BOOK REVIEW

Revolutionizing Trauma Treatment

Stabilization, Safety, and Nervous System Balance

by Babette Rothschild

Antigone Oreopoulou

“...here there is only agreement, there is stagnation”

Rothschild, p. xvii

This statement could well guide us on how to approach this book.

The first thought that comes to mind is that this book should be read with an open and inquisitive mind, moving forward in linear fashion, or backwards, browsing through, stopping on chapters that catch our attention, inhaling it, visualizing how to apply the techniques to our own sessions, or immersing ourselves in the amazing foldout chart of the autonomic nervous system.

I found it useful to frame my reading using the disclaimers the author gives in her introduction, which offer a solid, upfront preview of what to expect.

The first disclaimer is “Nothing we know for sure... the thing about knowledge is that it changes all the time... One of the shortcomings is trying to apply the evidence base to all situations.” When she states that “it is only the client who knows and can tell what helps and what hurts and the best thing any therapist can do for clients is to equip and empower them to evaluate what is useful and what is not,” Babette Rothschild puts us on notice that she will deconstruct the two pillars of evidence base – the choice of subjects and the presentation of results.

The second disclaimer is that making mistakes is a good way to learn. Treatment failures are a useful base from which to evolve treatment guidelines, and, she warns us, one of the causes of failure is adherence to a single treatment modality.
The third disclaimer is that the proposed techniques and strategies may or may not be appropriate for all clients, or for clients with additional diagnoses.


In the first section, *Theory and Principles*, Rothschild guides the reader in re-envisioning trauma therapy and its underlying ongoing clinical issues by offering different perspectives and connecting the dots between these various theories and perspectives. Based on the work of Janet, she clearly identifies the first phase of trauma treatment to be the establishment of safety and stabilization. Clinicians might overlook this first phase due to time constraints, and as a result, cause relapses in the therapeutic process. The second phase consists of the processing and resolution of trauma memories, and the third phase entails the “integration of gainings into the mainstream of daily life.”

Based on these three phases and on PTSD’s hallmark of “pulling of one’s awareness into the past, via intrusive images and flashbacks,” the author fleshes out therapy goals, the need to differentiate between trauma recovery and trauma resolution, the difference between “working in context vs working on trauma,” the timeline of past vs now and the future, and how to make meaning from trauma.

Chapters two and three are devoted to Rothschild’s famous chart, *Autonomic Nervous System: Precision Regulation – What to Look For*. Compared to the usual two-column autonomic nervous system (ANS) chart, Rothschild’s chart delineates six levels of arousal. Each level distinguishes subtle categories of the function of the sympathetic and parasympathetic nervous system: ventral and dorsal vagus activation, bodily symptoms such as muscle and skin tone and respiration, levels of arousal and the emotions connected with each level, possibilities for integration, along with the recommended level of intervention. The back of the chart includes a summary of the six levels in relation to affect tolerance and integration. The chart “aims to offer trauma therapists a new and improved tool to monitor their clients’ and their own level of autonomic arousal at any given moment in time.”

In both chapters, she seamlessly integrates theory, observations, and clinical case studies. She offers a short review of the autonomic nervous system and of Porges’ polyvagal theory, describes two categories of freeze and two types of hypoarousal, and, finally, gives directions on how to use the chart. Throughout, she highlights the need to reconcile the old with the new.

In chapter three, Rothschild’s therapeutic guidance focuses on the importance of using the sensory nervous system to repair the loss of dual awareness “which distinguishes the present from the past…and which [dual awareness] is a necessary part of stabilization and safety, a prerequisite to trauma memory processing and to relegation of trauma memories to their proper place in personal history.” She interweaves theory and clinical cases to show how the recovery of dual awareness achieves a balance between exteroceptive and interoceptive branches of the ANS, and how focus on the exteroceptive offers clients stabilization and safety.

In chapter four, she reclaims the value of history taking and treatment planning as keys to establishing safety, and therefore as the important first steps in trauma therapy. She sees history taking as a way to “get a three dimensional picture of clients” in order to “gain a perspective on the client’s talents and resources” and offer tools to “help the client to develop and increase her ability to defend herself.” She gives valuable guidelines on how to interview and what to focus on, and describes the pitfalls therapists can encounter. She presents this process using enjoyable cooking metaphors, injecting common sense into history taking and treatment planning.

In the book’s second part, *Practice: Applying Theory and Principles*, she uses clinical cases, the history of famous people such as Maya Angelou, personal stories, and the theory described in part one to focus on how to find and modulate resources, and explore how good memories can be transformed into “powerful antidotes.” She enriches her presentation by adding references to the work and theories of pioneers in the field, such as David Boadella and Antonio Damasio. She masterfully explains pacing, portioning, organizing, experimentation, the importance of baby steps,
and the adaptation of mindfulness and other techniques, always careful to discuss how to prevent adverse effects when applying these techniques. Last but not least, the Appendix offers more valuable insight on “avoiding common hazards.”

In reference to her second disclaimer regarding mistakes, Rothschild reviews the importance of language, verb tense, the distinction between reliving and remembering, focusing on memories of resources, knowledge vs intuition, good timing, avoiding hurry, and the mistakes that might happen in these areas.

This book belongs at the top of a therapist’s reference list. It brings to fruition yet another of the author’s disclaimers: “It is the responsibility of every trauma therapist to train and be familiar with a large variety of theories and methods so they can adapt every course of therapy to the particular needs of each individual client.”

At the outset of this review, I wrote that there are many ways we could read this book. I conclude with one more: One reading is not enough. I hope you will find this book as useful, provocative, therapeutically supportive, and enjoyable as I did.

Antigone Oreopoulou is a body psychotherapist and Biosynthesis practitioner whose work is focused on eating disorders, pre- and perinatal psychology, and effective communication in personal, family, parental, and business relationships. She lives in Athens, Greece.