

‘Discuss the sources of mental health issues in the modern world’

People are forever looking forward: driven by progress, repulsed by regression. Though when we do pause to look around, we see that 1 in 4 fall victim to the inexorable and often insurmountable force that is poor mental health. This is a problem faced by people both young and old worldwide – no one is immune. But why do we experience this in the modern world where many enjoy the highest quality of life to date? What is its cause? Who should we blame? The world is plagued by these questions and psychologists are looking for the answers. Mental health issues may be born of past trauma, triggering social media content, or feeling left behind, or they may well be intrinsic, with external factors merely catalysts in an inevitable reaction.

I. *Nourishment: The cornerstone of mental stability*

As the saying goes, ‘you are what you eat’. It is becoming clear that a leading cause of mental health issues is indeed what we consume. The pages we scroll through and internalise from our social media ‘feed’ can prove not so square a meal. Constantly watching the world be richer than us, fitter than us and more successful than us, forces the mind into a state of dissonance where rumination is left to reign supreme. Social media has arguably grown to be a virulent, lethal ingredient for poor mental health. Here, each platform is a launchpad where destructive behaviour is praised, promoted, and even profitable. Worryingly, in 2017 *The National Eating Disorder Association* found a positive correlation between the usage of popular photo sharing app, Instagram, and increased self-objectification and body image concerns among women aged 18 to 25. Social media users are fed unrealistic ideals which leave their perceptions of good and bad distorted, potentially manifesting into feelings of unworthiness, inferiority, and self-loathing.

The realm of social media gains one new user approximately every 6.4 seconds and claims an average of 142 minutes of an individual’s day (2020). The overwhelming majority (90%) of 18- to 29-year-olds in the U.S. use a form of social media. The modern audience scans through

a myriad of content online, easily left unhappy because each post may make us feel inferior to our virtual peers. Perhaps the term 'peers' is even inappropriate. It is now commonplace to compare our lives to those who, in reality, are very dissimilar to ourselves - individuals who may live in other geographical regions entirely, and whom we do not and may never know personally. In a 2019 mood survey sponsored by *The Cigna Health Insurance Company*, 46% of respondents admitted that they either 'sometimes' or 'always' felt alone, many of whom linked this to their social media usage. The obsession of late with 'staying in the loop' and conforming to societal norms has undoubtedly robbed us of time, energy, and mental stability.

In 2020, *The University of Pittsburgh School of Medicine* carried out national analysis on social media activity, which suggested that the more time young adults (aged 19 to 32) spend using social media, the higher the likelihood that they feel socially isolated. Time in solitude leaves us in silence: the silence, so loud and intrusive, unleashes negative thoughts and feelings about the way we see ourselves, those around us and the world as a whole. Left unmanaged, this negative cognitive bias surely feeds into the development of conditions such as depression, OCD, anxiety and eating disorders. This begs the question: what if more people stopped bowing to this deafening silence and instead spoke to themselves with a kinder, rational voice; if we stopped fabricating our character for the online world and instead accepted our individuality?

Excessive exposure to a false image of the world causes us to question ourselves where there was never truly a need. Humanity is being sold a façade, that flat stomachs and fabulous homes and six-figure salaries are a prerequisite for happiness and success, when they should be viewed as bonuses – not the be all and end all. Such ideology has become ingrained in our minds, potentially contributing to the 971 million people worldwide suffering from mental illness.

II. ***Advancement: The need to do better***

Modern society has witnessed change almost beyond measure: from the humble abacus to the enormous Turing machine to handheld supercomputers and nanotechnology. The constant desire for the next best thing is common to both the employed and unemployed, fuelling self-deprecating thoughts such as 'I should be further along in life', 'I should be making more money', 'I should be doing better than this'. Though normal fluctuations in mood are common to us all, there comes a point where this mindset ultimately decimates one's mental state.

Humans have always held the highest status, yet we still cannot help holding ourselves to ever-higher standards of success in order to feel adequate. Perhaps people of today are experiencing mental health issues due to the increased pressure we put on ourselves. This perceived need to do better deprives many from living in the now, as it is easy to detach from the present to try and push ahead. We have become our harshest critics, constantly doubting whether we are on the right path, in the right relationship or being the best version of ourselves. Our minds take over while our bodies become haggard vessels good for little more than simply carrying us through tasks of the day. Indeed, even if we complete our enormous to-do lists and fulfil everything that society prescribes, this seldom eases our mental anguish. *Greg Kushnick*, a well-known psychologist based in New York, elegantly captures this sentiment: "throughout the day, you transition in and out of tasks, feeling distressed by how emotionally disconnected you are. You wait for the feeling to kick in- some interest, excitement, anything...you settle for a mild sense of engagement when a task successfully distracts you from your negative thoughts".

We yearn to find that final puzzle piece to make us feel 'whole' and 'normal' when nothing was missing. We look for success far and wide, but often forget to press pause and check in with ourselves. Whose beliefs tell us that we are unsatisfactory? Whose standards are we really

living up to? When self-improvement shifts from a journey to be enjoyed into a Herculean task we fixate on, ill mental health is inevitable.

III. ***Society: The modern slave driver***

Though both men and women experience mental health issues, added expectations and learned stereotypes have created a stigma surrounding men's mental health. Historically, boys have been taught that in order to become 'men', they must assume traditional gender roles: namely, being the breadwinner and emulating unyielding strength, dominance, and control. These characteristics are not innately bad. However, the unrelenting reminders of societal expectations creates undue feelings that these criteria are the bare minimum. With this mindset, men (and women) become discouraged and ashamed when they do not meet these rigid impositions. This amounts to feelings of distress whenever a foot is put wrong, even though the action may be completely valid. We then dwell on our mistakes, casting excessive blame on ourselves: a hallmark of depressive disorders.

The pursuit of perfection in conjunction with mounting societal pressure has no doubt culminated in mental health decline: 24% of women and 13% of men in England have been diagnosed with depression in their lifetime. To this, add 8.2 million cases of anxiety in the UK (2013), and 6.4% of people in England burdened with the consuming force of eating disorders. Moreover, an estimated 30-50% of people with mental ill health have comorbid substance abuse and dependency; likely echoes of desperate cries for help.

Granted, the modern world has seen many blessings, such as improved healthcare and the dizzying peak of technological advancement, it has also cultivated a mental health crisis running rampant worldwide. A multitude of factors are responsible for this phenomenon, including unhealthy social media consumption, the desire for excellence and a longing for control, but all have this common denominator – a sense of 'lack'. Even here in the UK, one of the world's leading global economies and a land of plenty, many are left feeling deficient.

Any 'lack' is often weaponised, used as evidence of laziness or an absence of talent, rather than an isolated weakness. What is more, our competitive, individualistic lifestyles promote unhealthy comparison between people: the 'winners' in life are depicted as the picture of happiness, health, love, and wealth, while the 'loser' feels ashamed because they seemingly fall short of the success of another. Feelings of perpetual lack plague modern society and force us to embark on a quest for fulfilment, but in the process, we forget just how special we are in our uniqueness. In the timeless words of philosopher *Lao Tzu*: "When you realise there is nothing lacking, the whole world belongs to you". Until we embrace words such as these, we may never be liberated from mental health issues in this modern age.

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