BOOK REVIEW

Mental Health and Deafness – A Difference, Not a Deficit


Drs. Du Feu and Chovaz have written a book geared toward clinicians such as family physicians, psychologists, psychiatrists, and social workers who have little experience working with Deaf people. They argue that mainstream education in most health-care disciplines does not provide much information related to the care of Deaf people, yet it is likely that these professionals will come in contact at some point with Deaf patients. The authors have attempted to condense the many issues that those who find themselves providing services to Deaf and hard-of-hearing patients may face. This work is meant to be an introductory text for mainstream clinicians and will likely not be as useful to the clinician already working in the field of mental health and deafness.

The authors begin by reviewing important foundational issues necessary for understanding Deaf people in an historical and societal context. They briefly review educational controversies that have existed for centuries. Providing a foundation for what is “normal” in child development and adolescence, they then expound upon issues in mental health that may arise across the lifespan. They discuss issues relevant to mental health assessment for both children and adults. This discussion includes the treatment of mental health disorders with chapters on schizophrenia, mood disorder, and one on other disorders (posttraumatic stress disorder, substance abuse, personality disorders). While most of the book focuses on Deaf individuals who have been deaf since childhood, the authors do devote specific chapters to late deafened individuals as well as deaf-blind people. They also include a chapter on legal and forensic issues that include a discussion on capacity/competence and informed consent. They conclude with a chapter on service development in the deaf mental health field. They acknowledge that there is a dearth of appropriate and accessible services for deaf people and make recommendations to remedy the lack of services.

This text makes an excellent primer for those who want to increase their awareness and understanding of Deaf individuals they may encounter in their work. While the focus is on mental health, there are many chapters that would be relevant to anyone who wishes to increase their understanding of and sensitivity to Deaf people in a general way. Multiple case examples from the authors’ combined 50 years of clinical experiences are woven throughout the text, providing the reader a rich understanding of the learning points.

Deafness should then be viewed in regard to the entire scope of the individual, not merely as a medical condition. A focus not on the deficit but on the difference (e.g., visual orientation vs. auditory orientation) would likely result in better outcomes. (Hauser, O’Hearn, McKee, Steider, & Thew, 2010, p. 491)

The authors have done a fine job focusing on the difference that deafness creates and readers can expect to come away with a good basic understanding of mental health considerations when working with Deaf patients.

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