

CREATING OPTIMISM: A Proven, Seven-Step Program for Overcoming Depression

By BOB MURRAY AND ALICIA FORTINBERRY

New York: McGraw-Hill, 2004, 272 pp., \$22.95, ISBN: 0071417850.

Reviewed by Stanley Krippner

Bob Murray, a psychologist, and Alicia Fortinberry, a Feldenkrais practitioner, believe that the root cause of the contemporary depression pandemic is failed relationships. Their mission is to encourage people to improve their interactions with each other based on concretely expressed needs. Get the relationship right, they argue, and the cure will follow. In their words, "Our society produces isolation, maltreatment, and disempowerment. . . . The very way we live is abusive to ourselves and our children."

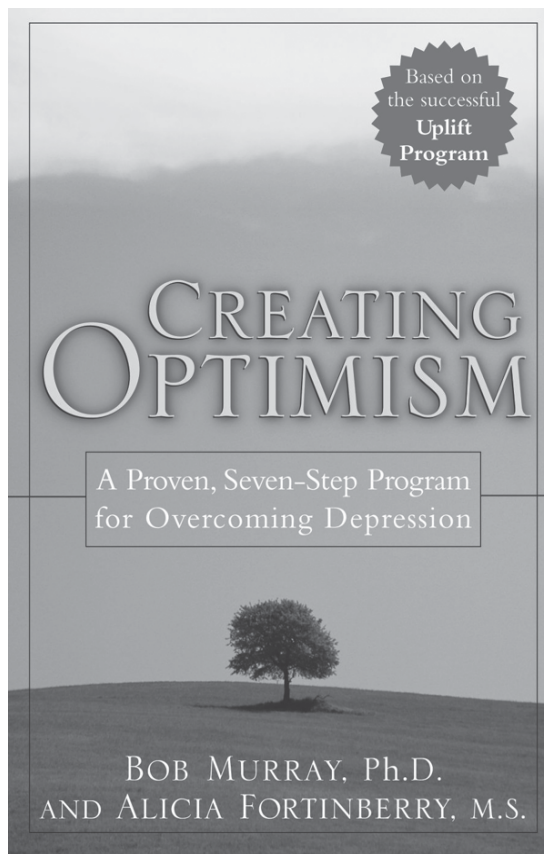
In their book, *Creating Optimism*, they provide a seven-step program for using relationship formation to overcome depression, pessimism, anxiety, and related problems. Their book is based on the Uplift Program, which they developed at the University of South Florida, and is touted as being of value for both practitioners and for lay people who want to improve their mood and enhance their personal interactions. Both authors have worked in the media, hence the book is reader-friendly and is clearly written. The examples are engaging and the exercises, ranging from guided meditation to "action lists," are practical and useful.

Murray and Fortinberry are not advocates of the medical model insofar as the treatment of depression is concerned. For example, they suggest that serotonin deficiency may be a

symptom of an overactive amygdala or a small hippocampus, both of which have been associated with affective disorders. They admit that antidepressants do work (although for a smaller number of patients than drug companies would have us believe), but they suspect that the active variable might be the trusting relationship between the prescribing physician

Decisionmaking is hampered, recall is distorted, and mood alterations result.

The authors make a controversial claim that childhood trauma can lodge in the body, creating a "kinesthetic memory" or (in their words) an "ongoing energy event." The resulting habitual somatic patterns of defense and restriction keep retriggering corresponding emotional patterns, as well as making the person prone to muscular pain and injury. From an evolutionary perspective, the isolated nuclear (or one-parent) family is a symptom of the mismatch between how people live now and how they were genetically programmed to structure their lives. Murray and Fortinberry assert that our "society lost its way somewhere around five to ten thousand years ago" when people stopped living in hunter-gatherer



and the patient. In any event, antidepressants are a limited answer to a vexing problem, and may only provide short-term relief. The "real cause" of depression, anxiety, and the like is "a failure of relationships, usually between adults and children in early childhood," including parental criticism, infighting, divorce, substance abuse, exposure to violence on television, and traumatic physical or sexual abuse. As a result, the depressed person is flooded by danger signals from the amygdala, and the frontal lobes cannot control this or cut it off.

bands and "were forced to wrest a living from the earth as farmers." The band shrunk to an extended family that protected the land as they worked it. Eventually, this morphed into even smaller family units, which suit an industrial and information age that requires mobility and compliance from its workers.

However, human beings are still relationship-forming animals, and the social environment is the nexus of an individual's relationships. Hence, change comes from the outside in—contrary to advice given by other

self-help books that only an inside-out shift is effective. The authors exemplify this assertion by prescribing exercises purportedly to help their readers create the specific types of relationships that are based on meeting functional needs rather than the dysfunctional needs that can doom relationships to failure.

For example, if someone is criticized, emotionally abandoned, or even abused as a child, that person will seek out companions and spouses who are likely to repeat this pattern. If they fail to do so, they run the risk of being manipulated or provoked to provide this type of gratification. This dysfunctional need is based on mistaking mistreatment for love, and condemnation for attention. Murray and Fortinberry demonstrate how functional needs involve successful negotiations and work toward harmonious relationships at home, at work, with friends, and even during a “first date” with a potential companion or lover.

Finally, *Creating Optimism* shows how these relationship techniques can foster self-esteem, a sense of competence, and (with others) a sense of shared purpose. It goes beyond most self-help guides in its focus on the body (“where depression lodges”), the natural environment, and the exploration of one’s spirituality.

I shared this book with a friend who has been diagnosed as “bipolar” but who prefers to handle his mood swings without medication. He wrote me:

When the authors claimed that you could only heal and feel optimistic from the outside rather than from the inside, this was completely adverse to my way of thinking. But now I believe that an individual can find healing from numerous

sources, be it inside or outside. Throughout the book the authors mention the backward nature of some religious dogma (‘fear of God’ and such threats). I was happy to see this addressed without sacrificing the importance of a healthy spirituality.

With regard to the exercises, my friend commented:

The happiness tips and exercises are very well thought out and a great way to do something about one’s state of mind instead of only taking the passive role of reading the book. So I really enjoyed this book and understood what it is trying to do.

However, the authors discuss a tendency of humans to seek relationships that reenact past trauma, but I don’t recall them explaining why these relationships are so enticing. And I doubt that we can completely rule out criticism when making a list of needs to present to our lovers. It is hard for me to believe that constructive criticism should be ruled out if a relationship is to reveal personal needs that are not being met. This, I suppose, is an arguable point. However, this book deserves more compliments than disparagements. The emphasis on purpose in life was motivating to me and was a great way to finish the book.

My own reaction to the book is that it is an original and provocative treatment of depression. I am less inclined than the authors to reduce the etiology of depression to a single set of determinants. Nevertheless, a topic of this importance needs to be discussed and dealt with from different perspectives.

STANLEY KRIPPNER is Professor of Psychology at Saybrook Graduate School and a former AHP President.