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Empirically supported drug treatment for all: Helping a nation get “Clean”

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Abstract

Reviews the book *Clean: Overcoming Addiction and Ending America's Greatest Tragedy* by David Sheff. This book provides, in layman's language, an overview of the full range of addiction science including: initiation of substance use, the neuroscience of addiction, prevention, treatment, and drug policy. Sheff has done extensive research for the book, including interviews of both individuals who have been affected by substance use disorders and experts in all aspects of addiction science as well as summaries of up to date empirical literature. The book includes a plan for targeting drug problems in the U.S. at multiple levels including: prevention, treatment, and drug policy. The author describes and encourages the use of empirically supported treatments for substance use disorders. The primary intended audience of the book appears to be individuals who have loved ones with addiction problems. The book is likely less useful for the psychologist who is accustomed to reading primary literature, but it could be a helpful book to which to refer people who may want additional information about substance use disorders and their treatment.

Have you ever been asked to explain the addiction problems of a friend or family member? Or perhaps a client has asked you how to find a good substance abuse treatment program for someone they know? Have you struggled to find a layman's resource that accurately digests the full range of addiction science, including: initiation of substance use, the neuroscience of addiction, prevention, treatment, and drug policy? How about a text that introduces the public to the idea of getting an empirically supported treatment for substance use? *Clean* does all of that.

The premise of this book is accurate: addiction problems are widespread in America, the cultural forces that maintain these problems are complex, and the beliefs that exist about addiction are often not based in science. This book is written from the perspective of a writer and journalist who has had a child with a substance use disorder and has been confronted with the challenge of trying to understand addiction and find adequate treatment. It follows Mr. Sheff's earlier and well-regarded *Beautiful Boy* (2008). The primary intended audience seems to be individuals who have loved ones with addiction problems.

A New Paradigm?

Sheff has done exhaustive research for the book, interviewing individuals with and families affected by substance use disorders, and experts on all aspects of addiction science from the

development of addiction to addiction treatment. Sheff indicates he is introducing a “new paradigm” that “helps people understand what they’re up against; shows them how to navigate bewildering, treacherous waters; and guides them in planning the best possible course of action” (p. xxii).

While the author’s paradigm does not seem new to those with training in substance use disorders and addictions, his book does serve as a targeted educational guide that could allow the unacquainted to get up to speed with addiction, treatment systems, and what is required to advocate for oneself within that system. Many components of this book, taken as chapters alone, could be helpful suggested reading for both the individual affected by substance use disorders and their family members or loved ones. For instance, Sheff includes a detailed discussion of the process of reframing one’s view of addiction from a moral problem to that of an illness. Within this discussion, he uses stories of parents whose children have addiction problems, including his own story, to illustrate the struggle of trying to make sense of a loved one’s drug or alcohol use.

This book is likely less useful for the psychologist who is accustomed to reading primary literature, but it could be a helpful book to which to refer people who may be seeking additional information about substance use disorders and their treatment. The book includes a chapter on beginning treatment that describes issues for parents to consider when working with a physician to select a treatment program. While in general, the book speaks to parents of children with substance use problems (likely due to Sheff’s own experiences) it could also be helpful for other concerned individuals.

Embodiment of Dissemination

For psychologists interested in connecting the ivory tower to what is actually done in treatment settings, Sheff goes the extra step. Sheff disseminates information about empirically supported treatments directly to the consumer, providing digestible information about different substance abuse treatment approaches both from the primary literature and through interviews with experts in the field. For instance, Sheff briefly acquaints the reader with the research on interventions such as Screening, Brief Intervention, and Referral to Treatment and in an unthreatening fashion, describes the process of the intervention and recent research on its effectiveness (Madras et al., 2009).

One caveat to be considered in recommending this book for a client is the level of alarm that may be invoked when reading the stories of parents and families who made decisions about treatment that they later felt may have contributed to their children’s death. While the intent of including these stories is likely to punctuate the seriousness of the problem, these examples could be extremely anxiety provoking for parents or loved ones who are already second guessing their decision making about their responses to the individual in their lives with a substance use disorder. For that reason, clinicians should not recommend this book to clients without first previewing it and considering the potential impacts.

As academic psychologists reading the book, the large number of personal stories of families and children experiencing drug problems seemed to take away from considering the issues from an empirically informed perspective. It is clear that the author interviewed a

large number of authorities in addiction science and policy, and the book scrupulously provides accurate citations for the facts and opinions it presents. While the inclusion of personal stories is a well-executed journalistic tool that can draw a wide audience, it may also alienate professionals. This is not to say that personal stories are not helpful, but there may be too many for the book to appeal to scientists.

One additional undealt with theme in the book is the way in which systems (e.g., families, schools, judicial systems) serve a role in maintaining or motivating addictive behaviors. It is well established that for those who are addicted, substances are powerful reinforcers. Evidence is clear that there is a significant biological component to addiction, and stigmatizing individuals because they have a disease is unjust. This poses a question that remains unanswered by Sheff and addiction researchers alike. If addiction is solely an illness, and those who are addicted are to be relieved of all moral culpability, how can the systems that they live in (their families, their communities, their governments) provide the impetus or the contingencies to help them emerge from addiction (the consequences which can be so motivating) while still acknowledging and accepting their illness. In an illness which is frequently defined by destructive actions, for which getting better requires a multitude of new and different choices, how can we motivate people toward being “Clean.” While Sheff danced around this conflict between acceptance and change, at times advocating for each of these poles, he did not offer solutions.

Overall Clean comes across as a sincere and well-reasoned book about drug problems in the U.S. and how to address them more effectively. Everett Rogers (2003) has suggested that the process of getting scientifically-validated interventions in the field takes decades or more. Thus, readers cannot expect a miracle, but Clean serves is one of the elements nudging the addiction treatment field toward a rational scientific underpinning. The information may not be as ground-breaking as the book claims, yet it can reach a broad audience of individuals affected by drug use who will benefit from both the material and the attitude of stubborn optimism that we have better ways to handle these problems than we have used to date.

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Biography

Dr. Annesa Flentje received her Ph.D. in Clinical Psychology from the University of Montana. She is currently on a National Institute on Drug Abuse funded Postdoctoral Fellowship at the University of California, San Francisco, where she studies the unique substance abuse treatment needs and outcomes of sexual and gender minority individuals.

Dr. James L. Sorensen is Professor of Psychiatry at University Of California, San Francisco. He received his Ph.D. in Clinical Psychology from University of Rochester in 1975. He is located at San Francisco General Hospital. His work in substance abuse treatment research began 35 years ago, directing a National Institute on Drug Abuse (NIDA)-funded double-blind investigation of detoxification from heroin. Since that time he has worked to improve

the scope and effectiveness of drug abuse treatment. His publications number over 200. In recent years he has focused increasingly on linking research and practice in the addictions.

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