is both refreshing to read alongside the more traditional approaches. What was surprising was the lack of reference to the aspect of the biophilia hypothesis (Wilson, 1984), and our innate connection with the natural world and its potential for reducing, stress anxiety and depression (Pretty, 2004).

John Henden brings with him many years of experience as a therapist and trainer in severe trauma and stress along with his personal experiences, and this provides the motivation towards the possibilities this text can offer. Supported by many renown experts in the field of solution focused therapies such as Yvonne Dolan and Alasdair Macdonald the book does offer a sense of celebrity recognition. As the reader I certainly felt that of the authors experiences over his career was the driving force providing hope and positivity in what can be achieved. This instilled a sense of assurance and belief which are fundamental aspects of promoting change.

Although the book is advertised as being for practitioners and survivors of severe trauma in particular, the text could well suit most individuals who are experiencing stress or feeling psychologically overwhelmed, although as the book adopts the atypical 'average person perspective, this may not translate as clearly for all neurodiversity.

The reviewer

Steve McCarthy-Grunwald is a senior lecturer and pathway lead for mental health nursing at the University of Cumbria with over 25 years of clinical and academic experience.

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