



Team of One

by Penny Priest

BOOK REVIEW

REVIEWED BY PAUL MOLONEY

Few practitioners of talking treatments have written novels about their field. Fewer still have grappled with what it's like to actually work as a therapist in a 21st century public mental health service.

Penny Priest, the author of this timely and bracingly honest novel, worked for many years as a senior clinical psychologist in the British National Health Service. Once upon a time, her profession prided itself as the vanguard of applied intellectuals in the mental health care field. But, in the restless electronic workplace of the early 21st century, coherent thought has become a challenge.

In defiance of such odds, the protagonist of *Team of One* has kept her talents for careful observation and for critical thought. Frances Fisher, careworn and unbowed, is a veteran clinical psychologist in the NHS, where ill-informed managers govern the design, delivery and evaluation of health care. Inside bustling offices that resemble commercial call-centers, clinicians clutch their laptops like begging bowls, striving to fulfil online data-entry directives and competing to book clinical consulting rooms and secure their own sliver of desk space. Their long-suffering patients have been re-branded as service-users: assigned to official treatment pathways informed by scientifically and therapeutically dubious psychiatric diagnoses.

Practical experience has taught her to doubt, not merely the effectiveness of the many leading talking therapy and psycho-education products that she and her colleagues are compelled to deploy. She also questions their root presumptions: that our personal troubles stem mainly from our own failures of self-knowledge and motivation.

Many of Frances' patients bear the diagnostic label of personality disorder – some with gratitude, others with puzzled resignation. Most have embraced the popular

and professional talk of neuroscience and blame their woes on what they take to be their own faulty neural wiring and wayward thought patterns. In compliance with the latest official healthcare guidelines, Frances and her co-workers are on-hand to coax them back to normality via therapeutic training groups based on the latest fashionable psychological skills training package, known as Zen Psyonics: a market-friendly blend of the mysteries of Zen Buddhism and of the prosaic clinic-friendly lore of CBT.

Heartened by Paula, a clear-eyed and outspoken ZP group participant and cancer sufferer, and guided by her own knowledge and ethics, Frances encourages the participants to share and explore the wider meanings of their struggles. As they subvert the ZP training manual, and as mutual solidarity grows, many are relieved to discover that they are not sub-standard or mentally ill. Rather, they realise have been hurt by what others have done to them, or are doing to them still.

Meanwhile, Alexander McDowell, the creator of *Zen Psyonics*, finds himself confronting a series of disturbing and knotty real-life questions that would make excellent Zen koans. During his fight to win his lawsuit for copyright infringement against a former protégé with the temerity to create his own interpretation of ZP, he finds himself reeling from a sudden injury and then from a devastating personal loss. As a result, Alex begins to doubt his own strength of mind and the magical notions underpinning his own teachings.

This novel is informed by the ideas of the dissident clinical psychologist, David Smail, who argued that if we are to grasp the origins of misery and madness and to genuinely help those who suffer most, then we must look at the many evils at work in the world in which we live. He said what we needed most, as individuals and as a society, is *outsight* instead of 'insight'.

Team of One is that thing: a skillfully woven tale that explores vital philosophical and political issues through the struggles of ordinary people, convincingly and movingly portrayed. It deserves the widest readership – including mental health practitioners, the people who use their services, and anyone who wonders why – despite an ever-expanding universe of psychological and drug treatments – we are further than ever from finding the promised technical fix for widespread confusion and despair. ■

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