

Beating Combat Stress: 101 Techniques For Recovery

John Henden

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Review by Barry Winbolt

John Henden's previous book *Preventing Suicide*, on working briefly with suicidal clients, was a much needed addition to the field, and I believe that his latest, *Beating Combat Stress*, will be even more highly valued. It will also have wider appeal than the title suggests, for though it may appear to be written for professionals working in a specialised area, it also puts practical techniques into the hands of anyone who is in a position to support sufferers of post-traumatic stress. In his words "*the book's twin purpose is to provide a handbook for practitioners and at the same time to be a self-help book or buddy-aid manual.*"

Speaking of wider appeal, and before discussing why I think the content and practical aspects of the book are so useful, a word about style. Henden writes in a way that is accessible and sincere, with glimpses of his conviction, passion even, that more can be done for people who often don't receive the help that they need. I'll return to passion later.

As I read through the dozens of ideas and techniques I was struck by the language; it is simply and artfully written as if by a copywriter for a patent medicine company. For example – and with little of the preamble that pads out so many books written by 'experts' – most of the techniques and strategies are "*easy to understand and apply*" and there is "*something for everyone*". And true to the tradition of the "over-the-counter medicine" genre he even puts in the usual cautionary advice that the book is "*not intended as a substitute for professional help when it is needed.*"

Maybe this persuasive clarity is one of his unique gifts, honed through his years as a therapist and trainer and now coming through in his writing. Or perhaps it is simply that, to put ideas across, one must first think clearly about what it is one wants to say. However the style came about, for me it produces a double effect. I am persuaded of the effectiveness of the ideas and at the same time I understand the salutary implications that such relatively simple tools need to be more widely understood and available because, as Henden says, some practitioners have found ways to “*avoid getting involved.*”

In case I appear dismissive – and because I know that my flights of imagination have got me into trouble at times – my comparison with patent medicine copywriting is deliberate and intended as a compliment. Until relatively recently in our history, effective pharmaceuticals did not exist. When they began to appear less than a century ago they were only available through medical specialists, and left to them it would probably be the same today, were it not for a burgeoning patent medicine industry that made treatment for common disorders available to everyone.

In a parallel way *Combat Stress* puts practical help within the reach of many people – practitioners, supporters and sufferers of post-traumatic stress – who otherwise might not be aware of it. Another reason I think it has broader appeal, and why I hope that people look beyond the catchy title, is that the ideas and techniques will also be valuable for therapists and others in the helping professions who work with people suffering the impact of more prosaic shock and trauma, the road accidents and other mishaps which for all their banality can continue to rattle around in people’s lives and produce the same after-effects as those caused by battle. Post-traumatic stress is not limited to war zones.

True to SF traditions the emphasis of the book is on simplicity and effectiveness with techniques for dealing with intrusive thoughts, flashbacks and triggers, sleep disturbance, changing moods and a wide range of other effects. Some of the less obvious ones, anger and guilt for example,

can often go unnoticed or ignored, overshadowed by the more pressing symptoms like flashbacks, but they can be just as debilitating and often become chronic. A valuable aspect of this book is that it provides a basis for talking through and normalising many of the symptoms that might otherwise be neglected.

John Henden's passion for his subject has produced a book that'll help the afflicted and guide their carers. As one who has worked with post-traumatic stress for many years I know the helplessness that practitioners – even solution focused ones – can experience when confronted by a client who is constantly and vividly re-living the effects of some personal tragedy. I hope that it is widely read and the ideas are carried forward into practitioner training as well as practice.

Barry Winbolt is an SF trainer and therapist and author of *Solution Focused Therapy for the Helping Professions*.
info@lifeboat.uk.com