

Peter Lehmann has been battling the psychiatric establishment for more than 30 years, in his home country, Germany, and Europe-wide through the European Network of (ex-) Users and Survivors of Psychiatry (ENUSP), which he chaired from 1997 to 1999. In 1989 he co-founded the Association for Protection against Psychiatric Violence, and helped set up the Berlin Run-away House. He is also a writer, publisher and bookseller, and has published a number of books criticising psychiatry and the drugs it uses to treat mental distress. They include *The Chemical Gag: why Psychiatrists Administer Neuroleptics* (1986); *Instead of Psychiatry* (1993), and *Coming off Psychiatric Drugs* (1998, published in English in 2004, and in Italian and Greek in 2008). His most recent book, co-edited with US psychiatrist Peter Stastny, came out late last year.

Beyond psychiatry

Catherine Jackson talks to German survivor activist and writer Peter Lehmann about his new book

Alternatives Beyond Psychiatry is a packed compendium of writings from over 60 people from all over the world – users, survivors, relatives, people working in mental health – describing what they have done and do to overcome emotional distress and stay well without medication. It is an astonishing collection.



‘It was important that this book should be beyond psychiatry. We were tired of discussing reform of psychiatry. It’s been going on for 200 years. We wanted to discuss alternatives based on freedom of choice,’ Lehmann says. ‘Medical help only helps people who have medical diseases, and we deny that craziness or depression in general is a medical

disease. Of course sometimes emotional distress can be caused by organic disease, but if so, psychiatrists probably would overlook this. I know it from other people and from my own craziness, and that is the message from all the people in the book – that their problems are mainly caused by social problems, communication problems, and they have to be answered with humanistic approaches, people supporting them, explaining what is going on, interpreting their experience.’

The content of the book ranges widely: individual survival stories, ‘organised self-help’ projects, models of non-psychiatric professional support, and structures and mechanisms for supporting alternative treatments for mental distress. ‘Some people who call themselves antipsychiatry say leave the drugs, abolish psychiatrists, problem solved. That is a very primitive approach,’ Lehmann says. ‘I am not against drugs. When I meet people who say they have recovered thanks to the drugs, I think wow, what good luck for them. I do not doubt it, but I am surprised.’

‘In the veterinary field, when dogs are given SSRIs to calm them down when they are left alone, or pigs on the way to the slaughter house, they are calmer; the drugs are working. They are working in humans too, to calm down people in the short term. But in the middle and long term they produce – and this is well known – a huge amount of disease and social costs, because people don’t really recover, the state is prolonged, it gets chronic, people lose their jobs, they have to go into residential homes and outpatient care and the medical diseases start – changes in liver metabolism, and in heart beat, 60–70% dyskinesia. With all these diseases, how can anyone say the drugs improve your quality of life?’

‘I am pro choice and informed consent. But research shows there is nearly no information – people asked say they haven’t been informed about risks, adverse effects and alternatives. The system doesn’t offer freedom of choice and alternatives. You have to start to create alternatives and this book gives people information to start to organise and work for alternatives.’

‘Psychiatrists do not want to learn from people like me who recover by leaving the system or fighting the system; they only want to listen to the people who took the pills, felt better and were compliant. They should go to user and survivor organisations and ask for teachers, learn from people who have dealt with their emotional crises without drugs. There are lots of positive reports of people with supportive psychiatrists in this book, who supported them in a social way. Psychiatrists could do a lot of good things.’

The book opens with a stark disclaimer of responsibility for ‘any injury and/or damage to persons or property from any use of any methods, products, instructions or ideas referenced in the material herein’. This was necessary, Lehmann says, to avoid the very real possibility of being sued. ‘This is not a book of advice, but people might use it as such. From the beginning of my activism against hazardous psychiatric drugs, I try not to tell people what to do, because they have to decide for themselves. I know people in the movement who act like priests: “Do this, do that, it helped me and it will help you also.” I don’t like this. People think they will be safe in self-help groups but there are sometimes not good people who try to persuade other people to think like them. People need to be respectful of each other’s approach. This book is a kaleidoscope, a firework of approaches from different cultures that should give a broad inspiration and show that alternatives are possible, humane treatment can be implemented, and demand is growing.’ ■

Alternatives Beyond Psychiatry
£16.99 from Peter Lehmann Publishing
www.peter-lehmann-publishing.com