

## BOOK REVIEW

### *They Can't Find Anything Wrong! 7 Keys to Understanding, Treating, and Healing Stress Illness*

by David D. Clarke, MD, Boulder, CO:  
Sentient Publications, 2007,  
200 pp. ISBN-978-1-59181-064-3. \$16.95

Reviewed by Kristina S. Brown, PhD, LMFT,  
The Marriage and Family Therapy Program at Forest Institute, Springfield, Missouri

Patients often find themselves spending an inordinate amount of time trying to get answers for their physical symptoms (pain), while physicians find themselves able to respond only with their inability to find a diagnosis. *They Can't Find Anything Wrong! 7 Keys to Understanding, Treating, and Healing Stress Illness* is an answer for patients who are unable to find out what is “wrong” with them. It is also an answer for physicians, as it provides tools for understanding, treating, and healing stress illness. Dr. Clarke, Clinical Assistant Professor, Emeritus of Gastroenterology and Senior Scholar at the Center for Ethics, Oregon Health & Science University, provides his expertise and experience diagnosing stress illness. From 1984 to 2009, Dr. Clarke successfully diagnosed over 7000 people with stress illness by assessing their hidden stresses and alleviating their physical symptoms.

*They Can't Find Anything Wrong! (TCFAW!)* is divided into three parts that answer the following questions: (a) “What is stress illness?” (b) “What are the causes, consequences, and treatments of stress illness?” And (c) “How do families and the health system help those with stress illness?” The clear and organized structure, including over four dozen case studies to illustrate different manifestations of stress illness, made this book both engaging and easy to read. Written for patients and physicians, this book describes the process for best understanding, treating, and healing stress illness. Dr. Clarke feels that “outside of the mental health profession, few doctors have had much training in psychological assessment and most clinicians are not comfortable doing it” (p. 187). This book provides structure and intervention ideas for the treatment of stress illness; it offers patients answers and physicians a manual.

Stress illness includes five types of stress that can cause physical symptoms: “prolonged effects from stress in childhood, current stress, posttraumatic stress, depression, and anxiety” (p. 18). The second part of the book delineates each of these stresses individually, and identifies when more than one type of stress is present in a patient. Each presentation introduces us to a new patient that Dr. Clarke worked with in order to better understand their symptoms, diagnosis, and treatment. In chapter eight of *TCFAW!*, we meet Corinne, whose history of stress began even before she was born when her maternal grandmother abandoned her mother, Betty, when Betty was just five years old. This childhood stressor formed Betty’s coping skills as a wife and mother, impacting Corinne’s own childhood and causing a lifetime of growing stress. Corinne was tasked with not only comforting her mother and managing the household, but literally saving her mother from multiple suicide attempts. Dr. Clarke helped Corinne to see that her physical symptoms were a manifestation of all her stressors (childhood stress, current stress, and traumatic stress, as well as depression and anxiety) and encouraged her to improve her self-care.

For patients, *TCFAW!* provides excellent tips on how to be a better medical patient and advocate for one’s own care. According to a 2009 survey done by the American Psychological Association, 75% of adults have experienced moderate to high levels of stress. This statistic clearly contradicts the idea that stress is just a lifestyle issue and not an illness. Dr. Clarke outlines seven specific keys to treating stress illness that can be implemented by both patients and physicians;

Key 1: Understand that your symptoms can be diagnosed and treated.

Key 2: Search for the sources of stress.

Key 3: Care for yourself.

Key 4: Get right by writing.

Key 5: Use appropriate therapies.

Key 6: Overcome hidden resistance.

Key 7: Become the person you were always meant to be.

The story of Corinne (see above) illustrates the first three keys; Dr. Clarke was able to highlight the sources of Corinne's stressors and help her see that they were treatable with self-care. With regard to the fourth key, Dr. Clarke believes that "buried emotions can be so strong that the mind must express them through the body if there is no other outlet" (p. 54) and "the more [patients] can express in words, the less the brain will need to release into the body" (pp. 173–174). Dr. Clarke encourages writing in a journal (as he did for Corinne) or writing a letter that is not always sent to the addressee, depending on the relationship. Appropriate therapies, the fifth key, include mental health counseling and possibly medication (both in Corinne's case), and the final two keys advocate strength and longevity for a healthy and stress-free life. Throughout the book there are also boxes filled with exercises, descriptions of symptoms, and questions for patients to ask their physicians.

For physicians, *TCTAW!* promotes skills that are familiar to mental health practitioners—the power of listening and the promotion of self-care. Dr. Clarke shares that, "in time, I came to see that in many situations the act of listening itself was enough to make a difference" (p. 24). This was a pivotal moment for Dr. Clarke because as a trained physician, his objective is to find a disease that answers for the physical symptom(s). He shared that his training "never included the concept of alleviating a serious physical condition solely by counseling" (p. 27). Stress illness is not diagnosed through a test, but assessed through understanding who the patient is and what could be happening in his or her life that is contributing to the physical symptoms.

Dr. Clarke also strongly promotes the idea of self-care as both preventive and curative: "Time spent in self-care can provide opportunities for growth that you probably would not encounter otherwise" (p. 177). Dr. Clarke encourages the health care system to consider incorporating

mental health practitioners into medical practices as "correct diagnosis and appropriate treatment is easier and faster and the huge blind spot between the medical and the psychological in patient care begins to close" (p. 192). *TCTAW!* reminds physicians to ask their patients questions specific to the five types of stress and to then listen to their answers for clues to what might be causing the physical symptoms. One especially poignant example was John, a 60-year-old man who had been itching for three years. Dr. Clarke learned that prior to the onset of his itching, John's wife Helen had developed a liver disorder that caused severe itching. When it became serious, John turned to God and prayed to let her live "and that if she did He could give me her itching" (p. 51). Dr. Clarke suggested that John was unconsciously fearful that if his itching stopped, Helen would get sick again despite reassurances by her doctors. This connection of stressors was necessary for John to let go of his fears and his itching was nearly gone a month later. This approach to patient assessment parallels the biopsychosocial-spiritual model used by many mental health practitioners.

This book was written by Dr. Clarke to physicians, sharing with them the success he has had by incorporating psychological assessment into his diagnosis and treatment of patients, especially with patients who have spent a long time struggling because the medical community could not find anything wrong with them. Patients could also benefit from this book, as it is written in simple language without medical and training jargon. It promotes advocacy for medical patients, including tips for asking questions of the doctor. For example, Dr. Clarke recommends writing a list of concerns to review with the physician. *TCTAW!* also promotes self-care as a preventive and curative measure. For mental health practitioners, this book does not necessarily provide new skills or new treatment options for patients, but it does give a name, i.e., stress illness, to a highly common presenting issue. Most important, *TCTAW!* promotes the collaboration between the fields of medical and mental health for best medical outcomes for patients. For all readers, *TCTAW!* serves as a reminder of the necessity of self-care and stress management for whole health and well-being.