

Review of:

Otis Doesn't Scratch

(Paperback)

By Clare Shaw and Tasmin Walker (Illustrator)

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28 pages \$15.37 (Amazon)

Reviewed by Valerie Wiley

Clare Shaw and Tamsin Walker have created a children's book and a companion informational guide to help children, aged 4-8, parents, friends, professionals and other care-givers understand and talk about self-injury. Shaw is a writer and poet and Walker is an artist. In addition, both are mental health professionals in the U.K. with extensive knowledge, both personal and professional, of self-injury.

The children's book is a 28-page picture book about Ted, who lives with his single mother and his orange tabby-cat, Otis. When Ted notices large purple gashes on his mother's arms, she tells him that Otis scratched her. Ted is puzzled, remembering that he has also seen bruises on his mother's legs, but he yells at the cat who runs away. Ted is so upset about the cat and his mom that he can't concentrate. His teacher notices and asks Ted to stay after class. The tears flow and Ted tells Mr. Worston how worried he is about Otis and his mom. When Ted gets home, his mom says that Mr. Worston called, and she admits that she is hurting herself. This allows Ted to ask questions about why, if she will die, and if self-injury would make Ted feel better—all of which mom answers. She reviews with Ted all the things that can help them feel happier but also says that sometimes people need to be sad. The last page pictures Otis returning through the door flap.

The story serves as a vehicle to provide the information that the authors want to convey: about it not being Ted's fault, that mom loves him and will not die, that there are activities and people they can rely on to help them feel better, that people are not always happy, that mom is not crazy, that it's okay to cry. In the process of serving the message, however, the book feels didactic. The characters function more as mouthpieces than real characters that readers can relate to. One reason for this may be that there is very little dialogue between characters. Most of the conversations are reported after-the-fact by Ted, and that means that neither of the adult characters is heard offering an empathic response to Ted's experience. This distances the reader rather than encouraging identification. Another reason is that the dramatic tension, the "action," is more about the cat than the self-injury. To wit: the last page of the book shows the cat returning home, resolving the tension of the plot.

The illustrations are a combination of photo-shopped images and super-imposed hand drawings. This combination is a bit difficult to make sense of and results in some very dark images. Although the

authors wanted to show that darkness and light are both a part of life, the book's target audience may find the pictures scary.

Other aspects of the story also raise questions. Does the fact that Mum is a single parent unintentionally suggest that single mothers are less able to cope with painful feelings and experiences in the more pro-social ways suggested? Did Mum have to initially lie to Ted? Although adults will understand her shame or desire to protect, to young readers she may seem untrustworthy.

In contrast, the companion guide to *Otis Doesn't Scratch* is an excellent compendium of basic information about self-injury, delivered in a clear and caring way. In a series of short chapters, this 46 page booklet covers: what is self-injury, why do people self-injure, self-injury and suicide, common assumptions about self-injury, self-injury and recovery, responding to self-injury, harm minimization to self, minimizing the harm for others and child-protection, how to talk to children about self-injury, mental health and the emotional impact of self-injury, and a list of resources and references. Shaw intersperses personal extracts from her own experience with self-injury in text boxes throughout the guide. Both the personal comments and the text benefit from her steady and reassuring voice and collegial tone. The authors' knowledge and experience are evident and would likely be extremely reassuring to anyone who self-injures, including parents. For example, in the section debunking the myths about self-injury, they begin by stating, "The fact that someone self-injures tells us that they are having a hard time and may need a little extra kindness or support...It is rarely helpful to assume that we know what is going on for someone." They go on to confront assumptions such as: people who self-injure are attention seeking, manipulative, mentally ill, just copycats, or that their wounds are nothing serious. But the guide is not unduly optimistic. The authors point out the realistic dangers to self and others, briefly outline how to stay safe, and offer specific web links for this and other topics.

The guide, although ostensibly geared to helping parents who self-injure talk with their children about it, seems to lose focus on this specific audience at times and address a more general one. Perhaps their intention is to target older children who might read the guide and not the book, while younger siblings might read only the book. This was somewhat confusing but in no way interferes with the useful information provided.

Ultimately, the question is whether or not mental health practitioners would be well-served in adding the book and guide to their professional libraries. A client-centered therapist might hesitate to use the storybook because Ted's feelings, reactions, behaviors and language describing his experience are not necessarily universal. A child may not even want to use words but would find another means of expressing their experience if left to self-direct. There is, however, a place for the guide if a client requested such material and the therapist felt comfortable recommending it. Despite these several caveats, Shaw and Walker have tackled a topic that is lacking in resources, and so they have not only raised awareness but have also begun to provide information and support to self-injuring parents, children, and those who love them.