Book reviews

PROBLEM-SOLVING TREATMENT FOR ANXIETY AND DEPRESSION: A PRACTICAL GUIDE
LAURENCE MYNORS-WALLIS

Oxford University Press, 2005
PB, 208 pp, £24.95, 0 19 852842 6

This is the idiots' guide to problem-solving. A short and sweet book in an easy-to-understand format, clearly structured with good little summary boxes dotted throughout. The book begins by examining the reliability of the latest evidence for problem-solving in common mental health disorders for adult and old age groups. Much of the evidence comes from primary care settings.

The technique is then explained in greater detail with step-by-step advice and suggested phrasing. It relies on no prior knowledge apart from basic communication skills. It is a really practical, 'hands-on' guide to be used by nurses, GPs or psychiatrists. Template information leaflets and worksheet examples are given. Common scenarios and illustrated case studies of common pitfalls and how to climb out of them, leave you feeling prepared. Ultimately, it even shows you how to teach problem solving in small groups and provides an appendix of sample slides for this.

The only downside is that it is designed for up to six, half-hour sessions. Therefore, it may be more applicable for the practice nurse to employ problem solving as a formal service. This could be done working in conjunction with the local counsellor. However, even in a rushed 10-minute session, you will still be equipped with positive and dynamic skills from this book to deal with those 'heart sink' patients.

Heather Hills

IDEAS: A HISTORY FROM FIRE TO FREUD
PETER WATSON

Wiedenfeld and Nicolson, 2005
HB, 822 pp, £30 0 29 760726 X

Ideas, as Peter Watson admits in the introduction to his ambitious guide to how we understand our understanding of the world, do not have a long history. If philosophy traditionally began in wonder, as Aristotle says, after Descartes it had to start all over again, with doubt. Wonder was an impediment to knowledge; and it never showed much scepticism about Plato's transcendental postulates, to which, as Alfred North Whitehead once wryly remarked, 'the history of Western thought has been little more than a series of footnotes'. It was only with Descartes' near contemporaries, Bacon and Vico, that we discover anybody bothering to keep tabs on the discipline of thinking. Descartes himself had a sharp antipathy to historiography; and the new movement of historical thought that sprang up under his ban was implicitly critical of his attempt to redescribe the world as if he were a mathematical Robinson Crusoe. Yet living every day as if it were the first gave rise to a common cognitive ethic which has transformed the world. It is countered by the notion that history itself is a kind of knowledge, which one closes the gulf between questions about facts and questions about ideas, which Descartes' philosophy had split wide open.

That is where the tightrope runs which Watson treads in his naturalistic history of man's progress from primitive times to contemporary civilisation. That he adopts a largely positivist approach — putting philosophy to work in the service of science — adds to the occasional unsteadiness of the spectacle. Only someone working outside the academy (Watson is a broadcaster and independent scholar) would dare to take on a book like this, charting a universal map of knowledge in 800 pages. The growth of knowledge itself means that very few professional people know much about the history of their disciplines; and the benefits of progress have largely appeased minds troubled by the loss of historical perspective.

Watson, on the other hand, is able to show ideas shifting their freight across cultures and eras. Descartes' refusal to assent to anything susceptible to doubt was not the first time 'the interiority complex' had appeared in history. The sense that humans are duplex, both a part of the natural world and distinguished from it by their use of language, goes back to the first great change in human behaviour, in what Karl Jaspers called 'the Axial Age', between 700 and 400 BCE: this period saw the separate emergence of the Upanishads and Buddha, Zarathustra, Homer and the entire gamut of Greek philosophies from sophism to cynicism. And the sense that history, unlike nature, had a direction. When Franz Kafka (1883–1924) wrote that he understood the Fall of Man better than anyone he was expressing the acute sense of discomfort a cognitive ethic induces in the person aware of being no longer fully rooted in history or community. The real traditionalist, as the Muslim thinker al-Ghazzali said, is unaware of being a traditionalist. He has yet to eat of the Tree of Knowledge.

Watson's book offers us four broad swathes, *Lucy to Gilgamesh: the evolution of imagination*; *Isaiah to Zhu Xi: the romance of the soul*; *Aquinas to Jefferson: the birth of modern individualism*; and *Vico to Freud: parallel truths: the modern incoherence*. His quincunx is a solitary chapter called *The great hinge of history,* which considers the remarkable quickening that occurred in Europe between the first millennium and the discovery of the New World. How did these 'frigid, gross and apathetic' people, as they were described by the Arab geographer Mas'udi, come to dominate the world? Watson traces Europe's ascendancy back to the 12th century, the age of Aquinas, when three highly influential ideas began to take modern form: the soul, the idea of