

The following excerpt is from "Balancing Act: Assessing Strengths in Mental Health Practice" by Dennis Saleeby, Chapter 2 in *Mental Disorders in the Social Environment*, pp. 36-37, edited by Stuart Kirk, Columbia University Press, 2005. Saleeby's Diagnostic Strength Model is in part a parody of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual utilized in psychiatric diagnosis, but it also demonstrates (intentionally or otherwise) how strengths-based rhetoric might be given more intellectual rigor than it often has.

"What if there were a manual, as definitive, categorical, and hefty as the DSM, that required us to account for and appraise the assets, capacities, resources, and dreams of an individual, a family, or a community? To ignore the virtues, gifts, talents, and skills of people is to draw only a faint outline of those individuals. As a matter of fact, a diagnosis wrought by consulting the DSM confers upon the individual the status of case: one among many with similar afflictions and limitations.

With apologies to skilled ironists, imagine the following:

The Diagnostic Strengths Manual

Code 300: Estimable Personal Qualities

301.00 TRUSTWORTHINESS

A. For at least six months, nearly every day, the individual has exhibited at least three of the following behaviors and qualities:

- Did what he or she promised
- Kept at a task that had many snares and difficulties
- Did not reveal a confidence
- Stuck by a friend, relative, or colleague during a difficult time
- Did more than expected

B. This is not better explained by codependency or a pathological desire to please others

C. Such behavior must have improved the lives of others

D. Rule out the possibility of a self-seeking desire to cash in on these loyalties later

302.00 PATIENCE

A. For at least six months, nearly every day, the individual has exhibited at least three of the following:

- Held her or his own wishes in abeyance while allowing a young child or a dependent to struggle to master a behavior

- Demonstrated forbearance in the face of a serious delay, not of her or his own doing, in achieving an important goal
- Calmly endured serious challenges and stresses in the environment
- Exhibited tolerance and understanding when confronted with a personal situation that defied personal values and standards of taste
- Maintained equilibrium and steadfastness in the midst of a situation of rapid change and transition

B. This is not better explained by sedative, hypnotic, or anxiolytic abuse.

C. Such behaviors have a positive, calming effect on others in stressful situation.

D. Such behaviors do not interfere with taking assertive action when required (Saleebey 2001)

Such a classification has many possibilities---from the further detailing of personal virtues and traits (as above), to including family, community, and cultural strengths and assets. The above also has some of the hermeneutic, arbitrary indicators of the DSM (Why six months? Why three characteristics? Why tolerance when faced with a challenge to one's beliefs? etc.). There is a literature about human virtues, admirable attitudes and behaviors, socially productive and morally consequential accomplishments. There is also a literature about the survival of one's humanity under the most stressful of conditions (Antonovsky 1987; Glover 2000; Vaillant 1993)."

References

Mallon, G.P. & Hess, P.M. (Eds.). (2005). Child welfare for the twenty-first century: A handbook of practices, policies, and programs. New York: Columbia University Press.