

Discuss the sources of mental health issues in the modern world.

Rising mental illness in the modern world: evolution, culture or statistics?

Mental health issues are biological conditions. They can impact an individual in a range of ways and they often trigger distress, dictating one's lifestyle. They range from anxiety to dementia to psychosis.

Historically, mental disorders were often linked to the supernatural as their source; this led to false accusations of witchcraft, bloodletting, and even incarceration in mental health asylums. In the modern world, we understand them to be the result of difficulties in the brain. The brain is a complex organ made up of nerve cells grouped in neurons; these communicate through electrical impulses. Mental health problems arise from complications at the gaps between nerve cells; these gaps are known as synapses. Interaction at synapses is through chemical transmission; a variation in the quantity of production of neurochemicals is what gives rise to mental health issues. For example, depression occurs when there are low levels of serotonin at synapses. This effect is known as neural correlates. There are many potential sources of mental illnesses in the modern world, of which multiple often influence an individual simultaneously. The most compelling sources which this essay will now discuss include evolution, culture, and statistics.

The first source of mental health issues in the modern world is genetics and evolution. There is very clear evidence to demonstrate that genetic factors strongly correlate with the risk of mental health illness. For instance, some genes may increase an individual's risk of developing a mental health illness, and others not so. Genes also dictate an individual's physiology which again impacts the risk of mental health problems. This may include factors such as the chemistry of one's brain; since this is different in all individuals, some people are more susceptible to faults at synapses than others. A further and similar area of study is epigenetics and the inheritance of trauma, this increases the risk of mental health conditions. Whilst these are all fascinating, the genetic factors are not exclusive to the modern world, however, the argument from evolution is perhaps more relevant. This describes the mismatch between

our current environment, that of urban life, and the one we were adapted for. Our current crowded city life is a fairly recent progression of which the change has been almost instant on an evolutionary timescale. For example, in the 1st century, there was approximately 1% of the population of Brazil living in urban areas but now in the 21st, there is over 80% (Ritchie & Roser, 2018). Therefore, we have not been able to appropriately adapt to this. Scientists, such as Randolph Nesse, argue that mental illness may be a byproduct of this. It is still not yet entirely clear why an urban lifestyle may cause increased mental illness; it appears at first glance as though the opposite should be the case as one is surrounded by others. But it is commonly appreciated that being in a crowd is one of the loneliest experiences, as described by Robin Williams who said, 'I used to think then worst thing in life was to end up alone, it's not. The worst thing in life is to end up with people that make you feel all alone'. Alternatively, a final evolutionary idea is that in some way mental illness benefitted our survival in the past but is no longer necessary today. Hence, something which was originally vital in protecting humanity is now a great burden without benefit. Whilst this argument is very logical, it does lack evidence at present although further research is being carried out.

The second source of mental health issues in the modern world is the culture or environment. The term environment encompasses many different factors including trauma, secularism, diet, and societal pressure, each, in turn, having a unique impact on mental health. Whilst the personal experience of distressing situations is certainly important in the development of mental illness, it will not be focused upon as trauma has been present consistently throughout humanity's past and so cannot be linked directly to the modern world. On the other hand, the influence of secularism is important to discuss as contemporary society is dominated by this. The truth of religion aside, it arguably presents many benefits to mental health including community, selflessness, and a bigger picture rather than overthinking smaller daily concerns. This is in direct contrast to the rise in the cult of individualism which is so popular today. Diet too has changed over time and unsurprisingly has an impact on both physical and mental wellbeing. Despite leading research into the field, such as that by Martina Watts who wrote a fascinating book on the area, maintaining healthy eating appears almost impossible amongst ready meals and confectionery.

This argument certainly contains strengths illustrated through scientific evidence, but it is important to note that consuming the perfect nutrition alone is not enough to cure any individual of illness whether this is physical or mental. Instead, perhaps the strongest argument for the modern world's source of mental health problems is increased societal pressure, promoting the lie, 'if I was ... I would be happy'. The blank here can be a range of ideas often concerning wealth, popularity, appearance, or academic success. Chasing these dreams may appear somewhat fulfilling on the journey and yet is commonly appreciated that once there, the destination is still not the answer. Those most content in life take their pot of gold along the rainbow rather than seeking it at the end. This is all accentuated by the influence of social media, platforms which enable individuals to portray a highlight reel of themselves and encouraging comparison between this and reality. Hence, increased societal pressure suggests clear causation for increased mental health disorders. In summary, the role of the change in environment provides a strong argument for the source of mental health issues in the modern world.

The final source of mental health issues in the modern world is increased awareness and the weak nature of statistics. Numbers are often considered to be strong sources of evidence; however, statisticians are increasingly aware of the need for context alongside all data. In one respect, it is difficult to understand how modern pressures could be any greater than those experienced primitively where finding food and avoiding predators was an everyday concern. There are many reasons for the statistical rise in rates of mental illness, of which the fact that there is more mental illness is only one reason among many. There is no doubt that trends in data show that the numbers are increasing. For example, a study taken by the NHS confederation during 1993 showed that 16% of people aged between 16 and 64 met the criteria for at least one common mental health disorder. By 2007 this figure had reached 18% (Mental Health Network, 2009). The results here appear clear however there are a variety of other suggestions for the cause of these numbers. For example, this may be a result of natural fluctuation rather than an overall increase. Or instead, it may be because mental illnesses are now more socially acceptable. Mental health problems are understood on a spectrum rather than dichotomously; perhaps the threshold for mental illness is lower than previously. Similarly, increasing awareness and labeling may also have led to this

increase. Further consideration must be into the validity of any source of information. The media harness the starkest statistics to illustrate their points however this may not be the most reliable source. These influences into statistics may be intentional however on the most part they are accidental. Hence, it is important to understand that many factors can influence statistics and it is vital not to assume causation from correlation. This said the severity of mental illnesses should not be misunderstood and whilst there are other possibilities, mental illness may truly be on the rise as a result of modern society.

In conclusion, the problem of mental health is vast and confusing with a multitude of influences to attempt to understand. Whilst this essay has focused on evolution, culture, and statistics, there will undoubtedly be other pressing influences of mental illness in the modern world that I have not concentrated on. What is most important with this question is how we use this information to care for those who experience the horrors of mental illness. However, it is also significant to note that the pandemic which is currently underway is likely to provide an entirely new perspective into this issue. Extra screen time and long isolation can only have negative effects on mental wellbeing. Surprisingly, the suicide rate in the UK has not increased during the pandemic. Hence, studies conducted soon will be of vital significance in discovering more about this enigmatic area. Therefore, this essay shall conclude as it began. Mental health illnesses are biological conditions. They are influenced widely by a vast array of factors. But I truly believe science can relieve our world of them.

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