

Toxic Mental Environments

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This article was originally written as a handout for people attending the first session of the Toxic Mental Environments Course at The Gateway, Shrewsbury, 2006. It includes information about sessions that can be booked through The Gateway later in 2006.

What do we mean by ‘toxic mental environments’?

The concept of toxic mental environments has been most clearly outlined by Kalle Lasn and others, principally through *Adbusters: Journal of the Mental Environment*. Thirty years ago, people became worried that the physical environment was becoming ‘toxic’ and was making people sick. This anxiety led to the green movement. In the West (but also increasingly globally) we are able to consume enormous amounts of consumer goods which we were led to believe would make our lives easier, but we live in a time when people are anxious and stressed, suffering mood disorders and mental health problems on unprecedented scales, experiencing great levels of dis-ease and are prescribed ever-increasing amounts of psychiatric drugs. Business cultures and the \$450 billion a year advertising industry appear to have infiltrated everything, and infect our thinking and behaviour in ways that human beings might not be wired up to cope with. We are saturated with advertising stimuli, which continually fight for our attention. The media is owned by a small number of people with agendas to get us think in ways that make corporate profits soar but may not be good for us as human beings. Pharmaceutical companies make billions of pounds selling products that purport to cure mental health problems but the numbers of people being treated for mentally illnesses continues to rise and increasing numbers of people report the drugs as making them ill. Is it time to clean up our mental as well as physical environment?

What is going on?

1905: 1% of Americans experienced depression by the age of 75

1950: 6% of Americans experienced depression by the age of 24.

Adults today are between 3 and 10 times more likely to be depressed if born post 1945 than pre 1945.

In the U.K., Richard Layard reported to Government in 2005 that 16% of working age adults have a ‘mental illness’, half of them a ‘serious mental illness’. Costs to society: £22 billion.

Using the same measure, psychiatric morbidity was estimated at 22% of population in 1977, and 31% in 1986.

Mexicans have a greater risk of developing mental health problems the longer they live in USA – being exposed to a place that 1000s are trying to emigrate to is making them ill.

Developing countries are developing western mental illnesses e.g. WHO studies indicate that Schizophrenia has increased by 45% since 1985 in developing countries.

In developing countries GDP, incomes, infrastructure, western health care, western style education, and access to global media are increasing, as are addictions, suicides and mental health problems.

WHO predicts depression will become second most common disabling disorder in the world (after heart disease) by 2020.

Can this be explained by the dominant theories in late 20th and early 21st century Psychiatry...faulty brain chemistry and genetics?

Why might this be?

The Psychology in the Real World: Toxic Mental Environments Course, in 4 parts (can be accessed together or people can come to one or some of the sessions) aims to explore this:

1st Feb 2006 10.00a.m. - 1.00p.m.

Toxic mental environments and the destructive effects of television and a speeded up society.

10th May 2006 10.00a.m. - 1.00p.m.

Making and breaking children's lives (with Craig Newnes)

2nd August 2006 10.00a.m. - 1.00p.m.

'Everybody must get stoned'- why so many people are taking psychiatric and other mood and mind altering drugs, and using food in response to toxic environments

1st November 2006 10.00a.m. - 1.00p.m.

Creating healthier work and community environments (with Dr Penny Priest)

(Please book through the Gateway (tel. 01743 355159). All sessions are free, numbers limited to 20).

The course will look at factors that rarely get mentioned in clinical psychology, such as poverty. In Western society there is an enormous amount of evidence that poor people suffer disproportionately in terms of mental and physical health problems. In short, the 'Losers' in society lose. But it also increasingly appears that the 'Winners' lose too.

In the western world compared to the past, people live longer, have more (and more equal) access to health care and education, suffer less discrimination, have more personal freedom and rights, have more leisure time, have access to time-saving technologies and constant entertainment, make more money (average earnings in USA doubled since 1960, adjusting for inflation) and yet...mental health problems, prison populations, suicides and addictions are at epidemic proportions.

Richard Wilkinson has looked at different countries in terms of health problems and found that countries with the greatest disparities in income and wealth have the greatest health problems (for all people, not just those on the lowest incomes). On the face of this evidence, inequality seems to be bad for us.

In addition, the highest rates of depression and manic depression are found in countries with greatest cultural instability.

Affluent British 15 year-old girls are now twice as prone to anxiety and depression as poorer girls (there has been a rise from 6% to 18% suffering from 'serious mental illness since 1987). They should be winners in modern society where sexism appears less and opportunities for young women are far greater than in the past, but eating disorders are soaring.

There is evidence to indicate that people with materialist values feel neither secure nor good about themselves, have fewer intimate relationships, feel little control over their lives, never feel satisfied and are always looking to the next promotion or purchase rather than enjoying what they have. Materialist values are reinforced, sometimes lauded, and are certainly conditioned into us, but is it possible that the more we absorb them the more psychological problems we experience?

Wilkinson believed that Western countries with higher rates of inequality of income and wealth also had less 'social capital', less social interconnectedness between people. Might too little of our 'social' contact be social (in the natural intimate sense of the word)?

Have we evolved to be in a culture very different from our own?

Since 1945 shopping has gone from largely being seen as a chore to being listed as people's favourite hobby.

A study in 1997 indicated 57% of women and 42% of men were more interested in the idea of an unlimited shopping spree than the idea of sex.

Compulsive Shopping Disorder is now diagnosed by psychiatrists with a prevalence estimated at 2-8% of people in the 1st world. It can be successfully treated with the drug citalopram as shown by a research study sponsored by a pharmaceutical company.

Is it possible that our society makes us mentally sick then sells us the cures to such sickness?

Life events and depression

There is a large body of evidence regarding recent adverse life events as factors in depression (e.g. Paykel et al, 1969: depressed patients reported 3 times as many adverse life events in the period prior to their depressive episode than non-depressed people).

These include redundancy, bereavement, trauma, imprisonment of self or a close family member, debt, poverty, loss of home, separation from or loss of a confidant.

Long-term risk factors include abuse and neglect in childhood, death of mother during childhood, social isolation and loneliness, lack of power, and poverty. Research of this kind is no longer state funded in USA (since Reagan and the decade of the brain) or referred to in Psychology and Psychiatry textbooks. Why is there a reluctance to look outside ourselves and our individual bodies to our environment when trying to explain human distress?

David Smail (see his latest book *Power, Interest and Psychology*) refers to the *Power Horizon*, and how things that we notice tend to be things closest to us e.g. our emotional and physical reactions and people we are in contact with. Factors that might be more important are less noticed, are less in conscious awareness, and there are often powerful interests that want to mystify us in order to hinder our attempts to identify causes (or causes of causes) of our problems that do not suit their interests. Spin makes our heads spin.

Speeded up society

Exercise: How did you wash your face this morning?

Exercise: How much coffee, tea, high energy drinks (coke, lucozade, red bull) do you have per day?

Exercise: What are you like in queues?

Exercise: What are you like when using a computer that is old/not broadband?

Exercise: What % of books that you buy or start do you finish?

Exercise: How are you affected by there being over 1,000,000 different products in each Sainsbury's store?

1 in 3 adults in Britain now say they 'almost always feel rushed'.

Children (and many of us) have learned to multi-task – to do homework with the TV on, with music in the background or through headphones, whilst texting or engaging in multiple mobile phone conversations, and eating supper. It's amazing, but is it good for people? How does this relate to the explosion in ADHD (Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder)? What is happening to children's brains? (Grace Jackson M.D., in *Making and Breaking Children's Lives*, cites evidence that such activities are creating structural changes in children's developing brains that might make activities with low sensory input e.g. being still, reading, more difficult for children).

We are 'wired' – people have phones at home and mobiles, text, have computer and internet and email, TV, car phones, car TV, video games....but are we 'wired up' for this? Haven't are bodies evolved to go long periods without much happening?

Richard DeGrandpre believes that human consciousness is being transformed – we have developed a tolerance of speed and bombardment of sensory input but have also become hooked on speed. This explains the massive rises in intake of stimulant drugs: caffeine, red bull, high energy drinks and foods, cocaine, ecstasy, Ritalin, SSRIs. Also the fact that people take increasing amounts of time in high sensory environments (Clubs, T.V. and

video games). Lo-stimulation environments induce fidgeting, restlessness, irritations and anxieties, impulsiveness, boredom, need for movement (as a response to and need to bump-up the stimulation). Children in low stimulation environments (e.g. having to sit still and listen to a teacher talk) cannot manage and are on the way to being diagnosed ADHD.

Diane Ackerman: *A Natural History of the Senses*

“Our senses crave novelty. Any change alerts them, and they send a signal to the brain. If there is no change, no novelty, they doze and register nothing. A constant state – even of excitement – in time becomes tedious, fades into the background, because our senses have evolved to report (only) changes.”

We are being saturated with advertising stimuli that continually fight for our attention. Advertisers spend millions (including monitoring brain activity) learning how to do this. Men get to read adverts whilst they pee. We have learned to shut it out (a.k.a. dissociation). Shopping malls bombard us with light, products, and mood music. This attracts people hooked on our speeded up society but overwhelms others (who get labelled agoraphobic, or are said to suffer panic attacks).

T.V.

The introduction of T.V. into parts of the world where there was no T.V. is associated with rises in individual and social problems (see the case of Ladakh in the book *Get a Life*). Western culture and problems appear to be exported straight into people’s heads.

Classical Conditioning: Advertising pairs products with beauty, success in business, wealth, success in getting sex. These things have to be perceived as desirable so they can be encoded in one image or a 15 second commercial. We are exposed to this message millions of times in our lives. There is often a rational bit of us that knows this is ridiculous, but conditioning works beyond the rational – it affects our behaviour. Our brightest psychologists have gone into advertising not mental health work.

T.V. warps our view of the world. USA television shows 7.5 acts of violence per hour. Might this be connected to people’s paranoia and fears about going out, even when people are members of groups with very low risk of violent assault whilst out of their homes e.g. the elderly. T.V. /capitalism wants people at home where they are watching TV/adverts and to go out just enough to buy things (although increasingly we will not have to even do this with the advent of internet shopping and interactive TV).

Evolutionary psychology suggests that we are ‘wired up’ to make comparisons between ourselves and others in our ‘pack’. But now we are comparing ourselves against thousands not dozens of people that we ‘know’. Oliver James has described this most eloquently in *Britain on the Couch*. We compare ourselves against the rich and successful and the celebs (success now defined as having been on T.V.). We have constant access to the beautiful and the made beautiful (through cosmetics and surgery and doctored

images). We are tricked into thinking we know these people but only have access to their made-up lives (PR people control 'real life' interviews with 'the stars').

There is research evidence (see James) to show we rate the attractiveness of real people including our partners lower after exposure to images of T.V. 'beautiful people', and our mood lowers when exposed to T.V. 'beautiful people' of same gender as us.

Exercise:

Monitor the time each day you spend in high v. low intensity activities

(T.V. is not low intensity as TV bombards your senses).

Question the thoughts that 'pop' into your head when engaged in slow/low intensity activities (e.g. "Life is passing me by" "I should be....") Where did such ideas come from?

Exercise:

List what gives you 'quality of life' and monitor how much time you spend doing those things.

Csikszentmihalyi conducted over 20 years of research into "What kinds of activities are people engaged in when they experience sustained periods of contentment?"

These turned out not to be activities characteristic of passive lives of ease and physical comfort (the idea of retirement after most of our life has been spent in physically hard, tedious or stressful labour). Nor were they high sensory input activities that we engage in on a solitary or semi-solitary basis.

What brings sustained periods of contentment is "Deep engrossment through involvement in meaningful and challenging projects".

Have we even discovered which projects each of us might find meaningful, engrossing, captivating and challenging? In the short time we have on this planet, how much time are we going to spend doing these activities?

Bibliography and useful references

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