BOOK REVIEW

Neurofeedback in the Treatment of Developmental Trauma: Calming the Fear-Driven Brain.


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This book review briefly introduces the new concept of developmental trauma disorder, first coined by Bessel van der Kolk, to discriminate the total catastrophe of early childhood abuse and neglect from the relative catastrophe of posttraumatic stress disorder in adults. Sebern Fisher describes the disorder and the innovative treatment approach that she has found to be successful with these patients combining psychotherapy with neurofeedback. Through affect regulation, the approach helps this type of patient to release their trauma identity over time, thus developing a sense of self that enables them to engage in more fulfilling life patterns and relationships. Fisher provides us with a rich perspective on attachment issues as they affect brain function. Also provided are useful references and protocols and forms for clinical applications.

This book describes how psychotherapy combined with the bioelectrical reorganization of the brain through neurofeedback can help traumatized individuals to re-regulate their brain function. Rather than simply branding the traumatized individual with a personality disorder diagnosis, she adopts a new term: developmental trauma disorder, which finds the root of the cause in brain dysregulation due to severe abuse or neglect and pain. Through the treatment, individuals who have essentially lost or never had a self can then “find” themselves and discover what it feels like to be safe in their body, perhaps for the very first time. According to Fisher, they usually know what is real, but they do not know what is safe.

The trauma identity is governed by the natural fear circuitry in the brain. These patients have not necessarily formed an identity; neurofeedback can offer them a new way to see how identity can form and re-form in the seemingly impersonal realm of brain wave frequencies. The psychotherapy then helps them to integrate this “new” sense of self or identity. This sense of identity rests on firing patterns deep in the brain. Fisher takes us on this journey through numerous, engaging case histories as well as her own personal experience with neurofeedback for trauma. She includes current research and inspiring conversations with other clinicians along with the case examples. She refers continually to the notion of affect regulation as posited by Allan Shore, Bessel A. van der Kolk, and others, as crucial to understanding why her approach works. As patients begin to self-regulate and quiet limbic reactivity through the neurofeedback training, they identify less with their feelings. They can begin to experience peace; however, this is often frightening for them as they actually had needed their fear responses to survive their various traumas: They had assumed fear-based identities. The psychotherapy part of the described treatment supports the integration of their new self-based identity.

Fisher gives us a very thorough explanation of the brain structures and functions that underlie all of the principles described above. Her content is direct and clear and can be easily understood by clinicians and the lay public alike. She includes chapters for clinicians for introducing their current patients as well as new patients to neurofeedback. This is a valuable resource then for how to combine the therapeutic approaches into existing practices. Fisher explains that no meaningful therapy can occur when affect is significantly dysregulated. This would explain the failure of therapy or medication alone to best help these clients. Fisher also shares with us, in her first four chapters, how to explain that the purpose of neurofeedback is the regulation of dysregulating affect. She includes the importance of informed consent to best clarify the treatment plan. But at the same time, Fisher warns the clinician to “think neurofeedback,” to continuously check in with the patient and his or her experience, to note the differences between arousal and activation. We activate the brain beneath the electrodes, but the “reward frequency set” determines the level of arousal. Her discussions of sensor placements and frequency rewards will be quite valuable to clinicians reading this book. A “reward frequency set” is the array of
electroencephalography frequencies that the practitioner designates in training to produce feedback when their amplitude or power increases.

Fisher describes four major components of how to “think neurofeedback”: considering the impact of the training, following the fear, following the brain’s preference, and thinking plasticity. She also gives us techniques of assessment, protocols for training, and the effective therapeutic approach. The therapist can help patients to recognize changes, validate them, and then to “use their new brains.” The many tables and illustrations provided in the book help to illuminate her discourse. In addition, she has generously provided access to all of her intake, assessment, protocol, and documentation forms in the book’s appendix. This alone is worth the price of the book.

Fisher also waxes poetic at times; she refers to the traumatized individuals as “patients” because the word, patient, has its root in the Greek word for “suffering.” She believes that the well-regulated brain supports a self that is unafraid to love, that neurofeedback is a “relational technology and intervention” as she states in her introduction to the book. She has set out to make neurofeedback understandable, accessible, and compelling to clinicians and their patients who struggle with the tragedy of developmental trauma, and this I believe she has accomplished in this rich and layered work.

The book is 382 pages long, in hardcover. The price was quite reasonable at US$39.95. This book should be in the library of anyone who treats trauma patients and does neurofeedback. It is an invaluable resource as both a readable treatise of this approach and an indispensible resource and reference. I read it with a highlighter, a pen and sticky notes, several times. Fisher’s approach is novel and compelling as well as informative and engaging. It has and will continue to inform my professional practice, and I will share it with the students I mentor and train in counseling and neurofeedback.

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