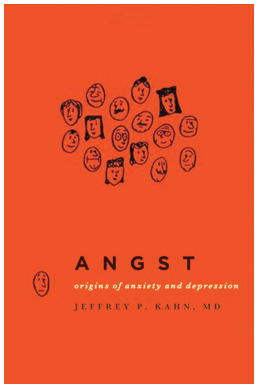
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BOOK REVIEW

Angst: origins of anxiety and depression

Jeffrey P. Kahn, Oxford University Press, 2012, 312 pp, hardcover
ISBN 0199796440



With over 30 years dedicated to clinical assistance, psychotherapy, and research, Jeffrey P. Kahn has devoted his career to investigate various topics, such as psychiatric aspects of heart disease, anxiety disorders, depressive disorders, schizophrenia, and workplace mental health. Since his first articles with colleagues like Donald Klein, Prof. Kahn has also furthered the knowledge about the relation between anxiety and psychosis.

His book posits a novel evolutionary theory that common anxiety and depressive disorders are actually primeval sociobiological instincts now out of context in modern civilization. Although a scientific hypothesis, with about 650 references from psychiatry and other research fields, the book is written in a style suitable for the popular non-fiction audience, with lots of cartoons and song lyrics.

In overview, the theory suggests that panic anxiety, social anxiety, obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD), atypical depression, and melancholic depression derive from specific social instincts important to the survival of herd-like species. Basically, we human beings have an evolutionarily inherited set of herd-like biological instincts. The fact that we often follow reason rather than ''sheep-like'' instincts has led us to arouse specific biological instincts in the form of the five syndromes - which try to coax us back to the herd.

Panic anxiety calls us to return to the herd when we stray geographically or emotionally; social anxiety calls us to lower our social rank in response to otherwise gratifying recognition; OCD is an exaggerated call for four social nesting instincts (OCD factor analysis subtypes: clean, save, behave, arrange); atypical depression includes ''rejection sensitivity'' that promotes considerate behavior, and thus social harmony; melancholic depression calls for the passing of those with a pronounced perception of socially purposelessness, in order to preserve resources for others.

Some instincts have been repurposed over the course of civilization (e.g., think of socially anxious performers who challenge their fears rather than laying low), and genetic changes may have been selected for the enhancement of some instincts (e.g., cross-species infant separation anxiety now retained as adult panic anxiety in some humans).

Jeffrey Kahn, with all his clinical experience and a huge literary foundation, builds up a challenging paradigm. This evolutionary perspective also sheds additional light on the mechanisms of currently effective treatments, and may be useful for differential diagnosis of psychosis. Some clinical presentations, termed as schizophrenia nowadays, are actually psychotic versions of ''the five syndromes'' derived from our social instincts. Considering these five psychosis subtypes, more specific treatment combinations may be prescribed, like antipsychotics and benzodiazepines for ''panic-psychotic'' patients. It offers new models that can be used in psychiatry research, instead of the old fashioned nosographic constructs of mental disorders.

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Disclosure

The author reports no conflicts of interest.