

comprehensive. It is geared towards addiction professionals and, I surmise, even for experts in this field.

FALK KIEFER

Central Institute of Mental Health, University of Heidelberg, Mannheim, Germany

PROMOTING MENTAL HEALTH. CONCEPTS, EMERGING EVIDENCE, PRACTICE

HELEN HERRMAN, SHEKHAR SAXENA & ROB MOODIE, eds

Geneva, World Health Organization, 2005, 288 pp, CHF50 and \$45, ISBN 92 4156294 3

With contributions from more than 70 researchers, administrators and health promoters from over 20 countries, this book presents a positive perspective on mental health promotion.

The first part of the book deals with concepts. Mental health is defined by the World Health Organization (WHO) as a state of wellbeing in which the individual realizes his or her own abilities, copes with the normal stresses of life, works productively and is able to make a contribution to his or her community. This is much more than the absence of mental illness; it is partly a normative definition and yet it implies that the meaning of mental health will vary between situations and cultures. In contrast to physical health, mental health is a concept that is not known in most of the cultures of the world. Mental health is linked conceptually in the book to health in general, human rights, quality of life and social capital (i.e. mental health contributes to the functioning of society).

Mental health promotion, in its turn, consists of actions to address the full range of potentially modifiable determinants of mental health. These determinants, it is argued, can be found on an individual level (e.g. ability to handle stress), on a community level (e.g. social relationships and networks) and on a societal level (a secure surrounding where the basic needs—food, housing, education, social support—can be fulfilled and where members can control their lives).

Theories of aetiology are important for mental health promotion. Especially important is to show the chain of influence from policy measures to determinants and mental health. Because of the complexity of the interactions and the inability to control for confounding factors

it is difficult, if not impossible, to depend upon randomized controlled studies for evidence.

Many authors conclude that most politically useful evidence of effects of mental health promotion must be derived from community-based research and changes in social institutions such as families, child-care institutions, schools and work-places. The lack of evidence for the effects of mental health promotion is a complication throughout the book. The authors must often be content referring to studies showing the relation between deteriorations in various living conditions and increasing mental illness. Another problem is the small number of studies from low- and middle-income countries. This means that the book sometimes slips either into a negative problem trap, where the purpose is to talk about promotion and empowerment, or into a provincially normative trap, where the rich world's child-rearing, family patterns, production conditions, etc. dominate the discussion. The contributors are very conscious of these problems and approach the shortcomings with an expectation that the situation will improve.

Several authors point out that the interventions most likely to promote mental health are those that have no specific mental health goal. Among these are housing programmes, a decrease in unemployment, decreasing poverty and the absence of war. Sometimes the text seems to imply an enormous expansion of the concept 'mental health policy'. The consequence could be the opposite: in a world where human rights are adhered to, we may not need any mental health promotion.

This book is not written for politicians in general. It is too technical for that. (It is not written for the weak-sighted either: green print on burnished paper.) Rather, it is written so that mental health practitioners and administrators can take part in the discussions and decision-making, with a greater understanding of the implications for mental health of various policies and with better arguments to promote mental health. It is also written in a manner that provides a rich source of information about concepts that are relevant and programmes that have worked for researchers and policy-makers. Thanks to the fact that the authors are open about the conceptual and empirical complications, the book is convincing as a work in progress.

KERSTIN STENIUS

Centre for Social Research on Alcohol and Drugs, SoRAD, Stockholm University, Sweden

This document is a scanned copy of a printed document. No warranty is given about the accuracy of the copy. Users should refer to the original published version of the material.