

# Book Reviews

## Counselling in Disability and Illness (2nd Ed.)

By Gill Brearley and Peter Birchley, London: Mosby, 1994, 121pp.

This book describes itself as “an attempt to present a workshop in counselling skills, with special reference to illness and disability, for all those working in the paramedical professions and beyond”. In essence, the book is a follow-on from several years’ worth of successful workshops led by the authors. Although initially designed to introduce counselling skills for people with disabilities, the workshops and the book evolved into both an introduction to counselling as well as to specific strategies for counselling people with disabilities. When read in this light, this is a thoroughly useful handbook for either trained counsellors who wish to gain a few practical guidelines when confronted with clients who have disabilities, or for trainees in the helping field - such as social workers, nurses, or carers - who are looking for knowledge about how to assist people with disabilities when they wish to discuss personal issues.

Chapters 1 to 7 consider the nature of counselling, providing a working platform for basic safety when counselling others. “Ben - a person in need of help” is depicted as an example of how the onset of multiple sclerosis can radically change one’s life, including becoming unemployed, role changes at home, and the accompanying feelings of powerlessness. While Ben features in both the prologue and a separate chapter entitled, “Counselling Ben”, other typical client scenarios illustrate all the chapters, personalising the material. The counsellor is urged, and given examples of how to: take a person centred approach with clients; consider self-awareness; explore professional issues in supervision, which incorporates role playing case scenarios; and provide professional

accountability to both clients and organisations, including details on confidentiality and the counselling contract.

Chapters 8 to 13 are more specific to the skills required when counselling people with disabilities. There is an excellent chapter on counselling persons with speech difficulties, as well as a pertinent section dedicated to utilising creative, action-oriented techniques in counselling. Sexuality, abuse, culture and grief are also topics covered within these chapters. The final chapter briefly covers the topic of “why be a counsellor?”.

The beauty of this book is its simplicity. A counsellor can quickly flick to the relevant page when needing guidance about a particular issue and there, in clear language, is practical advice. The danger, however, is that the text may be seen as something of a one-stop shop complete in itself, rather than a collection of practical tips from two experienced disability counsellors sharing their knowledge with others who are beginning in the field. Their agenda in providing this introductory text has inevitably meant that not everything has been covered in satisfactory detail or accuracy. For example, British Sign Language (BSL) and Makaton are described as systems where hand gestures stand for words. In actual fact, BSL is not a system of gestures but is a “language” in its own right with a different syntax and grammar structure from English. It is used by the Adult Deaf Community in Britain and is synonymous with Deaf Culture. Makaton, on the other hand, is a “communication aid” developed primarily by health professionals for persons with either one or more of speech, hand and intellectual impairments.

It is the lack of acknowledgment of such nuances of difference and points of accuracy that gives rise to my sense that the book’s emphasis may be too much toward *helping* people with disabilities - as if they are other than ourselves - rather than appreciating and understanding the otherness of disability as a way of being that is of equal value to living without a disability. To avoid stereotyping, a section on disability culture could have been included, or a more accurate title could have been “A practical introduction to counselling people with disabilities and

illness". As it stands however, I have unallayed fears that the interpretation and use of the book will exceed the authors' original intentions and the actual scope of its content.

Nonetheless, this caution should by no means detract from what is of value about this book; may it have a wide readership. At this time in New Zealand it is particularly relevant for such helpers as Community Home Carers, many of whom are undertaking this type of work for the first time. Whilst learning themselves, these people are also responsible for helping their clients to adjust to community living from institutionalised care. Despite the reservations expressed above, but bearing them in mind, it would also be suitable as a resource for workshops on counselling or working with persons with disabilities.

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