

Shaw, L., Tacconelli, E., Watson, R. & Herbert, C. (2010). *Living confidently with HIV: A self-help book for people living with HIV*. Blue Stallion Publications: Oxfordshire UK. ISBN: 97819041217093. 269 pages.

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In a world where more than 25 million people have already died of AIDS and over 34 million are HIV positive, the issue of learning to live well with HIV is pertinent to every nation. The increasingly prevalent use of rape as a weapon of war has caused additional HIV infection and burden. Globally, women represent the majority of those infected with HIV (in war torn countries this rate rises to as high as 70% of prevalence) and approximately half a million children are infected with HIV annually. There are already over 14 million children in Africa who have been orphaned by HIV. Thus the title, "Living confidently with HIV" was one which held much promise. I have worked for many years with HIV education, both as a sexuality educator and as the co-facilitator of an International HIV Monitoring and Evaluation course run six monthly through International Health. This course was delivered primarily to government and health officials responsible, in their respective nations, for the monitoring and evaluation of HIV infection and treatment.

The book has a UK base and focus. It begins with some optimistic statements and aims – "The introduction of new drug therapies for HIV infection (combination therapies) means that it no longer needs to be seen as a "death sentence", but as an infection that can be controlled in the long-term, similar to diabetes or high blood pressure" (p. 14). The book also begins by declaring that the type of chronic disease that one has is not the strongest predictor of wellbeing but that more important areas include, "having a supportive partner and friends, good self-esteem, a job or occupation that you like, a nice place to live, a

sense of purpose or meaning to life, a satisfying sex life, and being able to enjoy yourself" (p. 15). This statement seemed to augur well for the inclusion of some contextual focus and meso-systemic analyses. The aims of the book were stated as: increased knowledge, confidence, support network and quality of life for the individual as well as better adjustment, relationships and motivation for the future. The authors clearly stated that the book is primarily based on cognitive behavioural therapies (CBTs) and on Lazarus and Folkman's theories of coping. It is divided into three sections: Basic information and advice on key aspects of living with HIV, Emotion focussed strategies and Problem focussed strategies.

The strongest section of the book is the first section which gives people good information about the nature of HIV, disease progression and prognosis, anti-retrovirals (ARVs) and the healthcare system. It emphasises the importance of ARVs to quality of life. Because developing and transitional countries have only 42% of the population in need with access to ARVs, the text's utility is nation specific. The authors provide clear definitions of the medical terms, procedures and professionals that HIV positive people may encounter within the UK. The information is accessible and clear and this could assist in empowering individuals to better negotiate on their own behalf within the health system. Particularly clear sections include those on ARV side effects, the rights of patients, issues around disclosure, paediatrics and HIV and pregnancy and breastfeeding.

Other sections of the book cover issues such as CBT, defining and managing stress, coping styles, anxiety and depression, and mindfulness. In these domains, the authors are less effective, partly because of they use medical jargon, concepts and language, and partly because they over-summarise and over-simplify some complex domains. This simplification results in the treatment of topics such as death in a superficial manner that is less than helpful to the patient. The entire domain of mindfulness therapy is synthesised into 10 pages. This

amount would be appropriate for a description only, but is accompanied by text instructions for practice. The notion that this mindfulness précis could be utilised by the naïve practitioner is highly dubious. The broad brush approach also creates some unhelpful ambiguity. For example, in the section dealing with myths about HIV the following statement, “that you are a danger and that you will easily transmit the virus during sex” (p.132.), is cited as a myth. I am sure the authors intended the emphasis to be on the word ‘easily’ but to present this statement as emblematic of HIV myth is obfuscating.

From a community psychology perspective the individualistic focus of the book is problematic. The statistical reality that vulnerable populations have higher rates of STIs in general and that these populations tend to be less likely to have a ‘nice place to live, supportive partner and friends and a job or occupation they like’ is not addressed. Wider social issues linked to the neo-liberal dismantling of the welfare and industrial relations systems such as increased stigma and discrimination and enforced labour and compliance programs for people who lose employment (due to HIV diagnosis or other reasons) are not acknowledged or addressed. The focus on the individual ‘coping’ and ‘maintaining a positive attitude’ is problematic in this context. There is scant text devoted to how the individual can access wider social and government support although there is an appendix of agencies at the back of the text. Tackling the complex issue of how to increase one’s social support is also given inadequate coverage. The language of the book is quite complex and is pitched at secondary and possibly tertiary educated populations hence, may be of little utility to less educated individuals or those from a non-English speaking background.

The text provides complex information and could be seen as an early primer for the patient seeking information around diagnosis and some forms of psychological therapy. The text is most likely to be helpful to the naïve patient who has few psychological or emotional skills and who has just received an HIV diagnosis. It provides a

lot of information and a stepwise approach that, in the shock of diagnosis, may help the individual have a sense of what they are facing and that there are still options available to them.