

**Weekes, Dr C. *Self Help for your Nerves*, London: Thorsons. (pp 176) £7.99**

I decided to review *Self-help for your Nerves* by Dr Clare Weekes, as it has a special meaning for me having used it when I was suffering from a breakdown, some ten years ago. I found its insights and practical ideas refreshing and very soothing and felt an affinity with the author who made me feel understood and accepted.

Following her early experience in general practice, the author went on to specialise in the treatment of nervous illness. Her pioneering contribution to this field was to separate anxiety states from mental illness. This book was first published in 1962, which was used as a text in the United States and generally in psychiatric rehabilitation centres worldwide.

Dr Weekes talks directly to the reader, explaining how the nervous system works and the physical aspects of nervous breakdown. She uses case studies to explain how her self-help techniques work and explores the possible causes of breakdown.

The first chapter covers the physical nervous system, both the voluntary and the involuntary, with a view to helping the reader understand the process that their mind and body is participating in during a breakdown. Referring to the involuntary nervous system she says:

'This second part is not under our immediate control but – and this is of paramount importance in understanding 'nerves' – It responds to our moods.'

The biological descriptions are written clearly and concisely without jargon or preamble. I found this really helpful in allaying my own personal fears that I was going mad. I understood it was my body's way of reacting to my emotional feelings about my life at that time. This clarity enabled me to 'see' what was happening and understand that I was participating in a process and that if I chose to, I could change how I was feeling. This was a very empowering thought. As the author puts it:

'Each of us has unsuspected power to accomplish what we demand of ourselves, if we care to search for it. You are no exception .... I am not writing this book for the rare brave people, but for you, probably a sick, suffering, ordinary human being..'

This was a revelation; I could take control even when I felt as if everything was beyond my control.

Dr Weekes goes on in further chapters to describe nervous 'illnesses' such as stress and anxiety and their physical and mental symptoms. I particularly liked her explanation of cycles, such as the fear-adrenalin-

fear cycle, where you are fearful of a situation or person and how your mind reacts to this and in turn your body; adrenalin is released and you then become more fearful of the sensations in your body and the cycle continues.

At no time does Dr Weekes suggest delving into the embodied history of the reader, but does suggest that talking to someone, such as a counsellor, about your fears and feelings could help. Her ethos is dealing with the here and now and finding your way back to recovery.

Despite the influence of her medical background, there is a strong humanistic component to Clare Weekes' approach. When talking about how others may view the sufferer of a breakdown she says

'They think, "Why doesn't he pull up his socks and get on with his work and forget all about this nonsense?" That is exactly what he would like to do. But what we, the healthy ones, do not realise is that by this time the fear felt by such a sufferer is greater than the average person has known or paused to imagine.'

I also feel that there are elements of Gendlin's Focussing-Orientated therapy where the client is encouraged to approach their felt sense with an amicable and open attitude. The author advocates a philosophical acceptance of feelings rather than fighting against them, using a four-stage system to work them through, 'Facing, accepting, floating and finally, letting time pass.' Both Gendlin and Weekes show an appreciation of how the body is a powerful tool for understanding your emotional needs and that your body can be an indicator of suppressed or neglected feelings. She advises readers to:

'...Examine and do not shrink from the sensations that have been upsetting you. I want you to examine each carefully, to analyse and describe it aloud to yourself.'

A form of visualisation for relaxation is also recommended and advocates tuning into your body and listening to it and the noises that it is making, using 'the visual receptive area of our brain and spare the thinking area.' This is similar to Gendlin's concept of 'inner bodily attention'.

The author also incorporates cognitive-behavioural ideas into her approach e.g.:

'To feel more secure you must take home a definite plan of action. You must have an acceptable way of looking at your problem before you return.'

She emphasises the importance of a solution based approach rather than delving into the deeper emotional aspects of the reader's problems.

I feel that it is difficult to align Weekes' theoretical base to just one stream of counselling/psychotherapy. She blends a mix of humanistic values such as, valuing the client, the view that people can change and that this is possible within the right environment along with the educative, problem-orientated approach within the cognitive-behavioural process, that is considered to be part of the behaviourism stream. This could possibly be thought of as a truly integrative approach.

The book deals very much in the here and now and gives practical advice on how to develop coping mechanisms, whilst changing behaviour through our cognitions.

When first reading the book I grabbed onto the feelings of acceptance that I gained from Dr Weekes' insightful words. The fact that I could recognise my own emotional sensitivities and that these had manifested into physical sensations was enlightening. I realised that my response to my own personal circumstances was OK and I could find my way back to a healthy existence if I chose to. This, combined with the safe environment in which to explore my feelings in greater depth within a therapeutic relationship, was a life changing experience.

Today re-reading the book I can see both its power and its limitations. Dr Weekes is accomplished at suggesting a pragmatic approach to problem solving within a set of circumstances such as bereavement, but further exploration into grief and possibly attachments is not encouraged. I believe that this book is really beneficial in understanding and gaining clarity in what is happening to you and why, but does not attempt to identify possible underlying issues.

This book is useful in helping clients to identify their feelings and to implement coping mechanisms, but further exploration of these issues would be safer within a therapeutic relationship as a client deeply entrenched within their breakdown may have different needs that require a different approach. I believe that a book such as this can help to reassure the client by increasing their knowledge of their illness and can be used in conjunction with individual counselling and psychotherapy.

In conclusion, I found Dr Weekes' book very helpful in dealing with crisis intervention within certain parameters. I cannot dismiss the power of feeling that you are not alone and that others have felt in a similar way. Self-help books when used within a counselling context, along with the support of a qualified counsellor can provide an effective platform for change.

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### **Advance Notice**

## **AHP(B) AGM & WORKSHOP**

**Saturday 20 May 2006**

10.30am-5pm in Central London

Morning - Workshop on Living Humanistically

Afternoon - AGM and initial results of the Survey

More details in the March Issue