Should Some Mental Disorders Be Approached Differently?

Experts suggest that depression, anxiety and PTSD may be better treated with fixes to social problems instead of drugs.

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Depression, anxiety and posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) are clinically defined as mental disorders. But what if these problems aren't psychological illnesses at all? A new paper published in the Yearbook of Physical Anthropology by Washington State University Vancouver (WSU) biological anthropologists suggests that these conditions mostly occur in response to adversity and must be treated as such, reports WSU Insider.

The researchers believe that modern psychology and medications, such as antidepressants, have been largely ineffective in reducing mental disorder rates because drug treatment can't address the sources—such as a threat of or exposure to violence—that trigger these conditions.

"The pain is not the disease; the pain is the function that is telling you there is a problem…so the solution is not necessarily fixing a dysfunction in the person's brain but fixing a dysfunction in the social world," said Kristen Syme, PhD, a graduate of WSU and the report's first author, who likened the situation to giving someone medication for a broken bone without actually setting the bone itself.

Syme and other scientists want biological anthropologists to begin studying diseases of the mind to find more potent solutions for these issues, particularly for problems that are social rather than mental. Edward Hagen, PhD, a professor of evolutionary anthropology and corresponding author of the paper, agreed with Syme that mental illnesses should be addressed by their probable causes and not their symptoms.

Both scientists noted that some mental disorders, such as schizophrenia, are genetic, while others, like Alzheimer's, are connected to aging. But, they point out, depression, anxiety and PTSD aren't a result of genetics, occur regardless of one's age and are tied to threatening experiences.

In addition, the two proposed that some conditions, such as attention-deficit hyperactivity disorder, or ADHD, could be the result of "a mismatch between modern and ancestral environments."

Ultimately, these problems may serve as signals to make individuals aware that they need help, the researchers stressed.

For related coverage, read “Use of Mental Health Meds Has Increased During COVID-19” and “Mental Health Visits to Emergency Rooms on the Rise Among Youth.”

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