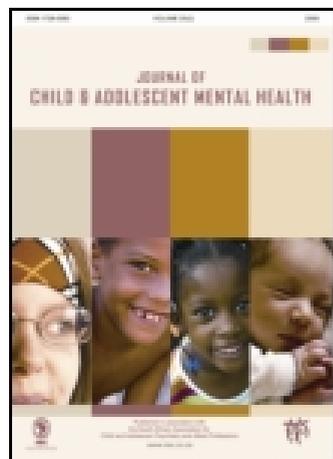


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Stahl's essential psychopharmacology: Neuroscientific basis and practical applications (4th edition)

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Book Review

Stahl's essential psychopharmacology: Neuroscientific basis and practical applications (4th edition)

Stephen M Stahl

2013, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, United Kingdom

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When you get an opportunity to review *Stahl's essential psychopharmacology* you embrace it. First, it is a way to get your hands on the latest edition and, second, some external motivation will ensure you read the entire book promptly. *Stahl's essential psychopharmacology* has become the bedrock for anyone working in psychiatry or related mental health fields. If you have trained or been involved in psychopharmacology training during the last 15 years, you will be familiar with this book and the role it plays in laying the foundation for psychopharmacology knowledge and comprehension. The first edition of the book was published in 1996 and this fourth edition is now the flagship of an entire essential psychopharmacology series which includes a prescriber's guide, case studies, self-assessment examinations and an illustrated series on specific topics. For those who prefer electronic forms, access to this book and others by Stephen M Stahl can also be bought online at www.stahlonline.org.

Similar to previous editions, the fourth edition of *Stahl's essential psychopharmacology* presents complex concepts in simplified and creative ways, making them easier to grasp and remember. Throughout the book cartoon-like illustrations are used to enhance visual conceptualisation of ideas extrapolated in the text. The illustrations by Nancy Muntner remain similar in style and appearance to those of previous editions and are undoubtedly among the book's major highlights.

There are, however, some significant changes to the fourth edition, distinguishing it from previous editions. The first three editions of *Stahl's essential psychopharmacology* expanded in size with each edition, reflecting the meteoric developments made in the fields of psychopharmacology and neuroscience. It is thus surprising that the fourth edition is much smaller than its predecessor, with 575 pages of actual text compared with the 1 011 pages in the third edition. This decrease in size is partly due to changes in the book's formatting and to attempts to edit out redundancy. One of the ways in which this was achieved was by a drastic decrease in the basic neuroscience chapters from eight in the third edition to three in the fourth edition, with much of the basic neurosciences now integrated into the clinical chapters. Although this has increased the book's readability, it can also be argued that when the basic scientific principles are thoroughly covered first, it ensures that a proper base has been laid before extrapolating more specific clinical disease entities. The formatting and appearance of the book is decidedly improved in this fourth edition. The pages are slightly wider, with text distributed in two columns and, even though *Stahl's essential psychopharmacology* has always had colourful images, the purple hues used in headings and tables increase the visual appeal of the book. Basically it looks more attractive and is not as cumbersome to carry around or hold whilst reading.

Other than the major change in the basic neurosciences section the content is presented in a fashion essentially similar to that of previous editions. For each disorder or group of disorders, the clinical features and basic underlying disease mechanisms are presented first, after which the drug actions and individual drugs are discussed. In this new edition the biological mechanisms of diseases have been updated with more recent developments and several new drugs are included throughout. The chapters covering psychosis and mood disorders have been updated significantly and contain new theories regarding the neurocircuitry, genomics and neurotransmitter actions involved. One particularly useful feature included in the 'Antipsychotic agents' chapter is a series of coloured boxes visually representing the receptor binding properties of each antipsychotic drug. This makes it much easier to understand the expected action and side effects associated with individual antipsychotics and to compare them with each other. The grouping of disorders has also been changed to be more in line with current scientific thinking. For example, obsessive compulsive disorder (OCD) has been moved out of the 'Anxiety disorders and anxiolytics' chapter and is now included with substance use disorders and other related disorders in the 'Impulsivity, compulsivity and addiction' chapter.

Throughout the book the focus is on matching symptom domains or endophenotypes with their hypothetical underlying malfunctioning neurocircuitry. The purpose of this approach is to move the conceptualisation and management of psychiatric conditions to become more biologically based and also to motivate treating each individual's symptom domains rather than according to a disease classification. This reasoning is at times used to advocate for the rational use of polypharmacy. Although this practice is often clinically useful and may be based on scientific rationale, it is not always supported by available scientific literature. The text does not clearly show which recommendations are evidence based and thus inexperienced prescribers may be unaware which of the practices advocated will be supported by current best evidence. However, the text does provide provisos and disclaimers indicating that off label use is discussed and that standard prescribing references should be consulted before prescribing any drugs.

Stahl's essential psychopharmacology has undergone a few transformations in this fourth edition, but essentially remains true to form. It is designed to be an introductory text on psychopharmacology and it certainly fulfils this criterion. It also remains an interesting and readable update for individuals with more experience in psychopharmacology. Making a psychopharmacology text 'easy reading' is no small feat and *Stahl's essential psychopharmacology* certainly delivers in this respect. It assists in making a very complex field somewhat less daunting to approach. This book is, as its name indicates, essential reading for anyone training or working in psychiatry. Due to its accessibility it can also be recommended for anyone interested in learning more about this fascinating subject.

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