

Handbook of Self-Help Therapies

Edited by Patti Lou Watkins & George A. Clum

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If there is one thing that has managed to keep up with the continual production and fanfare of new self-help approaches, authors, and materials, it is the ravenous appetite of the consumers and clinicians who continue to purchase and advocate for them. At the same time, the increasing costs of healthcare are creating an urgent push to highlight cost-effective, efficient, and often self-administered approaches to treatment. The junction of these two trends has left clinicians and their clients with a plethora of books, websites, and other self-help programs, yet has also provided little guidance regarding which treatments actually work, and how. In response to this need, several researchers have turned their focus toward empirically investigating which self-administered approaches are truly effective and which disorders they benefit most. In the *Handbook of Self-Help Therapies*, several of these scholars and clinicians offer a comprehensive review of current research on the use of self-help interventions and their place in effective and responsible clinical care.

The first four chapters of the book provide a general overview of the purpose, evolution, and place of the self-help movement in the context of general healthcare. The text begins with a chapter detailing not only the definition of self-help from the editors' perspective, but also surveying the history, emergence, and usage patterns of self-help in the United States. The author also addresses the ongoing deluge of self-help therapies that have little or no empirical basis, and notes the potential traps of self-blame and harm that can befall trusting consumers. Chapter 2 extends the call for diligence in ethical and clinical responsibility when designing self-help programs, and suggests a shift toward team-designed interventions rather than those produced solely by individual authors. In chapter 3, the often ill-defined role of self-help treatments within the greater framework of general medical and psychological care is discussed. The chapter also highlights the emergence of effectiveness research for self-help and discusses overall rates of success for these interventions. These introductory sections conclude with a discussion of various theories of self-regulation and motivation, highlighting how these theoretical and empirical knowledge bases can inform successful delivery and implementation of self-help treatment.

Chapters 5 through 15 survey self-help applications in a number of specific domains, including anxiety, depression, childhood concerns, eating disorders, sexual dysfunction, and several health behaviors such as sleep difficulties, alcohol and nicotine use, weight control, and diabetes management. These chapters vary considerably in their format, type of interventions or programs discussed, and relative degree of emphasis on research reviews versus suggestions and information for clinicians and consumers. Many sections detail the historical evolution of self-help approaches for the various disorders and summarize existing knowledge on the effectiveness of traditional psychotherapeutic (generally cognitive-behavioral) approaches. The chapters are generally oriented around a review of outcomes research for self-administered cognitive behavioral treatments in comparison to standard therapist-delivered interventions. In some chapters (such as those covering depression and insomnia), useful summaries and practice guidelines are provided as an easy-to-reference distillation of applied findings for the reader. Following these condition-specific sections, an especially practical chapter details the general

usability and effectiveness of psychological self-help resources in primary care settings and provides a concise guide to currently available resources. Each chapter ends with a bulleted list of “Chapter Points” that highlight the major themes discussed. The book itself concludes with a summation of lessons learned thus far in the evolution of self-help therapies and an astute prediction of the movement’s future, highlighting the increasing attention paid to empirical validation, interpersonal and societal factors in psychopathology and psychotherapy, and the need for self-help resources that are more readily accessible and usable by linguistic, ethnic, sexual, and cultural minority groups.

Much of the material covered in the *Handbook* extends beyond the traditional “trade paperback” format often associated with self-help. The rapid expansion of self-directed treatments has become particularly salient with the widespread shift from printed material to the more readily available and interactive format of the internet, and the chapters within the *Handbook* appropriately provide up-to-date, thorough coverage of currently available research on this medium as well as suggested guidelines for future internet and other computer-based interventions. Additionally, the inclusion of a chapter on motivational and self-regulatory factors, as well as the recurrent emphasis throughout the book on the degree of clinician involvement necessary for meaningful client change, are especially useful in bridging the often abrupt gap between self- and therapist-administered treatments.

Although the scientific rigor and comprehensive content of this book are readily apparent, a few factors compromise the volume’s readability and utility for a wider audience. Foremost among these is the inconsistency between chapters in their content, apparent intended audience, and format, which gives a slightly disjointed feel to the book and leaves some topic areas seeming inadequately or incompletely addressed. All chapters successfully review literature on the effectiveness of self-administered treatments; however, only a portion of them (primarily the behavioral health topics) provide specific, useful suggestions or resources to directly inform clinical practice or interested mental health consumers. In the same vein, this book’s appeal would also benefit from a more thorough editing to reduce typographical errors and refine the occasionally unwieldy text.

The *Handbook of Self-Help Therapies* is a comprehensive survey of the current empirical status of self-guided treatments in contemporary psychological and medical care, providing a timely and increasingly necessary reference for clinicians and researchers alike. As the body of available self-help material continues to grow and evolve at an exponential rate, a resource like this volume is essential in navigating the complexities of this approach to therapy and in helping clients to truly help themselves in a safe and effective fashion.

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