

Book Review

Sound Steps: Review of “*Seven Steps to Managing Your Memory: What’s Normal, What’s Not, and What to Do About It*” Andrew E. Budson and Maureen K. O’Connor. Oxford University Press, New York, NY (2017). 345 pp, \$27.95. ISBN-13: 9780190494957.

The experience of declining memory in the context of aging can be considered a sobering experience at best, and a harrowing experience at worst. In the current cultural zeitgeist of “fake news,” a gloomy thunderstorm of misinformation regarding what is “normal” age-related memory loss and what is not, and in particular what can be done about it, runs rampant and unchecked, much to the detriment of the aging public’s health and wellbeing. It is in this crucial time that Dr. Andrew Budson and Dr. Maureen O’Connor’s book, *Seven Steps to Managing Your Memory: What’s Normal, What’s Not, and What to Do About It*, ushers in much needed brilliance, illuminating a path through what can be a dark and disconcerting sense of the unknown.

The book is written primarily for the aging adult who is having concerns about perceivable memory problems. It is structured within a framework of seven steps, much like other popular reading tomes that have become instant bestsellers from other fields. I must admit that when I first saw the title, I had some instant reservations about the book, having some familiarity with other “seven steps” writings. The common problem with these is that there is a tendency to not provide the necessary nuance, opting for a refreshing yet shallow pond instead of a purposeful stream from which to draw meaningful nourishment. This book does not have this problem. It provides a solid, current, and accessible well of information, certain to bring some sustenance and solace to potentially fearful and anxious readers. In regards to timing considerations, this book is likely to be most useful to those in the early stages of memory decline or impairment. A person with a profound memory impairment in the moderate or severe range would likely find this book to be less useful or comforting.

The first two steps discuss what are normal age-related changes in memory, and what are signs that may indicate what may not be normal, respectively. The practice of clinical neuropsychology is featured prominently in the second step, and Dr. O’Connor’s contributions here do honor to our profession by highlighting the assessment practices of a clinical neuropsychologist as the ideal method for assessing cognition. The third step describes Alzheimer’s disease and other dementias that could cause memory loss. The fourth step describes medical treatments for memory loss and presents current knowledge regarding common pharmacological interventions for memory loss. Particular attention is paid to Aricept and Memantine, arguably the most common treatments. As a clinician researcher who does not have intimate knowledge of pharmacological interventions, I found these sections particularly informative and helpful for my own clinical practice. Steps five and six describe ways to improve memory through behavioral modifications and cognitive strategies, respectively. Although Dr. Budson’s reputation as an excellent behavioral neurologist precedes him, it is his additional experience as a postdoctoral fellow in experimental psychology and cognitive neuroscience laboratories that clearly shine through the chapters devoted to step six, and I believe the chapters devoted to this step might be the most liked by readers interested in memory aids, strategies, and mnemonics. Step seven presents advice on how to plan for a future with impaired memory and includes some wise admonitions on driving and legal matters.

Throughout the book, there is a running fictional narrative of hypothetical patients that bring to life the presented topics in a personal and relatable manner. Practicing clinical neuropsychologists will be very familiar with these patient “archetypes,” as they represent common examples of referrals to a neuropsychology clinic. Lay readers will likely appreciate these third-hand account narratives to help digest the information presented. Also helpful are specific bullet-point-like questions and responses presented at the end of each chapter which serve to present the material in an alternative simplified format. What Dr. Budson and Dr. O’Connor have done is to put into practice the model of memory and learning attributed to hippocampal function in Chapter 1 and the mnemonic devices presented in Step 6. By presenting the same information in different formats, it allows the hippocampus to bind together the various aspects of the information into a more rich and detailed “episode” which can then be recalled with greater ease at a later time. This approach in writing the overall book is not lost on the knowledgeable reader, and it is generally successful in its overall aim.

While I view this book as a beneficial contribution to the growing canon of memory-focused self-help guides, I would be remiss to not point out some of its shortcomings, which need to be acknowledged lest the general public be prematurely

dismayed or misled. The book presents an idealized academic memory clinic experience that presents as well-integrated (and well-funded) in all of its activities and endeavors. One of the fictionalized characters returns to the clinic multiple times for repeated cognitive assessments and intervention sessions with care providers. It is hard to imagine many clinics functioning successfully like this in today's managed care environment. Having had the great fortune of training and working in clinics such as the one described in this book, I know these are available in certain places. However, the reality is that not all clinics will operate in such a careful and deliberate multidisciplinary manner, and the general reader should know that an experience in a local clinic may not be similar to the examples presented in the book in all aspects. Another issue is what may be viewed as the overly optimistic or positive viewpoints that are occasionally expressed in the text. For example, the Preface states unequivocally and without qualification, "We can help you with your memory." Language such as this seems overly promissory, particularly for those who may have major memory difficulties. The text also claims that currently available medications for memory impairment are "good," and "better" ones are likely on the way. While current medications are helpful for a large portion of older adults, some do not seem to benefit from currently available medications, and the prospects for better medications for memory loss becoming available at least in the near future may be argued as somewhat uncertain at best. Clinicians considering recommending this book to patients might wish to ponder further the potential impact of these points.

Despite these shortcomings, this book provides an excellent overview for those experiencing memory problems in old age. It provides sound advice and direction for cognitive assessment at the hands of a qualified clinical neuropsychologist working closely alongside a behavioral neurologist or physician with expertise in memory disorders. Although the primary intended audience is older adults with early memory difficulties, this book would be a valuable resource for clinical neuropsychologists practicing or in training at all levels. For the graduate student, intern, or postdoctoral fellow in training, it can be read as a creatively formatted review of our current understanding of age-related memory decline and approaches to assessment and treatment of that decline. Soon after finishing this book, I thought about asking my postdoctoral fellow to read it. That is arguably one of the highest indications of its worth that I could give.

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