

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

Europe and the experiment. They coincided with the foundation, in 1065, of the Nizamiyah in Baghdad, a theological seminary, and the end of 200 years of intellectual enquiry and toleration in Islamic culture; a few decades later the first European university opened at Bologna. Joseph Needham wrote his book *The Great Titration* (1969) to puzzle out why Chinese civilisation had, after leading the world intellectually for several centuries, turned away from the development of capitalism and the sciences. Christendom could have gone the same way, too: one of the early Church Fathers wrote, 'after Christ, we have no need of curiosity.' But that fundamental dual concept of humankind was strengthened by the Christian doctrine of rendering unto Caesar... Hence the saeculum, which has no equivalent in Islam, and the uniquely Western idea of 'dialogue', a kind of market exchange in the ideological sphere.

Watson's fundamental sympathy is realist: knowledge is something out there, not wholly under the control of the explorer himself, if it is to be credited as a discovery. Accordingly, his synopsis suffers from realism's usual problem: blindness about the historical specificities that made it possible. (Descartes, for instance, saw no reason to doubt his Latin or French.) It therefore comes as no surprise that Watson should regret in his conclusion that 'man's study of himself is his biggest intellectual failure in history'. The 'science of human nature' entertained by the 18th century, when it was still believed that the human species like all others was unalterable, has not been successful because its methods have been falsely propagated by analogy with the natural sciences. History itself is an activity of thought: 'it is the discerning of the thought which is the inner side of the event' (RG Collingwood). So having scaled the great discoveries of the 19th and early 20th century, we emerge with Watson on the intellectually impoverished plateau of the present. Perhaps *Ideas*, for all its funambulant high jinks, is itself symptomatic of this lull in inventiveness. It fails to explain how the development of ideas has brought about the kind of absolute anthropological awareness that helped Peter Watson to his overview.

Iain Bamforth

3-7 April

MRCGP Preparation Course
RCGP, Princes Gate, London
Contact: Events Department
E-mail: events@rcgp.org.uk
Tel: 0207 344 3124

4-5 April

Minor Surgery Course
Foresight Centre, University of Liverpool
Contact: Anna Reid
E-mail: mersey@rcgp.org.uk
Tel: 0151 708 0856

5-6 April

Minor Surgery Course
The Woodlands Centre, Chorley
Contact: Debbie Leyland
E-mail: dleyland@rcgp.org.uk
Tel: 01925 662351

5 April

Managing Long Term Conditions 2006
London Hilton Metropole
Contact: Gavin Johnstone
E-mail: events@rcgp.org.uk
Tel: 01925 662143

7 April

Dermatology Study Day
University of Winchester, West Downs Campus
Contact: Dr G M Fairris
E-mail: cwhite@rcgp.org.uk
Tel: 01962 879961

11 April

Joint Injections half day workshop
Liverpool Medical Institution, Liverpool
Contact: Anna Reid
E-mail: mersey@rcgp.org.uk
Tel: 0151 708 0865

25 April

Joint Injections half day workshop
Liverpool Medical Institution, Liverpool
Contact: Anna Reid
E-mail: mersey@rcgp.org.uk
Tel: 0151 708 0865

26-27 April

Palliative Care in Primary Care — Module 2
The Woodlands Centre, Chorley
Contact: Debbie Leyland
E-mail: dleyland@rcgp.org.uk
Tel: 01925 662351

THE ROAD TO NOWHERE

I'm writing this in the middle of nowhere, stuck on a train that is 3 hours later than the one I was hoping to catch, because I had to stay in for a plumber who failed to turn up because I wasn't at home when they rang to check if I was at home. As I'd arranged for the plumber to call between 3 and 5 pm, I naturally thought that getting home by 2.30 pm would be enough. They'd phoned at 12.30 pm, and again at 1.30 pm, to say they were rearranging the appointment for another day. After I'd listened to the answerphone messages, I rang them to say I was at last in, as I'd said I'd be. 'That's OK', said the chap on the other end, 'our plumber will be with you between 3 and 5'.

He wasn't, though. When I phoned at ten past 5, a recorded message told me that the office was closed, and would I phone again during their opening hours, which were 8.30 am to 5.30 pm.

So here I am on a late train, which is getting later, and I seem unlikely to get to my hotel much before 10 pm. There will be no-one in when the plumber calls later this week. Theirs is the second company to fail to send a plumber. The first lot cancelled an appointment, apologetically fixed another one, to which they failed to turn up. When I phoned them they found the job number and couldn't understand where their chap was.

These are all private companies. I know things go wrong. Nothing is perfect. But, private or public, things will continue, every now and then, to go wrong. Every fault in the public sector is assumed to be because of useless public sector workers who are stalling Our Great Leader's reforms. Hospitals or schools, private money and ambition will set things to rights. Except — lo and behold! — Hewitt has had another vision. Forget the hospitals; tell them all to get out into the community with their clinics and treatments.

I don't think Hewitt is wrong in thinking that patients with chronic diseases in the community tend to be ignored, and that the NHS concentrates too much on acute and sexy illnesses treated in hospital. But why didn't the Labour government think so 9 years ago? And how long will it be before all is turned on its head yet again?