Mental health in the modern world: Capitalism and congruence

In the final article of this year, I would like to look at the impact of our modern society, and how the increase in mental health issues is likely a perfectly fitting response to the structures and values that we live among. Those with mental health conditions can often be treated as the "unwell", and need fixing to be able to return to "normal" working life without any adverse reactions. But what if the recent rise in mental health conditions and these reactions are a clear indicator and wholly appropriate response to the world we currently live in?

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Gabor Maté describes the recent rise in illness (both physical and mental) as a "normal response to abnormal circumstances" (Summit, 2021) and I am inclined to agree with his diagnosis. I could spend the entire article listing the many things that we have faced in our lifetime, but to give just some of the headlines, before we even faced the global pandemic, we had lived through wars, an increasing divide between the rich and poor, support systems being defunded or taken away from us completely, the continued rise of capitalist culture, recessions, corruption, increased work demands, and that's before we even touch on all of the personal struggles and battles we face in our private lives.

It is no surprise that alongside all these events, we have also seen an alarming rise in mental health conditions, with the number of people with common mental health problems increasing by 20% between 1993 and 2014 (MacManus et al, 2016). There is often a debate about whether the presence of mental health conditions is increasing, or whether we are more able to talk about them and have better structures in place to obtain support and statistics in relation to them. It is almost impossible to provide a definite answer to this debate, but for this article, I will be approaching the matter with the view that an increase in mental health issues is a result of modern-day society.

Human Nature

Carl Rogers (founder of the person-centred approach) was quoted as saying "When I look at the world, I'm pessimistic, but when I look at people, I am optimistic." (Rogers, 1976). What I believe Rogers was getting at here, and is still the case today, is that despite a belief in the human nature of people being positive, the structures that we live in and the way that the world is run, can lead to a world that does not reflect this inherent nature that he believed was in us all.

The response to this may be that the world is run by people and so how can this difference exist? However, if we are to look at the way power and money is divided between the people who inhabit the world, you have a small minority, with arguably similar not-for-human-growth values, deciding and ruling the structures that the rest of the population operate in. This can leave us with little chance, or hope, of being able to strive and reach our full potential that our human nature is capable of.

Beyond a stunting of our potential, it can go even further, as we see with the rise in mental health difficulties. Living in a world of conflict and incongruence, trying to fit into the structures and values that are set out for us can have dire consequences. If we are born to be creative, expressive and autonomous, what is the result of living in a world where we may feel restricted, controlled, and pushed beyond our limits? I am not arguing, here, to live in some idealistic utopia, but I think that there are few people who would choose the way of life that is demanded of us, if we had the choice and freedom to follow our desires and natural inclinations.

Capitalism and congruence

While I don't want to make this a political article, I do believe that the presence of a capitalist society and culture promotes values and structures that are restrictive, and at worst damaging, for our natural way of being. With the introduction of values of materialism, personal wealth, fame, and instant gratification being central to many of the processes we live by, this can cloud our judgement and take away the freedom to express ourselves and live congruently.

Continuing with the influence of Rogers, and to explain the importance of congruence up to this point, Rogers believed that a tension between how we naturally feel and want to be in the world, and the ways that we feel we ought to behave, were the root of many psychological difficulties, including anxiety. The more that we behave in a way that is not congruent with our feelings, desires and needs, the more psychological tension we will experience, and I think this goes a long way to explain the rising presence of mental health conditions in the modern world.

I believe that the structures and values of the modern world are largely imposed on us because of decisions based on power and money. The current cost of living crisis is a good example of this. Over the economic downturn of the last few years, the top 1% have actually increased their wealth by trillions of dollars, while the vast majority face rising energy bills, austerity and a new recession. This has a knock-on effect on our standards of living, disposable income for hobbies or self-care and a society that is locked in conflict over the current situation. Putting aside the injustice of this, I fail to see how such living conditions and inequality can avoid having a negative impact on our quality of life and mental health.

So, what do we do?

If we believe that even a portion of what is stated above, it may lead us to question how we live in a world like this and try to maintain a largely positive mental health. I know that for myself, I struggled with feelings of hopelessness and powerlessness in a world where it seems hard to change and overcome the huge power structures that exist. Through some reflection and conversations with those around me I realised that while I may not be able to change the world, I can make ethical and positive decisions for myself and those around me, in my own little world.

This has started by trying to be more ethical in my choices, mainly around consumerism. Even actions like changing banks to a more ethical outfit, being more mindful of the products and services that I buy into, so that they match my values more closely and have an ethical ethos, as well as educating myself on the impacts of actions, products and services, can all go some way to ease some of the dissonance I experienced wanting to be an ethical consumer in a capitalist world.

In addition to this, we may have to admit that, even though it may not be through actions of our own, we may need to go the extra mile to take care of our mental health. It may be that the approaches and levels of maintenance we once had for our mental health now need to be turned up a notch to match the increasing difficulty and conflict in the modern world, to counterbalance the new stresses and strains we may be faced with in the present day.

You may find some ideas in my article around self-care helpful (Molyneux, 2022), but it can also be beneficial to think of personal ways you may counteract the experiences and events that are happening around you. For some people, this may be not watching the news as much, or changing our sources of information. It could be finding (or re-finding) an activity that allows you to be absorbed and mindful — this could be anything from cross-stitch to skydiving (and anywhere in between!) or even physical exercise to process and exorcise some of the tension you may be holding as a direct result of the world we live in.

As with most things, this will likely be a personal journey and different things will work for different people. I think the first thing that we can do is to become aware of the world's possible impact on our mental health and see if we notice any signs of potential negative impacts on our mental health. If we do feel that it is impacting us, then being aware is the first step, followed by having conscious effort and engagement with the problem (and solution). This may be trying out different things to see what helps, talking it over with a friend or professional or even journaling some of your processes around this topic.
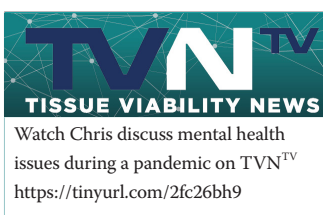
CONCLUSION

I hope that within this article, I have not only made an argument for how the society we live in may explain why our mental health can be negatively impacted and deteriorating, but also for the engagement we may need to have to counteract this increase in tension and adversity. Although we may disagree with the structures and politics that we live among, until this changes we may have to acknowledge the impact it has on us, while also doing what we can to reclaim our mental health and offset the negative impacts we are likely to experience living in the world we do today. **Wuk**

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