

REVIEWS

Make Health Happen: Training Yourself to Create Wellness (Second Edition)

By Erik Peper, Katherine Gibney, and Catherine Holt

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This unique book addresses the psychological context in which biofeedback and self-regulation typically operate. It doesn't focus on weight loss, exercise, smoking, or nutrition but primarily addresses the power of self-regulation and attitude change to improve long-term health. The book's main sections cover relaxation, cognitive change, and imagery. It hopes to move the lay reader from a "fix me, heal me" stance to "what can I do for myself?"

There are many good parts, discussed first, and, toward the end of the review, some reservations. There is broad, authoritative coverage of many relaxation procedures and adjunctive methods and systems. Included are detailed instructions for developing new habits and expanding one's health care options. There is useful explanation of the value of persistent, thoughtful practice of these techniques, using, as one example, learning to drive as a model for comparison.

Many log sheets and worksheets are supplied, with some filled-in examples to get the reader started. There are instructions for making audiotapes or recordings, such as a body relaxation sequence. Sample scripts are provided for aspects of relaxation, breathing, visualization, self-healing, problem solving, and turning failure into success. Useful discussions are offered of the problems and obstacles people may have when pursuing these exercises and suggestions for how to get past them. This section shows the abundant experience of the authors.

Anyone in the business of teaching relaxation or any form of self-care is bound to find something useful in this book: It is a good book for the trainers as much as for the trainees, with reviews of many of the classic ways of helping people to become their own caretakers.

Some sections go beyond consensus science and require a new-age leap of faith, for instance, self-healing with imagery, getting answers from your unconscious, contacting your inner guide, and using a muscle-resistance test (extended arm is easier to press down when the arm's owner is recalling a hopeless and helpless experience). These are intriguing topics but should perhaps be presented as less validated

than the more solid and well-described procedures such as autogenics, progressive relaxation, biofeedback, breathing control, and cognitive change.

The section titled "Changing Energy Drains to Energy Gains" is a short but thought-provoking few pages that might stimulate some awareness of factors that either make you feel more alive and vibrant or nudge you toward the opposite. For example, I feel an energy gain from writing this book review, but I would feel drained by giving a talk about it. Who knows why.

However (here come the reservations), for this energy-drain matter, the instructions on the accompanying worksheet say, "Describe your detailed behavior program that you will implement to increase an energy gain and decrease an energy drain. Describe in complete detail . . . include how, where, when, with whom, under which situations . . ." Well, fine, but suddenly we're back in school, and I feel my energy drain. Several pages designate a space for "topics or concerns to discuss with the instructor," and the book's intended audience becomes apparent: students. Where is a lay reader, if not taking a class using this book, to find such an instructor?

The book was developed from courses given at San Francisco State University and other locations, and it is well suited for classes on promoting healing, reducing stress, and taking more responsibility for one's health. It reads like a class textbook, which is fine in the classroom context. But it is offered to the general reader as well, and therein lies a possible problem. The authors assume a certain level of commitment by the reader, as if he or she is in a class, working for a grade. But the general reader, not having enrolled, will have no commitment beyond opening the book to see what's in it. Because classroom students are obliged to follow the assignments, the professor can skimp on the incremental motivation. Not so here, however. It takes some work to transform a reader from a browser to an actual student who does the exercises, writes down the results, reflects, keeps track of progress, and so forth. It is not easy to replace a teacher, or therapist/trainer, with a book.

The instructions recommend discussing the book's exercises in small groups or among family and friends: Good advice, but how many people are really going to do that? If they're not in an educational or therapeutic group setting, how many people are likely to arrange a study group for "creating wellness"?

To be fair, people buy cookbooks all the time and might make only one or two recipes in the book and still consider the book worthwhile. Readers could approach this book in the same way: pick something that looks interesting, take some time to try it out, and see what happens. The authors' recommended sequence is there for anyone who wants to follow it, all the way from taking three deep breaths to contacting your inner guide and designing a personal self-healing program.

There are many pages of log sheets and worksheets, mostly numbered blank lines with brief instructions for what to write where, day after day. Using all my fingers and toes several times over, I calculated that these logs and worksheets total 89 pages (of a 282-page book): That's almost a third! Some pages are nearly all blank lines. The flattenable binding makes the log sheet/worksheet pages easy to photocopy, and the pages are perforated for tidy removal. However, there's no publisher's permission to copy pages even for personal use, so technically, photocopying means you're likely to go to prison, where you will have plenty of time to make health happen.

One other point: There is little provision for the possibility that an overenthusiastic reader might skip consulting a physician for certain symptoms before trying to visualize them away. Consider this either/or passage on page 194:

Whenever illness or other forms of imbalance are present, we could go to someone outside ourselves, such as a doctor or therapist, to get a diagnosis and prescription for how to get well; or we could choose to tap into that part of ourselves that truly understands what the problem is and how to resolve it.

Would the authors try, as their first step, using visualization to cope with symptoms suggesting melanoma, brain tumor, or diabetes? Surely they know better, but some people reading this book might not. Guidance from respectable authors such as these should include specific precautions regarding self-healing methods. They do recommend reading about allopathic as well as alternative approaches and making an informed decision. But if I were the publisher, I would be nervous.

Overall, this book is useful and well done, but its best use may be either as a classroom text or within a tutorial or therapeutic relationship, in which the reader can be coached and helped through the various exercises. It also has value as a source of many good self-care techniques that can be learned with or without the logs and worksheets.