

Book Review*

Title: SHOCKS TO THE SYSTEM: Psychotherapy of Traumatic Disability Syndrome

Author: Laurence Miller, Ph.D.

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Review: Roxanne Rae, LCSW, BCD

In this book the author provides us with an innovative and detailed view of trauma. He bases his views on the scientific literature on pain, stress, and trauma as well as on his extensive clinical experience with the patients no one else has been able to help. The author clarifies a category of serious injuries that have often gone inadequately treated as they fall between medicine and psychology. These are often people who search long to make sense of an injury and find relief from their symptoms, only to end up depressed, alienated, and wondering if what is bothering them is “all in my head.” It is likely that we each have seen someone in this struggle, whether we recognized it at the time or not.

Miller clearly describes how injury, pain, stress, and trauma “often mutually reinforce one another in a vicious cycle of disability and despair.” (p. xiii) He has a remarkable grasp of the negative impact of the medicolegal system for a person in this situation. The author terms the result of the downward spiral “traumatic disability syndrome: a persistent impairment in adaptive functioning, caused or triggered by a traumatic injury or incident, that is resistant to conventional medical and psychological treatment, appears ‘out of proportion’ to the precipitating event, and affects that person’s thought, mood, behavior, work role, family relations and social interactions.” (p. xiv) Miller makes a critical distinction in the diagnosis of PTSD. He defines trauma experiences as those “outside the range of normal, everyday experience *for that person.*” (reviewer’s emphasis in italics) In repeated case examples the personal meaning of the experience is illustrated to be an integral part of unraveling the trauma and improving the management of any residual illness symptoms. The author illuminates his ideas on “Real Healing” a chapter with detailed information on treating PTSD, including delineating psychotherapeutic practices which are not helpful in this situation.

This volume is well organized in a manner which makes it a useful reference book. Basic history and definitions are in the introduction and first chapter. The fundamental principles of the author’s approach to psychotherapy for traumatic disability syndrome are in the second. The balance of the chapters provide information treating specific types of trauma. A sampling includes: traumatic brain injury; toxic trauma; crime victims; and workplace violence. There are a couple of chapters on helpers, such as emergency response personnel and traumatized psychotherapists (who us?). The volume ends with a brief chapter on the adaptive ways some people can cope with trauma and

regain joy in their lives without professional assistance. Miller encourages us to learn about these people as a way to more fully understand traumatic disability syndrome.

This book will be helpful as a practical guide to update one's research knowledge, for both the seasoned practitioner and the novice. On a personal note, having lived through many experiences Miller describes in his chapter "No Relief-Traumatic Pain and Chronic Pain Syndrome," from both a clinical/intellectual perspective as well as a very personal one, I can assure you that Laurence Miller knows what he is talking about.

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