

SOURCE LINES

SELF-HELP: SELECTING THE BEST BOOKS

The appetite for self-help books has led to the publication of over 2000 new self-help books a year recently. As a society, we have become more focused on self improvement than at any other time in history. Advances in the scientific study of human behaviour has brought extensive information on better ways to raise your children, to loose weight, to improve relationships, to become a leader in the workplace, and to improve your personal effectiveness and happiness.

Does Reading Self-Help Books Work?

It depends on the severity of the concern and the quality of the book. For some issues, especially mild concerns, reading a book is the ideal way to learn about what to do. For other, more complicated problems, there is nothing better than talking to a counsellor, a doctor, a teacher, or a consultant who can address your particular concern with expertise and encouragement. Asking a trusted professional which books to read is a good way to sift through the many choices. Many counsellors will suggest self-help material to increase the effectiveness of the counselling. Practice through self-help exercises between sessions usually leads to quicker results (Burns, 1994).

Which Self-Help Books Are Worth Reading?

How do you know if the book's information is reliable and of high quality? Of the more than 2000 new self-help books published each year only 5% have research to document their effectiveness (Rosen 1993). This is an astounding figure. Imagine what would happen if 95% of the Do-It-Yourself books on installing Electrical Wiring in your house were not critiqued by a certified electrician to ensure proper, safe advice on wiring!!

The promotion of self-help books by celebrities like

Oprah or books written by high profile people like Dr. Phil, or John Gray do not guarantee they are effective or well researched either. The authors of The Authoritative Guide to Self-Help Resources in Mental Health (Norcross et.al. 2003) suggest the following strategies for selecting a good self-help book:

- Don't judge a book by its glitzy cover, catchy title or advertisements.
- Avoid books which make grandiose claims. If it sounds too good to be true it likely is.
- Examine if there is research evidence reported in the book.
- Books that focus on one problem tend to be better than those that claim to help all problems.
- Avoid psychobabble and slick writing.
- Check out the author's professional education and credentials.
- Distinguish between balanced information and subtle marketing.

Here are a few self-help books we recommend:

FOR STRESS, ANXIETY, DEPRESSION AND ANGER:

The Feeling Good Handbook by David Burns

This popular book has lots of exercises for overcoming a variety of problems using a cognitive.

Mind Over Mood by Dennis Greenberger & Christine Padesky

This is a great workbook for helping to deal with a wide variety of emotional problems using cognitive strategies. Our experience is it is best to use this book with a counsellor trained in Cognitive Behavioural Therapy.

FOR RELATIONSHIPS:

The Seven Principles for Making Marriage Work by John Gottman

This is an excellent research-based book which helps you assess your own relationship. It includes exercises to help you to improve your marriage.

Love is Never Enough by Aaron Beck, MD

Learning to change self defeating attitudes through cognitive strategies is the focus of this book.

FOR PERSONAL EFFECTIVENESS

The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People by Stephen Covey

This has been a best seller for many years. The ideas here

are excellent for application in personal, family and professional situations.

FOR PARENTS

How to Talk So Kids Will Listen by Adele Faber & Elaine Mazlish

This is an excellent book to help parents understand their child and his/her feelings.

This is a very short list. A counsellor can make more specific suggestions which would address your particular concerns. Self-help is a good first step but if problems persist, give us a call to make a confidential appointment.

SELF-HELP SITES ON THE INTERNET: TRUTH OR TRASH

The Internet can be a vast and confusing maze of information. Here are a few suggestions to try when you are looking for information about wellness and mental health issues.

Start with a good search engine such as <http://www.google.com>. For search results most relevant to your questions isolate a key expression. For example, instead of typing in *effective anxiety treatment*, rephrase your search using quotation marks to read, *effective "anxiety treatment"*.

Another strategy is to use the minus (-) sign which will remove many irrelevant e-commerce sites that clutter up your search results. For example when you are looking for articles about psychotherapy and type in *"psychotherapy treatment"* a lot of books for sale come up and get in the way of locating the articles you are really after. Use this hint, type *"psychotherapy treatment -books"* into the search engine. Another keyword that reduces e-commerce results is to include *-price* in your search phrase.

Now, anyone at anytime can publish anything on the Web, truth or trash. So the questions are, "How can I trust the information I find? How do I know whether it is truthful, balanced, or valid?" The following are three guidelines for judging websites:

- (1) Look to see if the author of the article has a professional degree (M.D., Ph.D, M.S.W.) and check whether they are affiliated with a major school or institution;
- (2) Be aware of possible bias in the article. For example, information about medications from the National Institute of Mental Health or Health Canada is probably less biased than from a pharmaceutical company;
- (3) Check for dates indicating when the information was initially published. Information is like bread, it has a 'shelf-life' beyond which it is not that useful.

Some Recommended Mental Health Sites

<http://helping.apa.org>. This site is published by the American Psychological Association and it provides information helpful to understanding various psychological issues.

www.athealth.com. This site provides information about specific disorders and self-help stories.

www.drugdigest.org. Provides information about drugs and herbal remedies. Written in plain English this database explains what each medication is used for, how it works, common side effects and interactions, etc.

www.nimh.nih.gov. This is the website of the National Institute of Health and is a rich source of consumer information.

SOURCE LINE, INC.

94 CUMBERLAND STREET, SUITE 604, TORONTO, ONTARIO, M5R 1A3

416-923-0868 / 1-800-394-8015

Email: reachus@sourceline.net Web Site: www.sourceline.net

Offices in Toronto, Woodbridge, Mississauga and Newmarket