

INTERPRETER OF MALADIES

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The depressed millennials

It is one of the most common things being discussed nowadays — millennials and depression. Being one of the most highly educated generations that grew up with the technological wave, it should not be so. Then again, it is the same generation that went through a global recession in their growing years, no matter which country they hail from. As the generation is more aware of mental illness, they are also addressing their various mental health issues.

But why are they depressed?

Is it too much free and easily available information?

The lacklustre career choices, or the economic situation that is meant to get worse? Is it possible that we may have missed some important issues here?

The human brain is a resilient organ that has a tremendous capacity to readjust to an ever-changing stream of cues from internal and external environments. Our brain processes and interprets continuous streams of sensory input received through sensory organs (e.g. eye, ear, skin etc.) to generate appropriate reactions (reflex automatic behaviour) or response (consciously chosen action) as a survival tool.

Human emotions are primitive biological signals that serve evolutionary and adaptive purposes. They help us to meet our needs and to reach our goals. They are temporary by nature, but become a problem when inappropriate, disproportionate, or destructive.

Depression is considered as a brain disease that manifests in behaviour (words and action), which has repercussions on others, and from others. From a purely biological perspective, it is the result of chemical imbalance in the brain.

Mental illnesses like depression can be reactive to a life situation which clears off as the situation changes. It can be an attitude arising from negative thinking, or could be a mild chronic pervasive condition (dysthymia).

Hormonal factors may also contribute to depression at different life stages. Depression becomes a clinical condition if it interferes significantly with day to day functioning level for a significant period of life (like months and years) which cannot be explained by any other coexisting condition like substance use disorder, chronic debilitating disease, etc. Seasonal Affective Disorder (SAD) affects people's mood and has been linked to lack of sunlight.

From a psychotherapeutic point of view, depression is inwardly directed anger. If the lid is taken off, the unresolved anger becomes evident. Here, anger and depression are just opposite sides of the same coin. There is another kind of depression (empty depression) that originates from intrapsychic loss of connections through 'attachment trauma.' Here, emptiness or painful loneliness haunt the person who can become a victim of unconscious self-defeating behaviour.

At times of global recession, higher prevalence of depression is quite predictable. However, not all depressions are directly linked to financial sufferings. Some underlying reasons of depression have very little to do with lack of affluence and opportunities.

Consumerism promotes the idea that accumulating wealth, power, etc. is directly proportional to 'happiness' and is an

antidote to 'depression.' Ironically, wealthy accomplished people are not necessarily immune to the condition. And myths can lead people to believe that any depression is 'ominous' or 'should be corrected.'

Poverty can be a source of shame that haunts generations. Toxic shame of poverty can lead people to become workaholic, success is then measured by the scale of money and power. Toxic shame gets transferred to children who end up carrying the overwhelming burden of shame of previous generations. Depression could be a cover-up of this intolerable shame lurking inside.

Higher awareness about mental illnesses, increased access to mental health services, less stigma around mental health issues, more parental attention to children's mental health etc. could be contributory factors in quickly recognising depression in younger generations.

A coping mechanism (for example depressed mood) used by a child in a dysfunctional family environment that serves the purpose (e.g. gaining attention) once, could result in the repeated use of the same, laying down a neuronal template that can eventually get a life of its own. Thus, a learned behaviour can eventually become an automatic behaviour. Quality of interactions with significant others, communication and attachment styles, fulfilment of basic human needs (e.g. love, acceptance, freedom, autonomy, etc.) play important roles in healthy human development.

Stress and depression also have close connection through the stress hormone cortisol. They also form a vicious cycle by feeding each other. This millennial generation has been blessed with many modern amenities, while also being challenged with enormous levels of varying types of stress. I believe, expectation and demand to 'succeed' has grown much bigger on children than it has ever been. Survival of the fittest through competitiveness is the trademark of over populous nations. The best job, or best salary is the only way to be the 'trophy child' of the family and anyone less than that will sink into depression as a natural consequence of living with the feeling of being 'less than.'

Excessive exposure to screen time (e.g. TV, Video game, laptop, cell phone, etc.) is harmful to the developing brains of younger children. Younger generations tend to spend more time with gadgets, objects, and with virtual relationships rather than with real humans in real time.

A recent research study reported that this excessive screen time can interfere with the brain's wiring process, causing developmental delays in areas like language, imagination etc. The study also shows that children and youth who spend too much time with a screen tend to be less happy, more depressed, and overweight. Recommended screen time for infants is zero, and for children and teens a maximum of two hours. The quality of that screen time is also a determining factor.

Probably lifestyle change, positive attitude, and valuing basic human connections are cost free easier ways to reverse this grasp of depression on the younger generations.

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