

Book Reviews

Overcoming Depression: a self-help guide using cognitive behavioral techniques (fully rev. 3rd ed.)

Paul Gilbert

London: Robinson, 2009. pp. 533, £12.99 (pb). ISBN: 978-1-84901-066-5

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The first and second editions of *Overcoming Depression* in 1997 and 2000 made available a comprehensive self-help guide for depression using cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT) techniques. The third edition is again aimed at those with little knowledge of depression, and who wish to help themselves to overcome depression, and it has been extensively rewritten to reflect 10 years of research. The plethora of research has been partly driven by CBT becoming a more widely known and used therapy, especially since the Increasing Access to Psychological Therapies initiative. Many of the key points of the first and second editions are still included but are now interwoven with compassion and mindfulness techniques. This sets the pace for the book, which encourages people to use mindfulness and compassion in everyday situations as well as when carrying out various exercises in the book.

The book's layout is exceptional. It is divided into four parts: understanding depression, learning how to cope, developing supportive relationships with ourselves, and special problems associated with depression, each containing useful chapters. The understanding depression section is excellent in normalizing depression through the welcome discussion of the function of depression and the brain's capacity for depression. It is skilled in explaining difficult concepts in lay terms but through doing so oversimplifies some concepts. The last two chapters in this part focus on the effects of kindness on the brain and the relationship between thoughts and feelings, which gently sets the scene for introducing CBT techniques in the next chapter.

Learning how to cope starts by focusing on mindfulness exercises that are good at demonstrating how our thoughts can run away with themselves and dictate our actions and so the need to become observant of our thoughts is important. It is therefore useful in demonstrating the principal theories behind CBT. However, it can be a bit daunting to start with these techniques as they are extremely useful but take time to master. When mindfulness is interwoven in later chapters with techniques aimed at solving problems common to depression, such as jumping to conclusions, it is easier for readers to relate to the chapters and exercises therefore become easier to understand and use.

Part three provides useful techniques aimed to prevent self-criticism as well as an illuminating discussion on the link between self-criticism depression and modern day pressures. Part four gives good advice on how to tackle more specific problems associated with depression, from situational problems to problematic patterns of behaviour, as well as an informative discussion on how to cope with shame and guilt. People are encouraged to read only the parts that are relevant to themselves and to build on the techniques in the book to find activities and exercises that work for them.

Each chapter finishes with an overview that helps focus attention on the aim of the chapter, whilst the key points in bullet point form are useful for people wanting to recap the poignant points and as well as those with time constraints. This is followed by easy to use exercises.

In summary, all the chapters are well written in a reader-friendly style and it is highly recommended as a self-help guide for CBT. The high use of case material makes the book easy to engage with and relate to. It is also empowering rather than patronising, whilst acknowledging that tackling depression may need to be assisted by other techniques such as a medication or exercise. It contains a wealth of information for a small sum of money. However, this comes at a cost as the size of the book may be off-putting to people with low motivation, which is associated with depression.

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The Stress Less Workbook: simple strategies to relieve pressure, manage commitments, and minimize conflicts

Jonathon S. Abramowitz

New York: Guilford Press, 2012. pp. 326, £14.99 (pb). ISBN: 978-1609184711

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The Stress Less Workbook is a self-help guide based on CBT which offers simple strategies to help reduce and manage everyday stress. The author uses a structured, step-by-step approach to encourage the reader to create and follow their own stress management plan. Abramowitz is an American clinical psychologist and internationally recognized clinician and researcher in the treatment of OCD and other anxiety disorders. This is the third self-help book he has written.

The book is divided into three parts. Part one explains what stress is and how it can affect us physically, mentally, emotionally and behaviourally. The author is careful to explain that stress can be a good thing and the aim of the book is not to eliminate all stress but rather to learn how to cope with stress more effectively. Through tick-box exercises, the reader is asked to identify their symptoms and levels of stress as well as triggers and maintaining factors. At the end of part one, the author encourages the reader to match their identified stressors with up to six stress management techniques to create their “stress management journey”. This final section is a little more complex and I imagine this is where a client may need support from a therapist in deciding where exactly to begin.

The second part of the book teaches six specific stress management techniques: problem-solving, communication/assertiveness, time management, cognitive restructuring, relaxation, and maintaining a healthy lifestyle. Each technique is clearly explained with questions, logs and charts to complete. The chapter on time management is very detailed and covers monitoring time, prioritising, delegating, planning, procrastination and reward. The “changing your stressful thinking” chapter felt slightly more complex than necessary, with many different thought charts to complete. Maintaining a healthy lifestyle has a detailed section on healthy eating including identifying eating patterns and cravings, as well as a description of different nutrients, plus sections on exercise and sleep.