

Book Reviews / Comptes rendus

Koenig, K. R. (2008) *What every therapist needs to know about treating eating and weight issues*. New York, NY: W. W. Norton. ISBN 978-0-393-70558-4, 240 pages

Reviewed by: Diana Norton, PhD candidate (Educational Counselling), Faculty of Education, University of Ottawa

What Every Therapist Needs to Know about Treating Eating and Weight Issues by Karen Koenig provides context, skills, and confidence for those who have never worked with disordered eating. It can also refresh the practice of specialists in the field. The author recognizes challenges and strategies for working with a full spectrum of issues—from challenges with food and weight to more severe concerns related to anorexia, bulimia, or binge-eating. She demystifies treatment by explaining contributing factors, concerns of co-morbidity, and treatment considerations.

Koenig is a licensed psychotherapist and expert in food and weight issues. She earned a Master's in Education from Antioch College of Ohio and a Master's of Social Work from Simmons College School of Social Work in Massachusetts. She has written four books and numerous magazine and journal articles about food, feelings, weight, and self-esteem that have been published internationally. Koenig promotes "normal" eating in an effort to free people of dieting and deprivation that often results in preoccupied thinking, weight fluctuations, and shame. She currently teaches and practices in Sarasota, Florida.

The chapters in this book intuitively delineate food and weight issues for therapists working with a range of clients. Particularly helpful are recurring sections called "Reflections for Therapist" and "To Help the Client Assess" that offer questions to inform one's work with clients. While grounded in theory, the information is accessible and easy to read.

Chapter 1 situates the reader in relation to how clients may experience food and weight issues and how these issues may be raised in therapy. Red flags indicative of a range of issues are recognized, socio-political trends acknowledged, and common myths dispelled. Koenig's comprehensive approach demarks (a) exploration of beliefs and attitudes, (b) integration of a positive relationship with food, and (c) emotions and feelings as requiring resolution for effective therapy.

Chapter 2 focuses on societal preconceptions and personal factors that may require attention in therapy. Physiological issues that can interact with food and weight issues are identified in Chapter 3. Koenig speaks to the fallibility of traditional weight management, instead promoting a holistic understanding of the role environment and genetics play. She suggests that support and education can help clients pursue individually appropriate goals.

The reality of health implications in terms of weight gain or loss and over- or under-eating are recognized in Chapter 4, including the challenges of keeping up with research and trends. Koenig helps the reader check in with their own perceptions through useful exercises that can also be applied with clients in therapy. The influence of personality traits, emotion, society, family interactions, and faulty cognitions are further explored in Chapter 5. In Chapter 6 Koenig discusses assumptions, underlying red flags, labels, perspectives, factors, and possible approaches for assessing food and weight matters. Behavioural and physiological considerations are clarified in Chapter 7.

By Chapter 8, the author has gone into greater depth by exploring dynamics that affect clients throughout the life cycle. Throughout the book, but particularly in Chapter 9, Koenig acknowledges barriers and limits a therapist might experience when working with food and weight issues. She offers helpful knowledge and skills, and considerations for prudent referrals. She also identifies “need to know” basics about nutrition and fitness to help clients move toward healthy lifestyle changes.

Chapter 10, on transference and countertransference, is powerful. While acknowledging weight as an “open secret” that cannot be hidden, the author discusses the role and impact of therapist boundaries, biases, feelings, assumptions, and experiences related to the therapeutic process. In the final chapter, Chapter 11, Koenig offers scenarios derived from her own experience to demonstrate ways a therapist may initiate conversation and address client concerns. Lastly, Koenig describes theoretical frameworks commonly applied in therapy for food and weight issues. Pros and cons of each model, as experienced by the author, help provide context for readers as they set out to work with their own clients.

What Every Therapist Needs to Know about Treating Eating and Weight Issues is a useful resource for counsellors, counselling psychologists, and counsellor educators who work directly with disordered eating or inevitably happen upon it in their practice. The book is a good refresher for specialists treating DSM-diagnosed eating disorders, but most useful for therapists addressing less severe and similarly significant disordered eating concerns. The book is rich in information yet easy to read, with a comprehensive index that facilitates easy reference.

As a therapist specializing in disordered eating, I value Koenig’s holistic approach to food and weight issues. She justifies an integrative approach considering all aspects of a client’s life and illustrates the fallibility of diet culture. The book is largely based on the author’s clinical experience, though the offerings are grounded using up-to-date statistics to describe the population. While support through empirical studies is rarely provided, Koenig offers a seemingly sustainable solution that encourages clients to fill up on things other than food: nourishing themselves with love, affection, connection, companionships, meaning, passion, and joy.

While the book is rich in perspective and promotes awareness, it does not provide answers for all situations. Food and weight issues are often complex, interacting with a range of influences and consequences. Furthermore, this book may insufficiently address the needs of youth or populations experiencing anxiety, abuse, trauma, or disability that sometimes co-exist with disordered eating. A single book cannot easily

address the entire multifaceted picture of food and weight issues, but Koenig does an apt job of achieving her purpose to provide an introductory text that promotes awareness of issues at hand.

The strength of the book is the author's encouragement to not make assumptions, but rather to continue questioning even innocuous influences in pursuit of personalized solutions for clients. She admirably aims to empower therapists and clients alike with a nondirective approach. Koenig sets reasonable expectations for the treatment of food and weight issues. Readers can derive support from Koenig's book as a base from which to approach food and weight concerns.