



## Book Reviews

Edited by Tina Beychok

### **Does Stress Damage the Brain?: Understanding Trauma- Related Disorders From a Mind-Body Perspective**

J. Douglas Bremner, M.D.  
W.W. Norton and Company; New York, 2002  
311 pages • \$30

Reviewed by Sandra L. Bloom, M.D.

As psychiatrist and researcher J. Douglas Bremner, M.D., pointed out, posttraumatic stress disorder is 10 times more common than cancer, but our society spends only one-tenth as much for research on this disorder as it spends for cancer research. Changing these priorities is one of the underlying intentions of this ambitious book.

*Does Stress Damage the Brain?* has three central tenets: 1) The effect of psychological trauma is best understood as a physiological effect on the brain, resulting in neurological dysfunction that, in turn, causes the psychiatric symptoms of PTSD and related conditions; 2) Other disorders such as depression and substance abuse are similarly related to the effects of stress on the brain and should be considered together with

PTSD as parts of a trauma spectrum of disorders; and 3) The traditional mind-body dichotomy that so characterizes modern medicine is outdated.

Bremner makes his case by ranging from a thorough but sometimes dense discussion of modern research on the effects of stress—especially the impact of stress on memory and higher cortical functions—to philosophical speculations about the implications of these important studies. In doing so, Bremner questions the theoretical basis of the present psychiatric classification system and recommends changes that pose a radical challenge to established authority. In his writing style, one sees two writers: one is a careful, studious, academic investigator who sometimes tends toward an assumption that the reader is as well-trained in this scientific endeavor as he is; the other is a passionate philosopher sharing his own personal experiences of witnessing the impact of overwhelming stress on his patients and in his own life.

Bremner has written a book designed to help any physician understand the underpinnings of the science of stress and the wider implications of these findings. His emphasis is on theory,

explanation and research findings. However, Bremner leaves it largely to others to explore the treatment implications of his work.

*Dr. Bloom is a psychiatrist specializing in the creation of trauma-informed systems of care. She is the author of Creating Sanctuary: Toward the Evolution of Sane Societies, published by Routledge in 1997.*

### **The Practical Art of Suicide Assessment: A Guide for Mental Health Professionals and Substance Abuse Counselors**

Shawn Christopher Shea, M.D.  
John Wiley and Sons; New York, 2002  
316 pages • \$34.95

Reviewed by Douglas G. Jacobs, M.D.

Shawn Christopher Shea, M.D., deserves much praise for *The Practical Art of Suicide Assessment: A Guide for Mental Health Professionals and Substance Abuse Counselors*. This seven-chapter book is divided into three comprehensive sections that address the nature of suicide from patient and practitioner perspectives, practical strategies for uncovering suicidal ideation, and easily applied and integrated techniques for suicide risk assessment. Not only is this book sound in its approach to understanding suicide and suicidal ideation, but it also provides an insightful and

seasoned perspective on the process and techniques of suicide assessment.

Shea's use of colorful language, patient-practitioner scenarios and practicable assessment concepts make this book an indispensable guide to increasing the accuracy, efficacy and efficiency of the suicide-assessment process. In particular, the validity techniques for uncovering secrets, such as the use of behavioral incidents, shame attenuation, gentle assumption, symptom amplification, denial of the specific and normalization, are excellent strategies that can be individualized on a case-by-case basis for eliciting suicidal ideation. The book is also successful at illustrating the complex concept of suicide risk as it applies to a diverse set of patients who may be suicidal.

The strategies detailed in this book provide mental health care professionals with the tools to integrate the information on the diverse presentations of suicidality into well-informed decisions about the management of a patient's suicide risk. The author also helps advance awareness about the suicidal thought process.

*Dr. Jacobs is chairperson of the American Psychiatric Association Workgroup for Practical Guideline for the Assessment and Treatment of Patients with Suicidal Behaviors and associate clinical professor of psychiatry at Harvard Medical School.* □

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