

The Pathologizing of a Culture

Depression, anxiety and other symptoms of emotional and mental distress have become so commonplace that they are literally being institutionalized. What was once considered an abnormality has now become quite normal. We should be asking why that is so. The National Institute of Health reports that in any given year 22% of Americans have a diagnosable mental disorder and that 9.5% of the population experiences depression; these rates of occurrence are staggering. They indicate the emergence of an epidemic. There is something terribly amiss here. This data indicates that what we refer to as mental disorder is quite normative. It's beginning to look as if the disorder is, in fact, the order. It is the normalizing of these conditions that has led to a culture of pathology. Let's take a look at some potential causes of this problem.

Cultural Misdirection

We live in a culture that is intensely fueled by competition and achievement drives. This externalizing force serves to remove people from the sources of authentic well-being. Focusing primarily on achievement and success deprives us of the grounding of emotional and mental wellness. One of the fundamental sources of happiness comes from relationships, which all too often become peripheral to life's other goals. Furthering this problem, the insidious nature of extreme competition is soul-defeating and de-spiriting as it treats us more like highly functioning machines than as spiritual humans. When we break down, we're given a diagnosis, told what our dysfunction is and offered a prescription. The cure, however, does not lie in the diagnosis and medication of these suffering individuals, but in a shift of perspective.

Bio-Medical and Pharmaceutical Influences

Bio-Medical and Pharmaceutical Influences

The pharmaceutical industry is second only to the military industrial complex in terms of size and power. Medical students are increasingly trained by the pharmaceutical industry and psychiatry, for the most part, has become a profession of diagnosis and medication, marginalizing actual psychotherapy. The overarching force in American culture is profit and there is enormous profit earned from the business of medicating people. Just look at the spate of television commercials hooking us into drugs and the ensuing happiness that they promise. We watch out-of-shape, middle aged men leaping with joy because they took a pill for erectile dysfunction. How absurd.

At times, life simply presents challenges and struggles that very understandably cause distress. We can, medicate away the pain and stifle our growth, or we can be supported through the struggle until we emerge. Recently, I heard a colleague recount the following story: A new client came in to see him and told him that her husband had just left her and their three young children. She was overwhelmed and anxious about finances. She indicated to him that her previous therapist had recommended anti-depressants. A pill can't cure or alleviate the circumstances that life presents. Yes, this woman is indeed depressed, but for a very good reason. Her depression isn't clinical, but situational and due to real life stressors. She doesn't need a pill; she needs support and encouragement to face her challenges. We need to look more circumspectly at the pharmaceutical industry and selectively determine when medication is truly advantageous, yet not subscribe blindly to the medicating of a population.

Outdated Psychotherapy Model

Traditional psychotherapy is still rooted in a Newtonian reductionism paradigm that believes in linear causes and mechanistic behavior. As I've written before, the universe appears to be a seamless, indivisible whole, wherein nothing is truly separate from anything else. The therapist's acceptance of the validity of diagnosis is in and of itself, founded in the illusion of objective separation. The therapy field has stagnated as it clings to a fragmented system of thought which is sadly outdated.

Psychotherapy has not kept pace with the insights of the emerging sciences which truly pave the pathway for healing and wellness. The current trend in the field inclines toward an institutionalizing of pathology and a normalizing of medicating symptoms, rather than aggressively opening to new learning paradigms. Traditional psychotherapy has seemingly become co-opted by the bio-medical approach and begins to resemble the problem rather than the cure.

Yet, the good news is that with a shift in perspective, psychotherapy can be immensely helpful. Rather than focusing backwards at causes, it needs to address the phenomenon of change and employ many of the wonderful new insights that so accelerate learning and emergence. I have experienced dramatic and profound results with many of my clients by employing this shift of mind.

To blindly accept the decline in mental and emotional states and to rely primarily upon medication as the solution is both narrow minded and depressing. Moreover, it's simply de-humanizing.

Copyright Mel Schwartz 2002 - All rights reserved

Mel Schwartz is a visionary psychotherapist, thinker and author who earned his graduate degree from Columbia University. He has been a keynote speaker at Yale University. Mel is the author of *The Art of Intimacy*, *The Pleasure of Passion* and is currently writing, *Emergent Thinking*.[®] He is the founder of the *Emergent Thinking*[®] Process. He is in private practice in Westport, CT. and Mt. Kisco, NY. Visit his web site at www.MelSchwartz.com.