Seasonal Affective Disorder and Beyond: Light Treatment for SAD and Non-SAD Conditions

This text reviews the theoretical basis behind the use of phototherapy and the clinical literature on the efficacy of phototherapy in seasonal affective disorder (SAD) and other selected disorders. The novice reader may be surprised to discover there are a number of different clinical conditions for which light therapy has been purported to be effective. While phototherapy is generally considered a legitimate treatment modality for SAD, its use in other clinical syndromes is less established. Clearly, the authors are strong advocates for the use of phototherapy in any condition where it may be remotely helpful. For example, the data on the use of light therapy in the treatment of premenstrual depression and eating disorders with seasonal patterns are not overwhelming, yet the authors make a strong pitch for its use. The text also reviews the data on the use of bright light in the treatment of jet lag, shift work, and sleep maintenance insomnia; however, phototherapy is not usually considered to be a practical approach to any of these conditions. Likewise, the use of phototherapy in nonseasonal depression is endorsed by the authors. While phototherapy in these non-SAD conditions may not be harmful, its therapeutic benefits are questionable. Regarding the acute treatment of major depression, the text recommends that if phototherapy were used, it should be in combination with “standard” antidepressant treatments.

The most widely accepted role for light therapy is in the treatment of SAD and subsyndromal SAD conditions. The authors acknowledge that the specific treatment parameters (such as the intensity, wavelength, and the time of day when light is to be administered) vary considerably among researchers and clinicians. The majority consensus, however, is that white light appears to be superior to any specific wavelength, and morning light is superior to evening light. Probably the most useful part of the book is an outline of “how to do” phototherapy, beginning with the initial standard treatment paradigm and including treatment options for partial responders. The section on the side effects reported with light therapy should be required reading for anyone who prescribes phototherapy. A surprising 20% of subjects will report transient side effects such as headache, eye strain, feeling “wired,” nausea, and dizziness.

The authors of this text are extremely knowledgeable about the technical side of the subject matter and the application of phototherapy in various clinical settings. However, most of the discussions are too technical for the average clinician. Most clinicians would be happy with simpler explanations of the proposed mechanisms of action of light therapy, followed by guidelines on how to conduct phototherapy. The technical details such as measuring light, different wavelengths required to achieve a biological response, and other physiologic explanations of how light treatments work will be less interesting to the average clinician. Whereas the efficacy of light therapy in the treatment of SAD is generally well accepted, the authors’ conclusion of the effectiveness of light therapy in other non-SAD disorders does not appear to be unequivocally supported by the reviewed literature. The discussion of delayed sleep phase syndrome and advanced sleep phase syndrome is a good review for the clinician who practices sleep disorders medicine or one who wants to know more on this topic.

Emile R. Risby, M.D.
Decatur, Georgia

Treatment of Childhood Disorders, 2nd ed.

Treatment of Childhood Disorders is a comprehensive and scholarly review of the latest behavioral-systemic treatments for childhood and family disturbances. The editors and their colleagues, mostly academic psychologists, address the multivariate forces that shape and maintain childhood disorders. The book is portioned into 6 sections: the introduction and sections on behavioral disorders, emotional and social disorders, developmental disorders, children at risk, and problems of adolescence. Each section devotes a chapter to a specific disorder or topic. Many of the chapters contain commentary about onset, course, outcome, etiology, genetics, pharmacology, treatment, and developmental considerations.

Behavioral-systemic treatment focuses on “building skills in the child and his or her social environment that will facilitate long-term adjustment, and not just on the elimination of problem behaviors and/or the short-term reduction of subjective distress.” (p. 10) The behavioral-systemic approach emphasizes attention to systemic as well as individual developmental perspectives across clinical diagnoses. The empiricism and critical thinking of the multiple authors are noteworthy, and their willingness to discard unproved treatments is praiseworthy.

This well-edited book moves smoothly from chapter to chapter despite having multiple authors. Barkley writes comprehensively about attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder; other authors offer reviews emphasizing cognitive behavioral approaches to child sexual abuse, autism, anxiety, and eating disorders. Each chapter contains a literature review, clinical data arranged in clear tables, and guidelines for initiating cognitive-behavioral therapy.

The book could benefit from more consideration of interper-sonal (attachment theory) and intrapsychic process (resistance)
issues. Many patients do not fit snugly into one theoretical category, and the norm in most caseloads is eclectic treatment. Furthermore, the belief that the child’s social environment can be tailored to support the goals of treatment is often overly optimistic.

Child and adolescent clinicians will benefit immeasurably from this encyclopedic and informative review book, and both experienced and novice therapists can profit from it. This text will probably be used primarily as a reference codex to support practitioners who use empirically based behavioral theory to guide their practice. Systemic and dynamic therapists will benefit from the research findings and clinical tips offered by these renowned authors. Credit goes to the authors of this volume for bringing the findings of the laboratory to the office of the practitioner.

Michael Maloney, M.D.
Gavin Behrens, M.S.W.
Rockville, Maryland

Harm Reduction: Pragmatic Strategies for Managing High-Risk Behaviors

The development of more effective strategies to prevent and minimize problems associated with potentially dangerous behaviors (such as substance abuse and unsafe sex) is of great importance to both at-risk individuals and society in general. Harm Reduction: Pragmatic Strategies for Managing High-Risk Behaviors is a new book that promotes a controversial movement toward various approaches to “harm reduction” of dangerous behaviors, a movement based on nonjudgmental assistance and education of alcohol and illicit drug users. The text includes 20 contributors, with 16 from the University of Washington in Seattle. It is unfortunate that only 12 authors had doctoral level (Ph.D.) training and that none were psychiatrists or other physicians despite the medically relevant issues discussed, including use of medications in substance abuse treatment.

The fact that this book has as much of a political agenda as a clinical one will probably be exciting to strong supporters of harm reduction (HR) programs, but irritating to those opposed and those primarily seeking a clinical text in the area. There is often a distinction between legislative and social goals for the “greater good” and the clinical needs of a patient. The stated objective is to “provide an alternative” to the “war on drugs” in the United States, with “a new approach to working with people who use drugs or who engage in other high-risk behaviors.”

The text is composed of 4 parts. Part I (3 chapters) includes a report on the first national HR conference in the United States, which took place in California in 1996. As a doctor not involved in the HR movement, I found this to be one of the less useful chapters; it seems to be included primarily for posterity purposes. To me, more interesting chapters in this section were on the international history of HR and basic concepts in HR. The book describes HR as nonjudgmental on the “use” of substance abuse and asserts that drug use in our society cannot be avoided. This passive stance will be considered the primary breakthrough for supporters of HR and as a road to enabling for nonsupporters. It is possible that both opinions may be correct depending on specific cases. Although abstinence is considered one of the possible objectives of treatment, it is not considered the only accept-