

Book Review

Newton, J. (2013). *Preventing Mental Ill-Health: Informing Health Planning and Mental Health Practice*. London, UK: Routledge.

Reviewed by Wayne C. Evens, Ph.D.
Bradley University

Journal of Social Work Values and Ethics, Volume 10, Number 1 (2013)
Copyright 2013, Association of Social Work Boards (ASWB)

This text may be freely shared among individuals, but it may not be republished in any medium without express written consent from the authors and advance notification of ASWB

Jennifer Newton, Ph.D., is deputy head of the school of social sciences at the London Metropolitan University. Her career has focused on integrating health and mental health services and practices. She served as project manager of an evaluation of the integration of health and mental health services in the United Kingdom. She has published three texts on mental ill-health prior to publishing this book.

Preventing Mental Ill-health is a review of research relating to causes of mental health and programs to prevent mental ill-health. The book closes with “there appear to be substantial overlaps in what makes us resilient to the chronic conditions affecting both physical and mental health. Vulnerability is key, and can also shape response to intervention, which can sometimes do more harm than good. There is some way to go before practice can be as effective as hoped. The business of providing support that works is far more complex, and far easier to get completely wrong, than some proponents acknowledge. But the pace of development in related areas of research and the commitment to change are grounds for optimism” (p.225).

The author opens the book with “to focus a book on prevention suggests that there might indeed be some magic pill, a fish oil capsule perhaps, or other chemical or a psychosocial equivalent that we could take, which administered to others immunizes against the often miserable, sometimes frightening, sometimes confused, occasionally

exciting feelings we call mental illness. In a sense there is—we need to inherit the right genes, be kept safe from accidental damage and traumatic experience, feel the love and protection of a parent or parent figure throughout childhood, learn the life skills to keep us safe, and find our own place in society among people or at least one person who cares about us. Easy. But how important is each one of these and how far can strength in one compensate for vulnerability in another?” (p.1). Newton does an admirable job of summarizing the research in several areas of mental ill-health, the critiques of this research and the issues of transferring research demonstrated strategies to actual practice. In Chapter 2, she discusses the importance of labels or diagnoses for effective research; however, she also discusses the deleterious effects that labels may have on individuals. Chapter 3 reviews the epidemiological studies from around the world to establish that mental ill-health is a growing issue, but it also explores the idea that we may be over diagnosing. Chapter 4 addresses the difference between “causes of cases” and “causes of incidents.” It explores the difference between preventing mental ill-health in populations and in individuals. It acknowledges the political issues involved in changing social groups and/or cultures. Chapter 5 summarizes what is known about the causes of treatment of depression. It identifies child maltreatment and neglect as a major known cause of depression and suggests that early intervention

Book review: *Preventing Mental Ill-Health: Informing Health Planning and Mental Health Practice*

to prevent abuse and neglect would be a major preventive approach. It further addresses the impacts of negative life circumstances leading to a sense of helplessness on depression. It suggests those social and economic policies that support hope and better living conditions might be effective in reducing the incidence of mental ill-health. Chapter 6 similarly reviews evidence related to schizophrenia. It explores the interaction between genetic predisposition and life events in causing schizophrenia. There is evidence intervention during pregnancy and through life course could be effective.

Chapter 7 examines why most people cope with negative life events and why some do not. It identifies optimism and social support as crucial to effective coping. The author states, "Those who seem resilient in the face of stressful experience in adult life are unlikely to have experienced severely traumatic events before, in either childhood or adulthood, and are more likely to have support in their lives now—someone who cares about them, seems likely to be a good resource in times of trouble, who won't let them down—I draw attention to their need for support. They have effective coping skills. They prepare themselves in advance for predicted terrorist, use problem-focused coping to avoid unnecessary risk, reflect on action that might help, have a strong locus of control, focus on staying home, look for meaning in their situation in the opportunity behind the threat, compare themselves with others with greater problems, have optimistic personalities and connect with others, staying sociable" (pp.121-122). The chapter suggests that interventions can help people develop these coping skills.

Chapter 8 explores evidence supporting the mind-body interaction. It discusses the relationship between physical ill health and mental ill health. It reviews the evidence for placebo effects, positive thinking and meditation, and diet. It provides the evidence for how physical ill-health may contribute to mental ill-health, and how mental ill-health may contribute to physical-ill health. It suggests that helping people stay calm and

maintain a positive outlook can contribute to both physical and mental health. Chapter 9 looks at childhood. It identifies parental mental ill-health, child maltreatment, and family discord as major contributors to later life mental ill-health. It suggests that reducing teenage pregnancy, supporting depressed mothers, providing education programs for separating couples, and improving detection of child maltreatment are important preventative strategies. Chapter 10 reviews programs to reduce child vulnerability. It suggests that early intervention at times when people are willing to accept intervention will be most effective.

Chapter 11 notes that high socioeconomic status, employment, and secure neighborhoods contribute to mental health. It stresses that helping those recover from mental ill-health is an important intervention. Chapter 12 reviews policy interventions and suggests some possible interventions. It acknowledges what we know works, and what we don't know. It suggests that along with clinical research we need research strategies that explore the use of empirically demonstrated techniques in real practice. It looks at the problems of comorbidity, unwillingness to change, and other issues confronted by practitioners.

I found this book refreshing in that it presents what we know, but also acknowledges the many issues involved in moving empirically demonstrated techniques into real practice. I would recommend this book to all mental health researchers, mental health practitioners, students wanting careers and mental health, and policymakers concerned with stronger prevention strategies.