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Standing Without Shoes: Creating Happiness, relieving depression, enhancing life

With a Foreword by the Dalai Lama

George W. Burns and Helen Street, Prentice Hall, 2003 244 pages. RRP \$27.95

A REVIEW BY “PSYCHOTHERAPY in AUSTRALIA” 2004

While it is not the usual practice of this journal to review ‘self-help’ books this book is a little different from the norm. For a start how many self-help books manage to gain the endorsement of the Dalai Lama? Seems that we all know how to get depressed, but it is a challenge to contemplate how to get happy. An essential and intriguing question to ask ourselves is ‘*What makes or enhances my happiness?*’

The authors of this book declare an interest in a world where we can go beyond simply relieving the symptoms of depression and instead actually *create* happiness. While Street and Burns acknowledge the challenges to being happy, particularly in the face of negative life events, they hold fast to a view that we can always do more for ourselves to enhance our well-being. They challenge the increasing trend that depression is something that we just accept. ‘*By enhancing the positive experiences in your life you can help place yourself in a better position to manage the negative.*’ (p.11)

Perhaps the term ‘*psychoeducation*’ is more appropriate to describe this book. Full of useful information on depression from clinical research and practice, the book is an attempt to provide a practical, realistic and accessible guide on how to overcome depression and improve happiness and well-being. It is the product of a collaboration between Perth based clinical psychologist, George Burns, and University of WA academic, Helen Street. Burns is already well-known to the psychotherapy and counselling community in Australia through his two previous books, *Nature Guided Therapy: Brief Integrative Strategies for Health and Well-being* and the best-selling *101 Healing Stories: Using Metaphors in Therapy*. It won’t be a surprise to those familiar with Burns’ work that

the book begins with a good yarn, *The Search of the Troubled Tycoon*. If you are curious about where the *Standing Without Shoes* title comes from you won't have to read far before you understand. The striking images associated with this story, and other stories sprinkled throughout the book, create some rich metaphors that help the authors convey their meaning in a very powerful way.

The book is divided into five parts. Burns is the primary voice of Parts One, *The Power of Happiness* and Part Three, *Pathways and Pitfalls: What Happiness Is and Is Not* and Street is the primary voice of Parts Two, *The Meaning of Depression* and Part Four, *The Important Things in Life*, and they come together in Part Five, *Connecting with Happiness*. Burns is assigned the voice of the practising therapist, while Street is the voice of the research scientist, although there appears to be much overlap in these roles. At times they challenge each other.

'Helen challenges me to ensure that my opinions are grounded in the facts of science and I quiz her about how to make the theories accessible in a practical way.'

Two types of exercises for the reader are provided throughout the book – *A Moment of Mindfulness* – encourages the reader to engage in valuable reflection on their own lives, and *A Time for Action* makes suggestions to the reader on what they could begin to do to make their life better. These exercises provide useful guidelines for therapists who would like to bring the flavour of this work into their practice.

Important clarification is provided of what is meant by the term depression both in clinical and everyday contexts. Many useful case vignettes are given that demonstrate; how depression can often arise from our flawed interpretation of negative events, the ways in which we attempt to create meaning, the tendency in Western culture to place ourselves as victims and hold others to blame, and the pitfalls of conditional goal setting *'I will be happy when ...'* There is the example of poor old James who had sunk into a deep depression following a traumatic event, so much so that he hardly noticed when he won six million dollars in a lottery!

This is not a 'come on get happy, chase all your cares away' book. It is written in a compassionate and down-to-earth style. There are no impossible positive affirmations to be found in this book, no radical

lifestyle restructuring necessary, no guilt trips, no pathologising and not once did I read a gung ho ‘You can do it!’ The authors tread gently over the terrain of the past careful not to arouse feelings of failure, regret, and hopelessness. The focus is on action and solution rather than worries and problems. The value of mindfulness is emphasised, as is dealing with loss, helping other people, nurturing the relationships that are good for us and recognising and limiting the influence of the relationships that don’t help us.

A curious contemplation offered by Helen Street provides a powerful demonstration of the dilemmas of living in a material world. She asks people who they think is the happier and more content, the Dalai Lama or Tom Cruise? In most instances, people suggest the Dalai Lama. She then asks which of these two men they would like to swap shoes with and not surprisingly, most choose Tom Cruise. Street is kind in her interpretation of this depressing information and suggests that people answer in this way not because they don’t value their own happiness, but rather because they do not want to lose their western way of life.

The following quote provides an excellent example of the general tone of the book:

‘There are an increasing number of books and tapes available that offer the promise of absolute happiness ... don’t believe those products that offer it to you, and don’t waste your hard-earned money on them. They play on a fantasy that we all have, a fantasy that is lived out in fairy tales and Hollywood movies: the fantasy of living happily ever after ... The belief that we can attain ‘absolute happiness’ or that we will be happy ‘forever after’ sets an impossible, unattainable goal and consequently, will – in and of itself – result in unhappiness. (p.94)

If you would like to order a copy of “Standing Without Shoes” directly from Dr Helen Street, please send a cheque for \$27.00 (this includes p&h in Australia) made payable to Dr Helen Street, WISE Research, PO Box 634, Subiaco, WA 6904