

Mental Health is a Spiritual Topic

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What comes to mind when we hear the term "mental health?" We often consider mental unwellness to mean the presence of undesirable qualities such as anger, depression, guilt, or other negative emotions. Being mentally ill might also mean being a threat to oneself or others. If these tendencies are not present, suppressed, or visible, we may consider a person to be in a more or less healthy state. This is a narrow way of discussing mental health because we are defining it by a negative condition. To say that mental health consists of the presence of good characteristics is to define it in positive terms. We will understand mental health better if we have a positive and objective definition of mental well-being.

Jesus described this health in terms of a person either "having life" or being "dead," terms used to refer to people alive from a physical point of view. A person who is truly alive and fruitful is exceptional, and these individuals are the light of the world. Spiritual vitality and not belief in a doctrine is what "having life" means. Many people who are about their worldly business in truth resemble a barren fig tree and are not truly aware and therefore not healthy. Mental health in this sense is not the norm but the exception. The goal of conventional psychology it seems, is not true mental health but adjustment to a minimum standard.

Let us expand our concept of mental wellness to that of well-being for the whole person. This considers the entirety of what it means for a person to be well, embracing the body and mind as well as the character and spiritual state of the individual. In light of this definition, we can understand mental health in relation to other things, including excellence, integrity, productivity, intelligence, and self-control. Moral and spiritual is mental health. A morally and mentally healthy person is one who expresses excellence. An excellent person does not merely pass a test of mental health, but flourishes and stands out as unique, capable, and successful.



Mental illness in today's world is increasing and is not improving by treatment with medications or by a true understanding of psychology. This means that many medical practices are based on error and must be discontinued and replaced with sound practices. Whether mental illness is produced by the negative influence of new technologies, the lack of a God-centered culture, or the overeating of processed food (who knows the real cause?), we will not solve it by watching the news, increasing funds, or putting more trust in the medical establishment.

What is certain is that our human problems will not be helped by clinging to the latest form of technology or a new medication as the long-sought solution. We must change our ideas. A human problem needs a human solution, and the solution will involve a true understanding of what it means to be human and structuring everyday life after the pattern of the unchanging truth. By getting away from conventional ideas about mental health and shedding the light of universal truth on the subject, we will transcend the confusion and uncertainty that prevails in the world and perceive the solution by which we can grow in understanding and virtue and thus achieve freedom.

A Science of Human Nature

We cannot understand mental health without grounding our understanding on an objective definition of human nature. Human nature is to be understood by virtues, a complete set of characteristics built into every individual with the potential to grow to maturity. Becoming mature is fulfilling human nature's purpose, which is what it means to have life, virtue, and health.

To say that all people possess the "germ" of every virtue from a moral perspective is like saying all human beings possess every muscle from a physical perspective. We do not need to acquire muscles; we already have them. The strength of each muscle depends on the degree to which each muscle has been exercised. A person who has developed the physical body to a point where any muscle can be used skillfully when the occasion demands is described as an athletic person.

It is similar with a person who expresses human excellence and virtue in all ways. The virtues of kindness, temperance, intelligence, bravery, authenticity, etc., are the fruits by which the virtuous are known. A person of moral health is not excellent in one field and deficient in others but is morally good in a broad sense. It should not be uncommon to see this kind of person because it is simply the normal outgrowth of human nature.

To personify every virtue which is natural to a human being, or to grow to completion according to the pattern of human nature, is what I mean by mental health. Rather than thinking about managing our health and coping, we should aim for the more worthy goal of flourishing and thriving. A state of stagnation, boredom, and unfruitfulness is an abnormal condition. The purpose of psychology, as well as that of religion, is to eliminate this state. One barrier to overcome is the tendency to conform to the world rather than seek the truth.

The original truth of human nature is that a person who is spiritually fruitful is happy and healthy. One also is happy who is in the process of growing to spiritual perfection. A person who still alive but whose growth has been arrested, and forms an identity around some limited good characteristics and other deficiencies which one is unwilling to eliminate and grow beyond, is not mentally healthy in an objective sense. In order to grow in this way, we must desire to do so and devote time to that specific goal. We will not grow merely by making a living and fulfilling the demands of the external world.

Man is a Learning Creature

It is a unique part of human nature to grow not only physically but internally. This internal growth is essential to true mental health. Only human beings consciously develop their mind, character, and individuality, whereas other animals grow in a much more automatic and less conscious way.

Internal growth is as unique to human nature as the concept of mental health is unique to human nature. For this reason it makes sense that growth is an essential component of true mental health. A human being has a desire to grow and expand, and the fulfillment of this desire is the very purpose of human life. The necessity for a person to grow, learn, and work toward a worthwhile goal to be healthy is like the need for a bicyclist to be in motion to remain standing. For a human being, the task of working on oneself is the "goal of goals"

Erich Fromm is a thinker and psychologist who explored the issue of mental health in the modern world. He linked his theory of psychology to his theory of human nature, insisting that we must base psychology on principles and laws which are stable and relatively unchanging, calling this theory "normative humanism." Contrary to conventional practice, we cannot do psychology without also doing philosophy, asking questions such as, "What does it mean to be human?" He writes:

"[N]ormative humanism [assumes] that... there are right and wrong... solutions to the problem of human existence. Mental health is achieved if man develops into full maturity according to the characteristics and laws of human nature. Mental illness consists of the failure of such development. From this premise, the criterion of mental health is not one of individual adjustment to a given social order, but a universal one, valid for all men, of giving a satisfactory answer to the problems of human existence"

Fromm raises the point that a society as a whole can be mentally well or unwell. In a sick society, a healthy person may be regarded as sick and a "normal" person may be mentally unwell, objectively speaking. To transcend this relativistic dilemma, there must be universal standards of mental health. Mental health is not adjustment to one's society, but an approximation to the original pattern of human nature.

When the human need for real spiritual growth is not fulfilled, nature has a self-correcting mechanism to reveal the fact that there is a problem through obvious external disturbances and abnormalities. These help a person become aware of the real problem. These are mental health symptoms. The symptoms are not the problem, but merely bear witness to the problem. The solution is to overcome frustration, anger, and dissatisfaction by growing and expanding our sense of power as a person.

Medications: A False Solution

This point takes us to the issue of how mental health symptoms are often addressed: by the use of medications to give a temporary sense of happiness, peace, and feeling good about life without internal growth being the cause. This method can either alleviate symptoms or create more symptoms that weren't there before. Ultimately, the underlying problem has to be faced and cannot be changed from the outside through technology or material medicine. Only a spiritual solution will meet a spiritual problem.

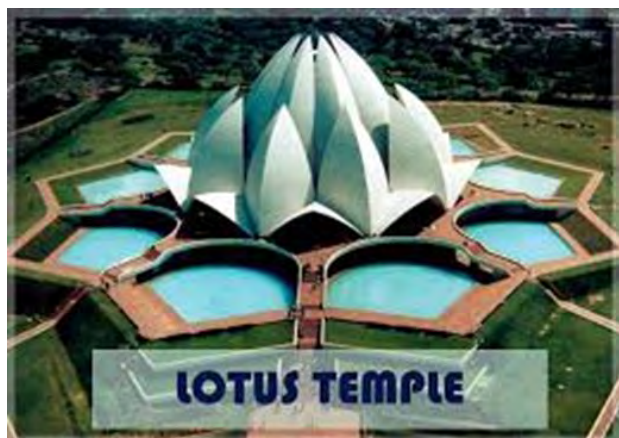
Since mental health is the product of conscious conformity to the eternal truth, we cannot consider the apparent equilibrium produced by medication to reflect human wellness. According to Jiddu Krishnamurti, "It is no measure of health to be well adjusted to a profoundly sick society." Since our society as a whole is very sick, the goal of psychology shouldn't be adjustment of the individual to society but empowerment of the individual to live as he chooses.

Mental health as a specialized field cannot be successful unless the general questions of human life are addressed by the practitioners of that field. Such questions include, "What does it mean to be human? What do human beings care about most of all? How do these psychological disturbances relate to the supreme concerns of human life? Does the solution I am using not only address the apparent problem but the unseen, non-empirical root of the problem?" Neither psychology nor any other field can truly be done responsibly unless that field concerns itself with its proper relation to the whole.

A distorted idea can produce a chemical imbalance, but a biochemical intervention cannot produce a sound and stable idea. We attain mental, moral, and spiritual health when we correct false ideas and beliefs, commit our lives to the ideal, and decide that growth is more important than our job, television, or fitting in with the world because growth is the purpose of our lives.

Let Us Cultivate Our Gardens

A spiritually healthy individual is one that desires to learn, grow, and transcend, and helps others do the same. An advanced society contributes to the improvement of individual and collective life. As Ralph Waldo Emerson has written, "The true test of civilization is not the census, nor the size of cities, nor the crops, but the kind of man that the country turns out" (Society and Solitude, 1870). A society is good only inasmuch as it facilitates the growth of good individuals. It does this by propagating a good culture which is rich with life-supporting elements such as truth, purity, reverence, and love, all of which are characteristics of the Original Human.



The sight of extraordinary architecture that is beautiful "for no reason," feeds the soul.

Growth takes place in a garden. The culture is like a garden in which good plants (individuals) are nurtured and bring forth good fruit. We each need to take responsibility for self-culture by living consciously and not by default, because our society will not provide us with the spiritual nourishment we need.

The fundamental concerns of human life, which are over and above most of our everyday duties, can be addressed through religion, art, literature, music and other cultural media. Fulfilling human nature requires remaining in touch with the higher concerns of the soul. Taking care of the tasks of everyday life and earning a living means becoming involved in a certain routine that requires time and energy. The universal problems of life are over and apart from many of these tasks and also require time, effort, and awareness.

One of the purposes of religion is to make us mindful of humanity's highest concerns. The understanding and practice of religious truths can relieve us of many of our mental and spiritual maladies. It is important that religion itself doesn't become a mere routine, but is re-infused with spiritual vitality each day through a collective as well as an individual, unmediated relationship with our divine Source.

Music and art can be a powerful way of raising our attention above the mundane and into the noble and inspiring possibilities of human life. Hearing great music can uplift and inspire one's soul unlike anything else. It is important that the arts also don't become mere reproductions of the everyday. Music should not express a base and immoral culture, but should be a message from the divine in the creator to the divine in the listener. It has the power not only to please, but to improve the listener as well.

This can be fulfilled if our musicians and artists are motivated by high ideals and are spiritually-minded. Beethoven has written, "Music is a higher revelation than all wisdom and philosophy. Music is the electrical soil in which the spirit lives, thinks and invents." Music can indeed be spiritually inspired and great music can be considered divine revelation.

Literature, television, architecture, and sports are also expressions of culture, all of which can be used wisely or carelessly. The important thing is that we use spiritual discernment with regard to all expressions of culture. We can ask the following questions: Does this come from above? Does this make the world better or does it make it the same or worse? Does this dignify human nature, making us think of the glorious possibilities of life, or does it reflect the undesirable conditions that cause suffering?

There is really no difference between being mentally, morally, and spiritually healthy and developing into our full potential by being well-cultivated. There is an abundance of negative influences surrounding us. Fortunately, however, there is no limit to the positive, life-giving influences of spiritually-inspired culture revealed throughout the ages. By immersing ourselves in the culture of what is true, good, and beautiful, we can benefit the world by being examples of mental, moral, and spiritual health.

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