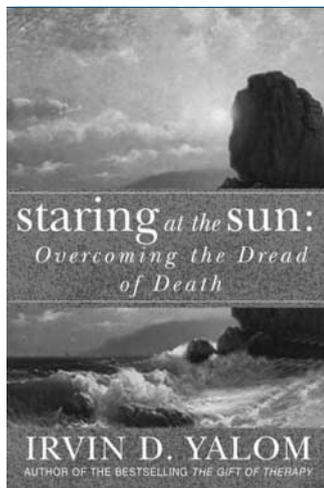


## Book reviews

Edited by Allan Beveridge, Femi Oyeboode  
and Rosalind Ramsay



**Staring at the Sun:  
Overcoming the Dread  
of Death**

By Irvin D. Yalom.  
Piatkus. 2008. 306pp. £14.99 (hb).  
ISBN: 9780749928094

'At the root of all anxiety is the dread of death. Discuss.' Regrettably, Yalom does not dissect this proposition but presents it as a certainty, although he does cite sources for 'the ubiquity of death anxiety'. Even if we set aside specific anxieties such as agoraphobia and social phobia, which Yalom presumably excludes from his theory, I remain sceptical: what dynamic contortions would be required to trace the anxiety of a 16-year-old facing a school examination to a dread of death? There are two likely reasons for Yalom's overstatement of his case – his personal experience ('I've been astounded to see that death has shadowed me my entire life') and his renown at dealing with his specialty, which inevitably leads to his practice being flooded with clients who are dominated by death anxiety.

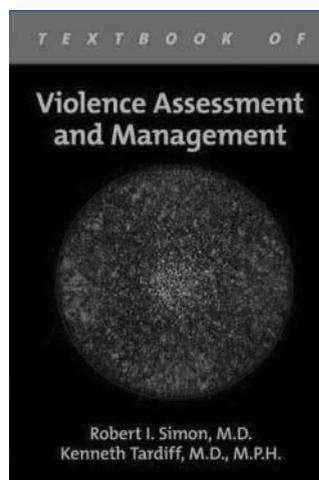
Having aired this grouse, I can move on to Yalom's expertise as a therapist, which is clearly evidenced in the numerous case illustrations he presents, although he is commendably honest in detailing at least one of his therapeutic failures. Yalom defines himself as an existential psychotherapist, recognising like minds in philosophers such as Epicurus, Nietzsche and Schopenhauer. From a psychodynamic viewpoint he is an unconventional therapist, making physical contact with his clients, revealing to them details of his private life, getting up during a session to retrieve notes of a previous session, and encouraging his clients to address him as Irv. The spur to this approach is clearly identifiable – he writes that he remembers none of the 'thoughtful, dense and carefully worded interpretations' of his ultra-orthodox Freudian psychoanalyst, but cherishes 'an unusual momentary burst of tenderness' when he reports his mother's blaming him for his father's heart attack. He recounts that he gained more from studying philosophy than from the psychoanalytic literature. As a consequence, he often adopts the role of a teacher to his clients: 'In every hour of work, I am able to pass along parts of myself, parts of what I have learned about life'. However, his philosophy-inspired teaching does not invariably achieve the desired effect. He quotes one client as saying, 'Even though I get something from discussing all those great thinkers pondering the same question, sometimes these ideas don't really soothe the terror'.

It is not clear for whom Yalom intends this book. The case illustrations are educational for colleagues and are sufficiently jargon-free to be appreciated also by lay readers. There is a chapter

headed 'Advice for therapists', and a curious section at the end entitled 'A reader's guide' which appears to be written by an editor and comprises sets of questions about each chapter which read like a test of comprehension for students, for instance, 'Has Dr Yalom persuaded you that the Greek philosopher Epicurus has something more valuable to teach us all, and if so, what is it?' There are nuggets of gold in this book, particularly in the case examples, but a fair amount of irritating material has to be sluiced away to reveal them.

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**Textbook of Violence  
Assessment  
and Management**

Edited by Robert I. Simon  
& Kenneth Tardiff.  
American Psychiatric Publishing.  
2008. 638pp. US\$84.00 (hb).  
ISBN: 9781585623143

Fifty people contribute to this 600-page book, ranging from academics with international reputations to doctoral students. Although it is possible to make multi-authored books work, it requires strict editorial control to do so, both in terms of defining chapter coverage and content and of being relatively savage in quality control of the eventual product.

The book's structure tends to mirror, for a large part, what one might expect to find in a general psychiatry textbook, and readers are obliged to pick through the various chapters for information about assessment and management of violence in particular disorders, treatment settings or special patient subgroups. It is certainly not a manual for the assessment and management of violence. In fact, only 5 of the 28 chapters deal directly with principles of assessment and management. These include introductory chapters on structured risk assessment and on psychological testing, all of which are informative, but US-focused (e.g. US courts' pre-occupation with risk 'scores', consideration of the Rorschach test). The final chapter on clinically based risk management of potentially violent individuals disappoints in that it concentrates largely on Tarasoff warnings and on patients with guns.

The editors state in the preface that 'much latitude was given to the different authors' writing styles and perspectives'. The result is a hodgepodge of chapters, some of which appear to be written for the professional and some for the novice. We are told, for instance, that 'from Biblical times to the present, we have known that alcohol is often associated with out-of-control behaviour and violence,' and that 'schizophrenics may be delusional and develop ideas of persecution'. This contrasts with the style in other chapters where, for instance, details are set out of controlled trials

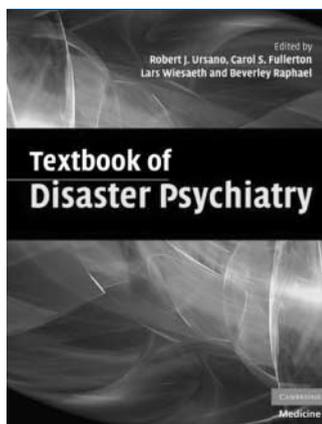
of mean QTc increase following administration of intramuscular ziprasidone.

The editors state that the chapters are 'tutorials' and it is quite clear that they are not reviews of the area. The authors seem to have been asked to produce 20-page articles with case examples and a list of 'key points' at the end. The case examples work very well, but the key points are let down by a tendency towards banality. For example, a 'key point' in the chapter on the elderly is that 'Violence resulting from dementia and delirium with resultant confusion is more common in the elderly'. Furthermore, the differences in approach between authors are illustrated by the length of their reference lists, the chapter on mood disorders giving more than 140 references and the one on schizophrenia and delusional disorder listing 24.

The question arises as to who exactly this book is written for. Clearly, it is a US product and a number of chapters are of no direct relevance to those working outside the USA. Individual chapters may appeal to others, but this is not a textbook for the specialist: it is an introductory tome which will be of interest to the intern, to non-medical members of psychiatric teams and to the lone clinician working in private practice in the USA. Perhaps its strength is that it is a book written for general psychiatrists in an area where specialist forensic treatises tend to dominate. But those clinicians in the UK wishing a direct and practical approach to an issue which besets them in everyday practice might better be advised to turn to Maden's *Treating Violence: A Guide to Risk Management in Mental Health* (Oxford University Press, 2007).

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### Textbook of Disaster Psychiatry

Edited by Robert J. Ursano, Carol S. Fullerton, Lars Wiesaeht & Beverley Raphael. 2007. 354pp. £55.00 (hb) ISBN: 9780521852357

In the past 40 years the number of major global disasters which have inflicted extensive human suffering has increased threefold, an increase which highlights the need within the burgeoning literature on major trauma for quality texts in the field of disaster psychiatry. Professor Ursano and his editorial colleagues, each with a distinguished pedigree in the trauma field, have produced a well-written and well-presented contemporary textbook, which should appeal to clinical practitioners (and their students), researchers and policy makers.

The book is proclaimed to be the first dedicated to disaster psychiatry. However, if we accept that psychiatry is the study and treatment of mental illness and emotional disturbance (Oxford English Dictionary, 2005), then the title belies the breadth of the book's coverage. It comprises five sections including

foundations of disaster psychiatry, clinical care and interventions, and public health and psychiatry. Incorporated within these sections are chapters covering the predictable gamut of topics, such as the epidemiology of post-traumatic conditions, traumatic death, acute stress and post-traumatic stress disorders, children and disasters, and early interventions. However, an attractive feature of the book is its inclusion of less familiar, but equally important topics, such as disaster ecology, public health and disaster mental health, non-governmental organisations and mental health professionals, and the assessment and management of medical and surgical disaster casualties.

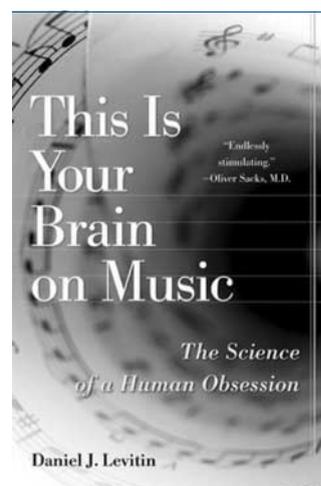
Perhaps, since only three of the authors come from outside of the USA, there is a leaning towards the North American literature and trauma. Reference has not been made to valuable European references such as the National Institute for Health and Clinical Excellence guidelines. There is, however, an abundance of well-selected references. These have guaranteed the editors' aims of producing a text which is largely evidence-based. Inevitably, and appropriately, in view of the distinguished panel of 23 authors, some assertions and observations are more 'eminence-based'.

No textbook can be expected to be of manageable proportions and yet be exhaustive in its coverage. Thus, for certain topics, such as the ethics of disaster work, research issues in the disaster field and the role of the media before, during and after a major catastrophe, the reader will need to consult other texts.

In conclusion, by virtue of its comprehensive content, lucid and attractive style of presentation, and its contemporary evidence base, the *Textbook of Disaster Psychiatry* represents an excellent purchase for a wide range of interested professionals.

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doi: 10.1192/bjp.bp.108.049767



### This Is Your Brain on Music: The Science of a Human Obsession

By Daniel J. Levitin. Atlantic Books. 2007. 322pp. £18.99 (hb); £8.99 (pb). ISBN: 9781843547150; 9781843547167

Music is integral to our lives and, from Elgar to Elvis, provides familiarity and pleasure. The healing properties of music, particularly for mental illness, have been recognised for centuries and music therapy is now established as a psychotherapeutic method to aid communication and expression. Many doctors have studied music and continue to play, as enthusiastic amateurs or in a professional capacity, alongside their medical practice. This book is an engaging investigation of the interface of psychiatry