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Ho-hum self-help book not so ho-hum

By G. Kent Stewart

Therapy American Style: Person Power Through Self Help.

Kenneth B. Matheny and Richard J. Riordan; Nelson-Hall Inc., Publishers, Chicago, Illinois 60606, 1979, pp. 285, Index, \$16.95

Ho hum, another self-help book guaranteeing escape from all the tensions and frustrations of life? **NOT SO!** Drs. Matheny and Riordan develop early the idea that readers should not expect magical cures to their problems. In setting the stage for using their self-help book, they emphasize that while positive personal growth and the accompanying success and happiness it can bring is within reach of virtually everyone, it is a slow process—in fact, a life-long process requiring a high level of discipline, commitment and attention to specific guidelines.

It is a truism of human nature that millions of Americans engage in a life-long struggle to achieve that illusive goal called success. Yet, most eventually succumb to a feeling of relative helplessness to control the events and forces which shape their lives. They conclude sadly, that the struggle is not worth the effort, that there is little if any control over what life will bring, and that what is to be will be. Again, not so, according to Matheny and Riordan.

Given proper tools, adequate instruction, normal intelligence, health, and a reasonable level of motivation, most people can take more responsibility for what happens to them and for what they become. This is accomplished by adjusting beliefs, attitudes, goals and behavior. Admittedly, the whole process is painstakingly slow, but through planning and discipline exciting and satisfying change can be experienced.

The three remaining parts of this four-part book are appropriately titled: *The Desire To Change; Sound Mind, Sound Body; and Influencing The Behavior Of Others.*

In the four chapters of Part II—*The Desire To Change*—the authors initiate discussion of the necessity of motivation as a condition precedent to initiating change resulting in meaningful personal growth and enlightenment. Such change represents an important goal in the mind of nearly everyone, but for a variety of reasons the price tag is too high to nurture the goal to fruition. The authors observe correctly, "the behavior is often embarrassingly inconsistent with stated resolutions" (p. 25).

As a first step in initiating and achieving personal change, the authors suggest creative use of the imagination. To see oneself as others see us is difficult indeed; but to see ourselves as we want ourselves to be is even more challenging. The idea is to employ the imagination and the thought process to achieve a mental set toward a certain type of desired behavior. The authors refer to the technique as autosuggestion. Others describe it as visualization—the technique of visualizing in the mind's eye a certain behavior or goal as already achieved.

The authors warn, however, that at this point the conceived change can begin to die if the process is relaxed or diluted through the entry of negative images into the mind. This is the essence of the human predicament accruing from the incompatibility of desired behaviors with behaviors required to cope with the reality of the moment. The individual experiences a double bind to which the authors suggest as a means for control continued discipline and practice. Their formula:

$$\text{Motivation} \times \text{Program for Change} \times \text{Practice} \times \text{Time} = \text{Change}$$

Again, overnight success is not guaranteed, but a beginning toward basic personal progress and improvement has been initiated.

From this point, the authors suggest choosing company which facilitates rather than retards effort to change and grow. These are various kinds of lay self-help groups. Some authors in the self-help field call these master mind groups while others refer to therapy, encounter, or problem-solving groups. Whatever the name, the purpose is essentially the same—to become involved with individuals possessing the same goals for breaking old habits of behavior (thinking and acting) and establishing new directions for personal growth.

In addition to the lay self-help group, with or without professional involvement or leadership, the authors recommend a specific reading program. They refer to this as bibliotherapy or bibliocounseling which "refers to a type of therapy where the patient is assigned certain topics, books, or articles for the understanding or insight they will bring." (p. 106). The authors note a variety of books from the many which are available. Bookstores stock nearly all the popular, time-tested titles and regularly display an ever-increasing number of new books in the self-help and inspirational category.

In Part III of the book, which contains three chapters, the topics of health and stress are addressed in the specialized context of the impact of the mind on the body.

Expanding on the cliché as one thinks so one feels, the authors point out that people punish their bodies not only by their behavior but more particularly by their thinking. Inactivity or overeating have obvious effects upon the body; but an even greater toll is exacted on the physical system by faulty thinking.

Ill health, faulty thinking and stress are partners. Poor health in itself is a stressor; yet excessive stress brings on ill health! Faulty thinking, which is usually negative thinking (negative, critical self-talk) is also a source of stress. Excessive stress brings on more stress until finally the energy necessary to cope is depleted. Each person has a given supply of stress coping energy. It cannot be replaced as it is used, and the supply level cannot be measured. Once it is depleted, and the mind signals need for more in responding to yet another stressor there is none available. Death follows soon thereafter.

It is fascinating to contemplate that while stress can

kill prematurely, it is also the fuel of life. Without some stress there can be no action, no progress, and no achievement. Yet, with too much stress the result is the same.

The authors therefore provide a prescription for reducing excessive stress and for seeking ones optimum level of stress. First, they discuss diet and exercise, then relaxation and rest. From that point they explore in considerable detail the impact of one's thought patterns on stress control. "Much stress is self-generated. It results from **views** of what is happening to one." (p. 188). People engage regularly in self-talk. This self-talk is based on a persons beliefs—their view of the world—and these beliefs determine an individuals emotional response to a given event or experience. We respond to stimuli in the manner in which we tell ourselves to respond. Our order for a given response is occasioned by our early training, our experience, and our basic value system.

Coping effectively by bringing about change leading to positive growth requires examination of ones value system and the feelings and beliefs which condition how one reacts to a situation or event.

From this instructional effort, the authors introduce Part IV of their book by reminding the reader that the game of life is built around a rule book; and that while some people (the happily successful ones) master the rules, "most bumble along with mixed success, suffering heavily when interpersonal conflict occurs." (p. 211) So, Part IV is opened with an exploration of the com-

munication process. Also included is discussion of the power and impact of expectations on human behavior. They close the book with an examination of principles for influencing human behavior.

In their discussion of the communication process, the authors devote considerable space to handling confrontations and to explaining the process of adult communication including transactional analysis and assertiveness training. Finally, they explore ways to cope with the threat of sending and receiving messages which communicate true feelings. Open communication is effective communication, but only the most secure and mature adults can practice it effectively. Yet, it is an important component of a concentrated effort to bring about change leading to higher levels of personal achievement, happiness, and success.

Finally, in the closing chapter of the book, the authors present guidelines for influencing behavior of others. Part of any persons success is having a positive impact on the behavior of those with whom they associate. This is especially true of those who realize their success through the success and achievement of others—and most human endeavor is undertaken in concert with other people.

In the epilogue, the authors state that while there is an available self help technology, ultimate success in the human arena is not where one finds it—it is where one looks for it. With this observation and with the book, this reviewer concurs.