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Book Review:


by Alan Carr, University College Dublin

This book is written from what Myles na gCopaleen called (tongue in cheek) The Plain People of Ireland. The wide audience for Keane's work is justified because, as he points out in the introduction, Bad Nerves (as they are colloquially known) are present somewhere in everybody's social network. Many forms of psychological distress are subsumed under this generic colloquial diagnostic rubric. In Keane's book, an attempt is made to demystify the way in which mental health professionals deal with a number of different manifestations of psychological stress.

An introduction by Keane himself and a general chapter by Anthony Clare are followed by 15 chapters, each of which addresses a particular psychological problem or technique for managing distress. Each chapter is written by an Irish expert, twelve of whom are psychologists.

The book covers adjustment problems related to four main domains: loss, anxiety, physiological functions and adolescent development. Stress at work (Edward Hogan) and adjustment to job loss each get a separate chapter. The inclusion of Eunice McCarthy's paper on unemployment is particularly appropriate in a country where this is a major national difficulty. Thérèse Brady and Tony Bates deal with adjustment to loss in its various forms in their chapters on bereavement and depression. The anxiety disorders are given wide coverage in four separate chapters on phobias (Mary McGoldrick), obsessive compulsive disorders (Frank O'Donoghue), panic disorder (Richard Booth) and post-traumatic stress disorder (Fred Lowe). Sleep problems (Marie Murray) and sexual problems (Tom Kelly) get a chapter each, as do the eating disorders (Gillian Moore-Groarke) and the addictions (Andrew Honeyman). While the book is largely about adult adjustment difficulties, adolescent problems are dealt with in a chapter by Paul Andrews. The last two papers in the book deal with managing stress (Orla O'Neill) and coping with pressure (Aidan Moran).

In each of the chapters, a description of the main clinical features of the problem are given, along with major related theoretical explanations and empirical findings. The material is presented, for the most part, in accessible prose with reference to case material. Each chapter ends with a list of suggested further reading. At the back of the book, there is a brief directory of services for those with various problems and their families. The book, Nervous Breakdown, is complimented by a series of radio programmes by the same name which are being broadcast on RTE 1. The programmes include first person accounts of each of the problems, along with experts' comments from the authors of each of the book chapters.

The importance of the book is that it adds to the small number of popular Irish works on psychological adjustment. Currently, this list includes no more than a handful of books including: Keane's (1991), Mental Health in Ireland; Anthony Clare and Spike Milligan's (1993) Depression and how to survive it; Patrick McKeown's (1986) Coping with Depression and Elation; and Edward Boyne's (1993) Psychotherapy in Ireland.

The book's strengths are the clarity with which it is written and the fact that the accompanying radio programmes provide concrete contextualized accounts of each of the problems to complement the academic material contained in the text.

The book has a number of major weaknesses. First, the chapters are too short. They run to an average of ten pages. Second, there is a glaring absence of a chapter on schizophrenia and, what are referred to in mainstream psychiatry, as the psychoses. The lifetime prevalence for schizophrenia in Ireland and elsewhere is about 1% (Ní Nuallaí et al, 1987). It is therefore a major national problem with which thousands of families cope every day and yet it receives scant coverage in Keane's book. Third, throughout the text, there is a predominantly individualistic framing of most problems. The interpersonal and contextual nature of psychological distress is under-emphasized.

Despite its limitations, Nervous Breakdown is an important work. I will be recommending selected chapters from it to many of my patients and their families.

References


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