

Getting it together

How to pick a book on self-improvement

The trip to your local book store is all it takes to realize that the psychological self-improvement business is booming. Shelf after shelf bulges with titles which promise to jazz up your sex life, get rid of your depressions, improve your sleeping, cure your neurosis, and make you a contented person.

Something for everyone, but is any of it really worth reading? Can people really get help from self-help books? The answer is yes, but only to a limited extent—far less than titles and pro-

motional campaigns would lead you to believe. And, in fact, such books can even do harm to an unwary reader.

I have mixed feelings about the current popularity of self-improvement books. I'm pleased that so many readers are becoming more educated about psychology and personal problems. But I'm a little dismayed at the amount of mediocrity and pure misinformation that sits side-by-side with books that are valuable and useful.

HOW CAN READERS tell the differ-

ence? Certainly not by looking at the packaging. Marketing experts have learned that catchy titles and cover designs sell books. The really worthwhile books frequently don't look half as interesting on the outside as their carefully marketed, empty competition.

And you can't rely on the apparent popularity of a book either. Television interviews and other media exposures are much more an indication of the effectiveness of a publisher's promotion department than of the real worth of a book.

Unfortunately, the reason for the proliferation of so many new self-improvement readings is not that so many experts have so many new and important things to say.

It's because self-improvement titles sell. It's one of today's hottest writing markets. And, like all fads, the self-improvement market has attracted a large share of opportunists who are good at saying things in catchy ways, but they just don't have anything to say.

How can a reader know whether he's buying a good book or just an appealing title? If you don't know as much about the subject as the author, then how can you evaluate what you're reading?

THE BEST ANSWER is to pay attention to what effect the book is having on you. The primary standard for a good self-help book is that it should observably enhance your ability to solve your personal problems.

If you have been stuck in a repetitive pattern, it should help you to break the pattern by trying something

new. If you have felt too confused and overwhelmed to do anything about your life, it should give you clarity and courage.

Using this criterion, a careful reader will soon learn to stay away from books which promote one or two specific solutions as the exclusive answer to most of your problems.

Very few personal problems are solved by individuals who have become assertiveness converts, meditation freaks, or positive-thinking addicts.

Instead of solving their problems, they have bought an obsession, a comforting distraction from reality which offers little more than a shallow or temporary solution.

The wise book buyer will avoid books which try to persuade him to deny or overcome his human nature. He will look, instead, for authors who help him to accept and understand his nature.

Books which rely heavily on journalistic interviews and testimonials as their source of authority should be treated skeptically. Mothers and neurotics are not necessarily the best ex-

perts on child-raising and neurosis. The best books draw from a blend of scientific theory, personal experience of the author, and experience with working with people who have problems.

GOOD SELF-HELP books spend most of their time helping you to define and analyze the problem rather than giving solutions. The fact is that most individuals can come up with their own best solutions once they

really understand their problems. Advice books are hardly worth reading.

Some more good rules are to avoid books which blatantly promise to be a substitute for professional counseling—if you really need such help, don't be distracted by a book. Be careful when reading books which don't bother to spell out the limitations of their approach. And squint skeptically at books which are written authoritatively by non-authorities.

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