

Book Review

Denning, P., & Little, J. (2012). *Practicing harm reduction psychotherapy: An alternative approach to addictions. (2nd Ed.)* New York, NY. The Guilford Press.

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Patt Denning and Jeannie Little offer this second edition of *Practicing Harm Reduction Psychotherapy: An Alternative Approach to Addictions* with solid success behind them and tremendous practice knowledge accompanying their writing. Denning and Little cofounded the Harm Reduction Therapy Center (HRTC) in 2000 and released the first edition of this book in that year. Building on the “enormous strides [that] have been made in the development of harm reduction psychotherapy [HRP]” since that time, this second offering is updated with the knowledge gained from the explosion of research and practice into HRP. New to this edition are sections on work in “community-based settings, groups, and with families and friends, as well as new chapters on trauma and on the biological, psychodynamic, and cognitive-behavioral components of the approach” (front flap).

The goal of this elegantly and poignantly written book is, according to Denning and Little, “to make harm reduction the paradigm for all drug treatment” (p. xii). But what is harm reduction psychotherapy, you may ask. Tatarsky answers with “harm reduction psychotherapy (HRP) is the category of psychotherapeutic approaches that may vary in theoretical orientation and clinical approach, but share in the commitment to the reduction of harm associated with active substance use without assuming that abstinence is the ideal goal for all problem substance users or a necessary prerequisite for entering treatment.” (Tatarsky, 2003, p. 252).

The book is broken into three parts plus four appendices (Appendix B, Harm Reduction

Supervision, is a pithy must read; Appendix D is a comprehensive [and possibly daunting] list of recommended readings). Part I, *Setting the Stage*, argues the case for HRP and the basics. Even if you think you know the reasons and the general “how to’s,” don’t skip this brilliant section. Part II has six chapters, all demonstrating HRP as an integrated treatment. Included are chapters on the fundamentals, such as “Assessment as Treatment” and “Developing a Treatment Plan,” which are especially helpful for new practitioners or students. The gem of this section for me was the authoritatively woven fundamentals of culture, trauma, and attachment (Chapter 5). I entice you with this quote on practicing ethnographically: “Listening hearing, *wanting*, to understand the minutiae of a person’s experience is absolutely necessary to assist his or her journey toward health” (p. 126). Further, Denning and Little ask us to examine the assumptions reflected in language, tying this to a person’s experiences of trauma and connection of culture and ecological context. It’s a powerful chapter in an already extraordinary book.

Part III looks at HRP applications, with chapters on the aforementioned topics of community settings, groups, and families/friends of people who use drugs. The final chapter asks the question “What does it take to practice harm reduction psychotherapy?” I recommend reading this chapter first—it’s a clear call to excellence, made with a combination of stories, practice wisdom, ethical theory, and qualitative research findings, to promote a dignity-respecting, hopeful, authentic, and proven approach to working with people with addictions.

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Do Denning and Little achieve their stated goal to “make harm reduction the paradigm for all drug treatment”? They make a compelling and, perhaps now more than ever, timely case.

Reference

Tatarsky, A. (2003). Harm reduction psychotherapy: Extending the reach of traditional substance use treatment. *Journal of Substance Abuse Treatment*, 25(4), 249–256.