Decision Making in Behavioral Emergencies: Acquiring Skill in Evaluating and Managing High-Risk Patients
By: Phillip Kleespies
Reviewed by Shea Golding, M.S., and Michael R. Nadorff, Ph.D.

Behavioral emergencies, whether they be imminent risk of suicidality, violence toward others, or interpersonal victimization, are a fact of life for almost anyone in clinical practice. When a client presents with a behavioral crisis or emergency, the clinician must make decisions that could have life or death consequences for not only the client but also others. Unfortunately, few graduate training programs provide adequate training in assessing and managing behavioral emergencies, leaving clinicians in the uncomfortable position of having to intervene quickly and decisively while often feeling unprepared and unsure.

Dr. Kleespies’ new book Decision Making in Behavioral Emergencies: Acquiring Skill in Evaluation and Managing High-Risk Patients is a companion to his previous book Behavioral Emergencies: An Evidence-Based Resource for Evaluating and Managing Risk of Suicide, Violence and Victimization. In his previous book, Kleespies provided the reader with a knowledge base about working with behavioral emergencies. The new book, reviewed here, aims to expand upon the previous book by focusing on helping clinicians develop the skills that are required to competently assess and manage behavioral crises and emergencies. Given that training in the assessment and management of suicide (Schmitz, et al. 2012), let alone other behavioral emergencies, is rare, this book fills a significant training need.

Recognizing that behavioral emergencies are one of the most stressful events that a clinician experiences, Kleespies begins his training on behavioral emergencies by reviewing the literature on decision making and stress, and then goes on to discuss how to reduce stress in light of a behavioral emergency. Although many of us have been trained on stress management in graduate school, few have received training on how to reduce stress in the context of an emergency. Thus, the inclusion of these sections is especially valuable.

Following his discussion on decision making within stressful contexts, Kleespies transitions to a series of sample behavioral emergency cases to help the reader practice making important decisions regarding extremely complex, stressful cases. Each case is presented in sufficient detail for the reader to make a judgment about how to respond, and is then followed by a commentary on the case, which allows the reader to compare notes with one of the preeminent experts in the field on these difficult cases. With each of the ten examples, which span the range of behavioral emergencies, the reader becomes more and more competent and confident, as these exercises provide excellent practice and preparation for managing a crisis in the real world.

The text then provides a review of the common decision-support tools that are used in behavioral emergencies. This section will be very useful to many clinicians as it includes information not only about suicide, which many of those reading this review will be well-versed in, but also in tools to assess violence risk, which may be newer to many of us. However, there
is a correlation between suicide and other behavioral emergencies, and a competent clinician must be able to manage all behavioral emergencies. As such, this section will serve as a very nice introduction or review to these risk assessment measures.

The book wraps up with a discussion of how to create a training program in behavioral emergencies, which is a great asset given the dearth of training opportunities in this area, and a section outlining the legal and ethical issues that are inherent in behavioral emergencies. Lastly, the author prepares the reader for the fact that negative outcomes are unfortunately a possibility when working with behavioral emergencies. Kleespies provides coping strategies for clinicians who work with suicide, violence, or victimization. This is a nice addition to any training program, and is a helpful reminder of the importance of self-care in clinical practice.

Decision Making in Behavioral Emergencies: Acquiring Skill in Evaluation and Managing High-Risk Patients is a valuable resource for any clinician and will appeal to all levels. It is a fantastic book for initial training, but even the most seasoned clinician will likely pick up numerous pieces of helpful information from this text. Kleespies ties together the aspects of this book skillfully and includes current research to reinforce the main points throughout. Thus, this book will prove to be a helpful tool for any practicing clinician.