Self-help books: Stressed readers or stressful reading?

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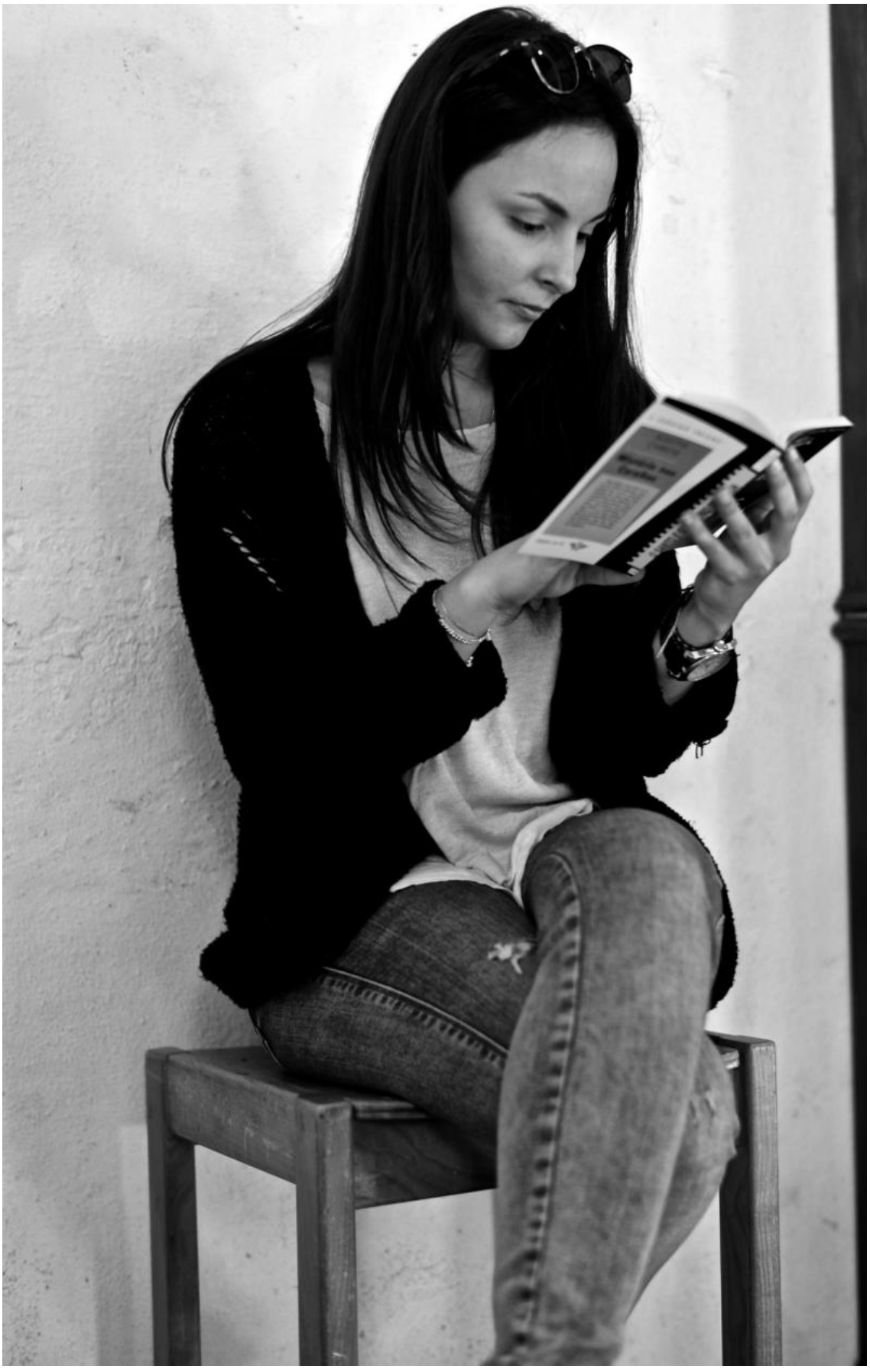

Consumers of self-help books are more sensitive to stress and show higher depressive symptomatology, according to a study conducted by researchers at the CIUSSS de l'Est-de-l'amp; Icircle-de-Montramp;eacute;al (Institut universitaire en santampeacute; mentale de Montrampeacuteal) and the University of Montreal, the findings of which were published in Neural Plasticity. Credit: Pedro Ribeiro Simões, CC BY 2.0

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"The sale of self-help books generated over $10 billion in profits in 2009 in the US, which is a good reason to find out if they have a real impact on readers," said Sonia Lupien, Director of the Centre of Studies on Human Stress (CSHS). "Initially, we thought we had observed a difference in participants in terms of personality, sense of control, and self-esteem based on their self-help reading habits," explained Catherine Raymond, first author of the study and a doctoral student at the CSHS of the Institut universitaire en santé mentale de Montréal. "In reality, there seems to be no difference between those who read and those who do not read these types of books. However, our results show that while consumers of certain types of self-help books secrete higher levels of cortisol (a stress hormone) when confronted with stressful situations, consumers of another type of self-help books show higher depressive symptomatology compared to non-consumers," said the student in neuroscience at the University of Montreal's Faculty of Medicine.

Method

The CSHS team recruited 30 participants, half of whom were consumers of self-help books. The team measured several elements of the participants, including stress reactivity (salivary cortisol levels), openness, self-discipline, extraversion, compassion, emotional stability, self-esteem, and depressive symptoms. The group of self-help book consumers was itself divided into two types of readers: those who preferred problem-focused books (e.g. Why Is It Always About You? or How Can I Forgive You?: The Courage to Forgive, the Freedom Not To) and those who preferred growth-oriented books (e.g.,You're Stronger Than You Think or How to Stop Worrying and Start Living). The results showed that consumers of problem-focused self-help books consumers presented greater depressive symptoms and that growth oriented self-help books consumers presented increased stress reactivity compared to non-consumers.

The chicken or the egg?

Does reading self-help books increase the stress reactivity and depressive symptomatology of self-help readers or are they more sensitive to stressful situations? It is difficult to determine the cause of this observation. "Further research will help us learn more," according to Lupien. "Nevertheless, it seems that these books do not produce the desired effects. When we observe that the best predictor of purchasing a self-help book is having bought one in the past year,[1] it raises doubts about their effectiveness. Logically, if such books were truly effective, reading just one would be enough to solve our problems," said the researcher at the Institut universitaire en santé mentale de Montréal. For this reason, she encourages people to rather consult books that report scientifically proven facts and are written by researchers or clinicians affiliated with recognized universities, health care facilities, or research

centres. "Check your sources to avoid being disappointed. A good popular science book doesn't replace a mental health professional but it can help readers better understand stress and anxiety and encourage them to seek help.

More information: C. Raymond, M-F Marin, A. Hand,S. Sindi, R-P Juster and S.J. Lupien. Salivary Cortisol Levels and Depressive Symptomatology in Consumers and Nonconsumers of Self-Help Books: A Pilot Study. Neural Plasticity. Article ID 624059. 2015

1. Salerno, Steve. "Sham: How the Self-Help Movement Made America Helpless," Crown Publishing Group, 273 p., 2005

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