

BOOK REVIEWS

Psychotherapy and the Quest for Happiness

Emmy van Deurzen. (2009). Sage. Pb £20.99.

Happiness is, it seems, a perennially topical subject. The last few years have seen an upsurge in research and writing about happiness and well-being, much of it from the standpoint of positive psychology, and van Deurzen's latest book, "Psychotherapy and the Quest for Happiness", joins a growing chorus of recent offerings which question why the current pursuit of happiness is so widespread and so persistent, and whether it is somehow misplaced. It is, in its own words, an attempt "*to propose a philosophical exploration of what therapy and counselling can offer clients who seek to understand their own life better*"¹.

The book begins with some big, and familiar, questions about the meaning of our lives, and what it is that we want to accomplish during our time. Van Deurzen says, "*When people come to therapy they often indicate that all they really want is the achievement of happiness in their lives*"² And yet the therapeutic endeavour can turn out to be about many other things than the pursuit of happiness. Van Deurzen suggests that we need to decide, once and for all, what role "*therapy and counselling play in relation to human well being and happiness*"³. Is happiness what we should be pursuing, and what we should help our clients to pursue?

In the opening chapter- "*Opening Pandora's Box: Values and Beliefs in Psychotherapy*", Van Deurzen roots her investigation firmly in culture, ideology, mythology, belief systems and the role of hope, despair and success. She places this in the context of a shift from post-modernism to virtuality which she explores more thoroughly in the second chapter, "*The Good Life: Philosophy as a Guide to Therapy*". She argues passionately for the possibilities which the virtual world affords us, as well as the need to rediscover afresh the values and moral abilities which are relevant for us today. She ends with an existential challenge which will be familiar to those acquainted with her previous work- "*We have to learn to bring our own limited freedom into existence and let ourselves be touched by the challenges of reality*"⁴.

The term "*limited freedom*" is apposite, as this is a particularly interesting time to be writing about the conjunction of well-being and the therapeutic world. Even as the book was going to press last year, the economic climate took a considerable turn for the worse, and many people have been forced to reconsider their values in the light of a changed financial landscape; it remains to be seen how the emotional landscape has changed, and what kind of re-evaluations are taking place, as a result. Simultaneously, there are tectonic shifts occurring in the therapeutic

community as outlined in the chapter “*Positive Psychology: A science of Well-Being*”. She takes aim at attempts to forge a “*science of happiness*” and queries Layard’s economic analysis of the costs and benefits of happiness and well-being. She draws parallels between the contemporary view of happiness as something we are entitled to, something we can achieve through our own efforts (aided by financial muscle), and the rise of short-term, manualised approaches to well-being which are designed to extinguish unhappiness and its “*symptoms*”.

“*Predictable Difficulties: Everyday Challenges*” takes the reader back through the existential challenges that all human beings have to face. She ranges these across the physical, social, personal and spiritual dimensions of our existence via a list of d-words- from *deficit*, *disease* and *desire* to *doubt*, *debt* and *despair*. “*Life Crisis: Triumph over Trauma*”, looks in more depth at those calamitous events which often bring a client to a therapist’s door, and the differing ways in which people can respond to these crises. Crucially, whilst acknowledging the devastation caused, van Deurzen says “*If we can be determined and confident in negotiating our transitions we will gain at least as much as we lose and we may find that our crisis turns out to be the beginning of a breakthrough into a whole new and better phase of life*”⁵. She goes on to suggest ways in which it can be possible to learn from crisis, and transcend trauma.

In the 6th chapter- “*Speech is Silver, Silence is Golden: Feelings Remain Unspoken*”- there are several poignant examples of therapeutic encounters which demonstrate both the potential of and the problems inherent in dialogue. It is refreshing to read van Deurzen declaring her own “*bias and background*”⁶ in terms of a therapeutic outlook and training which leans heavily on philosophers and existential thinkers. So it is only right that I am open about any bias I may have to her writing, as we have been colleagues in our work together over the past 7 years on the SEPTIMUS project which led to the establishment of the MSc in Psychotherapy Studies at the University of Sheffield, and the availability of online modules for students at the New School of Counselling and Psychotherapy, and through partner countries across Europe. This has given me some personal experience of her commitment to investigating what constitutes the good life for her, and what might constitute it for other people. It is notable that, as with her previous books, she does not fall back into relativism or equivocation; she is quite clear on what she believes are the things which constitute a good life, and the importance of pursuing them. Indeed, her writing embodies her own passionate response to these age-old questions and her awareness of her own ideas in relation to the sweep of human thought.

The book ends with “*The Meaning of Being: Beyond the Quest for Happiness*”, which clearly lays out van Deurzen’s reasons for favouring meaning rather than happiness, and a “*Conclusion*” which pulls together

all of her thoughts and argues for “*a more realistic psychotherapy profession, one that is not narrowly confined to focus either on psychopathology or on happiness*”⁷. She advocates a re-examination of what well-being might be- something much more than happiness, which is fleeting and ultimately unsatisfying. Movingly, she ends with mention of her father’s imminent death, and referring to such difficult experiences, she concludes that “*in transcending them and learning from them we make them into moments of truth*”⁸.

“*Psychotherapy and the Quest for Happiness*” is an important addition to Deurzen’s oeuvre, which has already seen her developing the theory and practice of existential counselling and psychotherapy. This latest book focuses more on the context of existential work, and is a wide-ranging and philosophical address to the eternal questions of what constitutes the good life. It is her blend of personal insights with the learning of others and her many years of clinical and life experience which make this such an accessible book, one which will appeal to therapists, clients, teachers and students alike.

In a world where “*Chicken soup for the soul*” can sell 112 million copies in more than 400 languages, and where their own web-pages can boast that in ten years, “*total retail sales of Chicken Soup for the Soul branded merchandise reached over \$1.3 billion*”⁹, there is an urgent need for work which is rooted in the rich traditions of philosophical and spiritual investigation. Van Deurzen’s work continues to demonstrate her grasp of these traditions, giving it relevance for those searching beyond happiness for meaning, well-being and truth today, those interested in where our ideas have come from, and those wondering how they may change in the 21st Century.

References

1. Deurzen, E. van. *Psychotherapy and the Quest for Happiness*. Sage: 2009, p. 10
2. *ibid*, p. 9
3. *ibid*, p.10
4. *ibid*, p.57
5. *ibid*, p. 108
6. *ibid*, p. 129
7. *ibid*, p. 168
8. *ibid*, p. 175
9. *Chicken soup for the soul*.
<http://www.chickensoup.com/cs.asp?cid=about> [accessed 29.4.09]

Chris Blackmore