Book Review

What Causes ADHD? Understanding What Goes Wrong and Why

Joel T. Nigg


‘No stone unturned’ sums up the rigour of Nigg’s work. With 64 pages of references, the book demonstrates a monumental effort in exploring the many facets of possible causations of attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD). The approach is scholarly, with a thoroughness of exhausting proportions. But the reader need not be alarmed by the density of such a critique; the style is helpful and easy to read, drawing together a complex field in a way that presents a clear understanding. Each section has regular summaries in the form of question-and-answer tables focusing on what is demonstrated by research and posing questions concerning what is not yet established about the causes of ADHD.

At the outset, the author recognises the debate over whether the medical model or a constructivist approach best describes the gamut of children’s difficulties which are subsumed under the term of ADHD. His stance is to use the term as a working understanding of a syndrome (an observed constellation of signs and symptoms) rather than to name ADHD as a disease with the causal implications of the strict medical model. Chapters work through the controversies surrounding the term, the neurological bases for some of the cognitive, behavioural and emotional presentations, and the genetic and environmental contributions to ADHD.

The sections on environmental toxins and dietary factors are rigorous to a fault, concluding that there is not enough evidence to pinpoint any particular culprit as a major cause of ADHD. Prenatal smoking and drinking, lead poisoning and extreme psychological trauma in early life may be causes in a very small proportion of cases; the influence of diet is unclear. Genetic inheritance has some established effect but with no single gene contributing to the disorder. Curiously, the vast array of research supports the notion of minimal brain dysfunction, bringing us full circle to the label given to impulsivity, hyperactivity and attention deficits in the decades before the term ‘ADHD’ was coined.

Certainly, this book makes fascinating reading; it stays true to the title in exploring causation and understandings, thus being useful to academics and researchers and providing a reference book for clinicians.

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