

Psychological Treatment of Health Anxiety & Hypochondriasis – A Biopsychosocial Approach

Abramowitz Jonathan S, Braddock Autumn E. 2008
pp xii + 331. Hogrefe & Huber US \$59.00, €42.95, £34.00.
ISBN: 978-0-88937-347-1

Few clinicians will disagree with the following sentence with which the preface to this text commences: "Despite a rich 2000 year history, hypochondriasis remains a controversial topic in the fields of mental health and medicine." Views on its aetiology range from it being a primary mental disorder, or perhaps as secondary to a more prominent psychological condition such as depression, or else as an actual personality trait or disorder. What cannot be denied is the interference with normal life and work which its sufferers experience as well as the inordinate amount of time which often has to be spent in reassuring them. In spite of every clinical investigation and test proving negative there remains on the patient lists of most medical specialties individuals who simply cannot accept being told that they are healthy.

The authors, both clinical psychologists, commenced their cooperative studies at the Mayo Clinic, Minnesota and prefer to use the term Health Anxiety in their functional approaches to their patients' individual problems, rather than Hypochondriasis with its DSM-IV-TR classification based upon a checklist of signs and symptoms which may or may not be present. Thus the text presents numerous clinical cases ranging from the classic tension headache sufferer who is convinced they have the symptoms of a brain tumour to health anxieties engendered by events of our time, such as the unfortunate patient who became convinced she had contracted anthrax in November 2001 shortly after hearing of the anthrax attacks in Washington D.C. Neither do the authors shy away from distinguishing health anxiety as a value neutral diagnostic label as opposed to the pejorative associations which hypochondriasis has with malingering or even character disorder.

The biopsychosocial model of the aetiology of health anxiety which is presented on p 46 focuses on "the development of certain dysfunctional beliefs about health and illness which are activated by the perception of benign bodily sensations and variations." Derived from this model are the lines of assessment and treatment of health anxiety favoured by the authors. The success rate of these in effecting an improvement in symptoms is contrasted with the poor results recorded from earlier studies on psychoanalytic and psychodynamic interventions which relied on Freudian methods. Explanatory therapy, exposure and response prevention (ERP) and cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT) are described, after which the second part of the book goes on to present the authors' preferred (and evidence-based) methods of effective assessment and treatment. The diagram illustrating the vicious cycle of body sensations, threatening thoughts, the evocation of anxiety and the fight-or-flight response on p189 could usefully be drawn (indeed that is the authors' recommendation) when discussing how symptoms intensify with patients who are experiencing same. Didactic and Socratic styles of psychoeducation are described on p205 and "Not-so-Great Expectations (Pun Intended)" on p215 focusses on the pattern of predicting negative outcomes in the future which so often accompanies health anxiety.

The book concludes with a comprehensive bibliography (which is not exclusively North American) and a number of useful handouts which can be duplicated for patient use as well as log-sheets for health concerns, self-monitoring and body symptom monitoring.

At £34.00 the book should certainly be accessed by Defence Medical Library Services and perhaps borrowed by the clinician

before deciding whether or not to purchase one's own personal copy. As an enabling text for the clinician seeking broader methods of managing the patient with chronic health anxiety it can be recommended; and how many of us know that hypo (below) and chondros (sternal cartilage) were the words originally used by physicians in Ancient Greece to describe unexplained stomach pains, especially in men, thought to be caused by movement of the spleen (p 17) ?

LT Col NK Cooper FRCSEd FFOM RAMC
Consultant Occupational Physician Tidworth ROHT

Emergencies in Clinical Surgery

First Edition. Callaghan C, Andrew Bradley J, Watson CJE
2008 XXIV + 546 pp soft cover. Oxford University Press Inc.
New York. Contact: Oxford University Press, Great
Clarendon Street, Oxford OX2 6DP. Price: £19.99 plus
postage and packing. ISBN: 978-0-19-921901-8

Every Medical Student and House Officer, no doubt, at one time has had an Oxford Handbook of Medicine in their white coat pocket, or located close at hand, especially in their first few weeks after graduation. This book follows a long line of publications by the Oxford University Press aimed at Doctors in training, providing them with an at-a glance guide to help with the management of daily encountered surgical pathologies. The main question posed is that given the fact that there are numerous texts that are available, should I purchase this one?

This is the first edition of the book and has a spectrum of contributors, ranging from Professors to Specialist Registrars at recognised institutions. The junior position of some of the authors is a relative bonus as it enables insight into the possible difficulties encountered by the target population.

As with any book there are pros and cons. It is a relatively slim handbook compared to others in the series and this in itself may appear as a bonus. However, it should be judged by the content it provides. This book appears to combine salient points from the Oxford Handbook of Surgery and the Oxford Handbook of Clinical Specialities. The overall tone of the book is in keeping with the rest of the handbooks series and is fairly straightforward to navigate.

The initial chapters of the book provide a concise summary of the management of the pre-operative patient; with issues ranging from resuscitation to communication and consent. Subsequent chapters detail in depth management of general surgical pathologies a Surgical Middle Grade may encounter on a regular basis. The overall script of the handbook appears to be directed at Senior House Officers to Junior Registrars, especially those who will be involved in Hospital at Night and may require knowledge of management of emergencies in other surgical specialities. Realistically, Senior Surgical Trainees should not require daily use of this book, as they should already possess the knowledge on how to manage most of the scenarios presented, but it may provide a useful aide memoire.

For the junior trainees, there are many useful and well written areas of the handbook; one which provides concise details on the diagnosis and management of post operative complications, an area which is often amiss in many pocketbooks and will no doubt aid Doctors who do not regularly encounter specific surgical situations.

Overall, the handbook is well written, and although not invaluable to the trainee surgeon, may be useful in a quick reference/aide memoire capacity.

M A Khan
Surg Lt Cdr RN
Specialist Registrar General Surgery