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Global forces shaping our mental health

A sense of isolation can lead to nihilistic responses, or to fundamentalism, argues ***Richard Eckersley***

Robert Pirsig's *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance* was one of the defining books of the 1970s. His next book, *Lila: An inquiry into morals*, published in 1991, had nowhere near the same success, even though he regarded it as the more important book. A highly original thinker who spent time in a psychiatric hospital after a severe breakdown, Pirsig says in *Lila*:

'….Now, years later, his resentment against what had happened in the hospital had lessened, and he began to see that there is, of course, a need for psychiatrists just as there is for cops… The thing to understand is that if you are going to reform society, you don't start with cops. And if you are going to reform intellect you don't start with psychiatrists. If you don't like our present social system or intellectual system the best thing you can do with either cops or psychiatrists is stay out of their way. You leave them till last.'

I was reminded of Pirsig's view when a professor of psychiatry, commenting on a paper I'd written, said he thought my 'overall pessimism was simply the reflection of an introspective person who is steeped in the data'. What he saw as 'pessimism' was my linking of the social and psychological problems of young people today to broad social conditions, especially the defining qualities of modern Western culture.

Considerations of mental health are dominated by a medical model that construes it in terms of individual attributes – as the professor's 'diagnosis' of my own case so aptly demonstrates – and especially as an illness requiring medical or psychological interventions. But we need also to think of mental health as a societal issue requiring social change – or as Pirsig characterised it, intellectual change: change in how we think about things; in how we see the world and our place it in; in what we think makes life worth living.

The medical model of health reflects a powerful tendency to separate the social and personal worlds: the conditions of social life shaped by large, external forces such as economic globalisation, technological innovation, environmental change, or terrorism, on the one hand; and the features of personal life shaped by internal, psychic processes and personal circumstances and experiences, on the other.

The reality is that change in both the social and personal worlds is being shaped by an extraordinarily complex interplay between the world 'out there' and the world 'in here' - in our heads - and that we need to understand this interplay to understand what is happening in both worlds. Here is an example.

The American Pulitzer-Prize winning writer Ron Powers has warned of an ‘apocalyptic nihilism’ that is infecting children. Powers focuses on the modern phenomenon of teenage killers - adolescents who murder their parents, teachers or peers for seemingly little reason. He recounts a story told by a young doctoral graduate in comparative literature, Theo Padnos, who was teaching literature to adolescent prison inmates. What struck Padnos was the ‘language of apocalypse’ used by the kids, a message that ‘in a world stripped of meaning and self-identity, adolescents can come to understand violence itself as a morally grounded gesture, a kind of purifying attempt to intervene against the nothingness’.

Padnos tells Powers: ‘They’re a community of believers, in a way. They come from all kinds of backgrounds. But what unite them are these apocalyptic suspicions that they have. They think and act as though it’s an extremely late hour in the day, and nothing much matters anymore.’ The kids are drawn to the mythic violence of movies and television, to stories of post-apocalyptic heroes just like they want to be – ‘violent, suicidal, the sort of people who are preparing themselves for what happens after everything ends’.

Other problems among youth, including eating disorders and deliberate self-harm, can also be seen as ‘attempts to intervene against the nothingness’, a deeply human need, as American professor of psychiatry and law Alan Stone wrote recently, ‘to transform the passive experience of suffering into something we can actively control’. Others might respond in very different ways to this sense that ‘it’s an extremely late hour in the day’. They could, for example, become even more determined to succeed, to be a winner at all costs, or lose themselves in the quest for pleasure or excitement. These lifestyles have their own hazards, including the various forms of addiction.

At a more mundane level, surveys highlight another response to what social analyst Hugh Mackay says is a widespread and disturbing perception of ‘degeneration’ in our way of life – disengagement, a retreat to home and hearth, a focus on tending our own patch. The happiest participants in his studies, he says, were ‘those whose horizons were most limited, and whose concerns were unremittingly local, immediate and personal’.

So there is a broader social and political dimension to this sense of the world as threatening and hostile, and that ultimately we are all on our own: a fraying of citizenship and democracy, a vulnerability to the politics of self-interest and fear. This link between the social and personal can direct, dramatic and powerful. Philosopher Peter Singer argues in his book, *The President of Good and Evil: The ethics of George W Bush*, that the president’s religious outlook is best represented by the Manichean idea of a force of evil in the world, with an apocalyptic Second Coming imminent and America as the divinely appointed nation set to destroy the forces of Satan.

In a documentary, *With God on our side*, shown on ABC TV recently, one of the commentators noted that Bush’s description of the September 11 terrorist attacks as ‘evil’ and his framing of America’s response as a war between good and evil were crucial to helping Americans to rally after the attacks, to cut through all the confusion, uncertainty

and complexity, and come to terms with what had happened. This reaction, then, reflects a deeply personal view of the world that has profoundly altered the world.

Apocalyptic suspicions are not simply a result of watching too many movies like the *Mad Max* and *Terminator* series, or televised images of war and catastrophe. They reveal something much deeper: a sense of being cast adrift, socially, morally and spiritually, of having no idea what life is all about and what makes it worth living. Nihilism is one response; fundamentalism is another, at the other end of the spectrum.

We can see in this story the multiple and complex links between issues of personal wellbeing and global developments, the ways in which broad social changes that affect everyone can, nevertheless, affect people differently, and contribute to problems that only some experience.

We need to examine mental health, not just in terms of individual illness that requires treatment or therapy, but also as an issue having social – even global – causes and consequences. We need to think of mental health as a way of better understanding ourselves and how we should live.

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