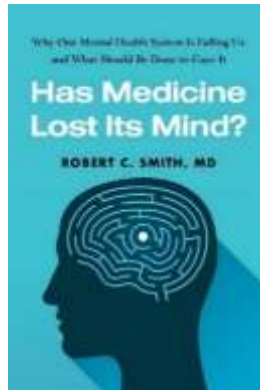


HAS MEDICINE LOST ITS MIND?



Newsletter 22: Why People Develop a Mental Disorder

December 2025

Dear (name),

Evolution offers a new way to understand mental illness. Emotions mediate basic survival, but many are not aware that they determine all our other life successes in a complex society.¹ When the way we express these feelings falls outside societal norms, many posit a mental illness. A new evolutionary perspective challenges this.²

Feelings of anxiety/fear produce the vigilance we need to detect harm in the environment, whether a bear attack or a sour look from your spouse. They lead us to “fight or flight” to resolve the problem. Sometimes, though, fight or flight is not possible or not successful, and to continue would deplete the energy we need to survive. This makes humans (or animals) feel helpless and/or hopeless, and we withdraw strategically to conserve energy. In a dog pound, for example, the recent admissions frantically bark and claw at their cages, while the old timers lie quietly, having found that all the energy expended early-on went for naught.

Both emotions (anxiety and hopelessness/helplessness) are normal, healthy, and adaptive responses that promote survival. Think about your own experiences with fight/flight or withdrawal? Maybe fearful or angry when cut off in traffic? Or feeling helpless before vaccines were available for the real life threat of the coronavirus?

We scan continuously for survival threats according to one evolutionary view, much as a smoke detector does for a fire. As with smoke detectors, it's best to have a few false alarms rather than risk a fire. For some people, though, the alarm goes off too often, is too loud, is too persistent—emotionally responding to what would not be a threat to most.² Some stew and worry constantly, while others have pervasive helpless or hopeless feelings and withdraw. Persistent over-reactive anxious feelings become clinical anxiety, while ongoing helpless and hopeless feelings become clinical depression.

An alternative evolutionary perspective argues that these proposed excessive responses themselves are actually adaptive and protective.^{3,4} Unfortunately, most experts have long believed humans have one ideal state, and that people not achieving it are impaired, as in the above examples of clinical anxiety or depression. The new view is that there is no ideal human state.⁴ Given quite atypical stresses in their environments, often far from the experiences of so-called normal people, many persons labeled with a mental illness may be responding adaptively and appropriately to their unique situations. Although those with mental disorders stemming from untoward environmental stressors, such as childhood abuse, may appear less fit, they are responding in a way that is or previously was adaptive, their survival issues far different from most of us.

What works under certain developmental conditions does not necessarily work under others.⁴ There is no ideal, what is optimal for one person may not be for another. Perhaps we need to reflect on the adage that we “walk a mile in his moccasins” before labeling someone abnormal.

Susan and I (and the girls) send our heartfelt wishes for a Happy Holiday Season.



Take care,
Bob

PS—If you believe medicine must provide better mental and physical health care, please help us spark this conversation. Forward this email to a friend, colleague, or journalist who cares about health care's future, or share the Has Medicine Lost Its Mind? link (below) on your social media with a note about why it matters to you. And tag me too @robertcsmithmd. You can find everything at <https://www.robertcsmithmd.com>.

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