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Assessment and Treatment of Internalizing Disorders

Review by Ellen Hymowitz

Helping Students Overcome Depression and Anxiety: A Practical Guide

By K. W. Merrell

2008, Guilford Press

As the title implies, K. W. Merrell has written a practical guide for school-based professionals working with children and adolescents with internalizing problems. There are many things to like about this book. Chapter one defines internalizing disorders and explains how depression, anxiety, and related problems are manifested in children and adolescents (describing symptoms, characteristics, and syndromes). It ends with the case histories of four students suffering from varying degrees of depression, anxiety, social withdrawal, and physical symptoms. The next chapter describes how internalizing problems develop, how they are maintained, and their possible consequences. Guidelines are provided to help practitioners differentiate depression and anxiety from other problems that are commonly confused with them (e.g., bipolar disorders, ADHD, conduct disorders, Tourette's). The next chapter presents a guide for assessing depression and anxiety, with an emphasis on the linkage of assessment to intervention. Recommended assessment methods are discussed and critiqued. An overview of social and emotional learning strategies and programs in schools follows in the next chapter with practical suggestions of how to use these for maximum impact. The next four chapters present a range of intervention strategies for treating depression. Included are comprehensive intervention programs, cognitive treatment techniques, interpersonal therapy, behavioral treatment, emotional education, problem solving, conflict resolution training, social skills training, and combined cognitive-behavioral treatment. Anxiety treatment approaches are presented in the next two chapters. These include systematic desensitization, modeling, reinforcement, self-control training, self-instructional training, transfer of control approach, and social skills training. The final chapter provides guidelines for making out-of-school referrals for counseling and/or medication. It includes an overview of medications that are most commonly used for treating depression and anxiety in children and adolescents. When relevant, a historical perspective is provided throughout the various chapters.

All of the intervention techniques that are included in the book are supported by varying degrees of empirical evidence. While techniques presented are eclectic, most are influenced by cognitive-behavioral and psychoeducational approaches. Of particular appeal is that these strategies are practical and can be used in the school setting. Guidelines are provided as to how to adapt techniques to students of different age and ability levels. Key points are summarized in tables and suggested timelines are presented. Concrete examples are given to illustrate strategies at times, and these are beneficial—more of the same would have been helpful. Potential difficulties that might arise during assessment and intervention and how to handle and resolve these are provided. Of particular value are the many reproducible worksheets corresponding to various assessment and treatment approaches.

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