What Do We Fear?

Celia H.

What do we fear? Social thought is rooted in fear of the abnormal and the fear of conflict that stems from confrontation. We tend to create stigmas around things outside of the confines of accepted normalcy. As a result, we are uncomfortable addressing real issues and submit to the stigmas because we are scared of the conflict required to change.

When confronting mental health and, in this case, depression, we tend to focus on "emotion-based coping." In other words, we attempt to internally manage emotions, but fail to bridge the gap to "problem-based coping." Is it possible to externally eliminate mental illness?

Individual people are much more alike than we are different. At some point in our lives, we all suffer from sadness and pain. My work is about the inaccurate perception of people with mental illness. The altered portrayal of a "seemingly normal" or stable person represents the skewed versions of people that society sees.

Celia H.
Delaware

Society isn't warm. It's not friendly. It's not kind. On the surface it might feel calm. Face value might seem simple and lighthearted. But that cheerful face, as lackadaisical as it may seem, at its fundament, is fear. At its root, at each of our own cores, we are blatantly, viscerally afraid. We live in a society of homophobia, sexism, racism, etc. Whether we came into the mindset with our own formulated opinion or it was imposed on our susceptible subconscious is beside the point, we've created a 'stigma'-centric culture of refined, conscious fear and consequent hatred of any unlike ourselves, imposing a the psyches of those subject to unwarranted discrimination. We're waging a temperamental war with a societally induced fear complex and feeding a species-wide visceral discomfort with anything below the surface. mental health holds its own in this line of fire. For concepts like prejudice, discrimination, homophobia, sexism, racism, though, common language accurately illustrates both sides of the issue: sexist person, victim of sexism. The sexist person is identified as the one in the wrong. Mental illnesses, though, while it can be discriminated, prejudiced against, is stigmatized and consequently falls subject to the language of stigmatization. 'Stigma' puts emphasis on the person who's different instead of those setting them apart. The language vilifies the wrong side, those with the stigma. Not only the language around these issues, though, is proving to be vitally in-comprehensive. Our culture perpetuates this mentality. We prefer to give way to the massive elephants in the room in fear of conflict. If I ignore the cause of discomfort, I can't feel uncomfortable, right? Mental illness is a different breed of elephant though. As inconspicuous as it often is, this elephant in society poses no threat to the stigmatizer and can be more seamlessly ignored. We've lumped this elephant in with the monsters under our beds, but the problem with the monsters was never that they were scary, but we just needed to dissect them and come up with a battle strategy together against them. It was that it was dark, they were scary but there was no way of knowing what exactly we were facing, we were alone and left with nothing but to learn how to control our fear. It begins to play on the fear of the stigmatized, those with mental illness, and leaves them with no real option but to suppress their pain.

Limited language and a cultural disconnect is demonstrated again in a more specific form with Depression. Depression manifests in a broad range of emotion. "Depressed" is used just as commonly and correctly to describe mild, temporary sadness stemming from a specific identifiable misfortune as prolonged, persistent, and most importantly, unfounded, anguish. The later, clinical depression doesn't consist of just sadness. It's not quite that upset feeling triggered by something like your favorite show being canceled. It's not rooted in a specific, identifiable misfortune at all. It's prolonged, unexplained, unfounded. It's sometimes entirely nonsensical and ridiculous but it can be debilitating in a number of different ways. It can materialize as disinterest or lack of trying but it's not a matter or not doing something because of lack of enjoying it. It's a matter of really, wholly, not being able to. 'Depression' causes a common and understandable misconception. A large portion of our ability to understand is rooted in what we know and knowledge is essentially just a bank of past experience. One that then forms beliefs and expectations. An unfortunate reality of human nature arises here: inability to fully understand how another person feels, no matter the circumstance. For example, before someone close to me had died, I never could have understood that kind of pain. Separate from this inherent unfortunate reality, though, is one of societies major faults: understanding and accepting unfortunate reality, that we don't always fully understand, in fact, that we *can't* always fully understand. One of the hardest things to comprehend is our non-omniscient existence, that someone feeling a certain way is not necessarily because they're wrong, or confused. It's because they are a fundamentally a different person and they have different beliefs and expectations based on the different experiences in their lives and most importantly, they have different brain chemistry, different balance of brain chemicals. The problem is rooted so much

deeper than the emotion being displayed on the surface. Sometimes, in cases of mental illness specifically, the root of another person's feeling is entirely, chemically not understandable to your person altogether. Specifically with depression, another element that complicates an acceptance of what we can't know about another person's feeling is the internal nature of the illness. We can't see it. There's no rash or CT scan of a tumor. There's no inherent, physical manifestation, no proof. These misunderstandings do not put people in a position of blame for not understanding but a position where they should know to be aware of the incomprehensive extent of their individual knowledge. This disconnect helps to create a misunderstanding and delegitimization of depression and can consequently contradict treatment.

Another fault of social thought is our tendency to think of happiness as a negation of "depression." When applied to instances of mild, temporary sadness caused by a certain event, that claim may be entirely valid but when applied to instances of unfounded anguish, such as neurological chemical imbalances, issues of mental health, happiness as an inverse, becomes unrealistic. The negation/opposite of depression, in the clinical sense, is vitality. " Your feelings come from your thinking. This doesn't mean that if you tell yourself everything is fine and you have no problems, then you will feel fine and your problems will disappear. [Rational emotive and cognitive behavioral methods do not] recommend 'thinking positively,' telling yourself to cheer up, or fondly dwelling on comfortable images that everything is wonderful" (Edelstein). The act of optimism, "'thinking positively,'" is not. For no reason except, it's not that simple. You can't merely change the end result on its own. All the different elements, such as, past experiences, subconscious thought, and neurological chemical balance have to be considered. Just like how you can't simply tell a car assembly line to produce t-shirts instead and without changing the machines and teacing the workers where to cut and how to sew, expect to end up with a t-shirt. You can't tell someone to change the end result of their unconscious emotional process and expect it to change without addressing the past experiences and chemical balance that informs their subconcious. Unsupported optimism is neither the inverse of depression nor a genuine sign of undoubted happiness. Instead, the method to the inverse of depression, to vitality, is teaching how to cope. Coping is realistic. Coping and vitality actually go somewhat hand in hand. Vitality just being the harder reigned of the two. While they are both attainable without the other, they tend to feed off each other. Coping could almost be viewed as the method to obtaining and keeping vitality but a portion of vitality is needed to begin learning to cope.

Depression is often very realistic. It's often rooted in mind numbing existential questions which in reality are nothing but the collateral damage of being intelligent life and being able to generally perceive of our own existence. There was a study done where two control groups of non-depressed people and depressed people were asked to play a video game for an hour. At the end, when asked how many monsters they thought they had killed, the non-depressed people reported that they had killed 15-20 times more monsters than they had actually killed. While the depressed people reported reasonably accurately. "These huge devastating questions are not illness but insight. What one comes to think as really extraordinary is that most of us know of these existential questions but they don't distract us very much." It's a matter of capability of looking past these questions and being able to focus on the standard, routine ones of day-to-day life. My mom used to tell a joke about guys underwear and how a guy will own the same pairs for such a long time that it comes to a point where they'll still have a pair in regular rotation but if you hold that same pair out the window it would disintegrate in the breeze. Depression and the inordinate focus on these questions inflict a feeling a lot like that. As if someone were to hold me out a window and blow on me I might just dissolve into a slight breeze. It's like feeling like energy, not like energ*ized*,

like energy. Not being created or destroyed, just transferred. It's been most accurately described to me as Toska, a russian word roughly translated as sadness or melancholia but more accurately translated as,"No single word in English renders all the shades of toska. At its deepest and most painful, it is a sensation of great spiritual anguish, often without any specific cause. At less morbid levels it is a dull ache of the soul, a longing with nothing to long for, a sick pining, a vague restlessness, mental throes, yearning. In particular cases it may be the desire for somebody of something specific, nostalgia, love-sickness. At the lowest level it grades into ennui, boredom" (Nabokov). The other problem with this feeling is that anguish and numbness and feeling like old underwear isn't quite attractive. Sadness is not accepted in conventional beauty and a smile has become almost indifferentiable as genuineness or merely a formality. We opt for what's pretty, easy, simple, unrealistic and normal. It's for these two reasons, functionality and conformity, that coping skills and mechanisms are a vital tool to survival.

Coping manifests in a few different ways. The two main types are problem-focused coping, "trying to find the main cause and deal with it directly and forcefully by trying to change or eliminate it," and emotion-focused coping, "finding ways to reduce or manage emotional aftermath of adversity. Ideally, these two classifications happen in a balanced manor, a problem is identified and targeted and emotional managing is used for social functionality in the time being. But, this simplified generalization of the two forms of coping misses a vital reality of the coping, mental illness. Mental illness often fosters prolonged coping and begins to bleed problem-focused coping and emotion-focused coping together. Mental illness, unjustified chemical imbalance itself becomes the unfounded "main cause" you're meant to deal with "directly and forcefully" and the rest of your life becomes the collateral, the "emotional aftermath" to manage. In reality, the former, the productive, problem-identifying-and-eliminating method of coping commonly gets overlooked for a few different reasons. Many people go undiagnosed with mental illness. A problem is never identified therefore cannot be eliminated. Another, what tends to result from trying to balance the sides of coping is increasingly skillful "emotional aftermath" managing because of it's silent, illusory nature. Dealing with the issue "directly and forcefully by trying to change or eliminate it" is much more difficult because of it's more concrete nature and the emotional externalization required. "Normality is the paradise of escapologists, for it is a fixation concept pure and simple. It is better if we can to stand alone and to feel quite normal about our abnormality doing nothing whatsoever about it except what needs to be done in order to be oneself." Here we find another reason the problem-eliminating method is overlooked. People are generally people pleasers. They like to be perfect and avoid conflict. In our cowardly journies, the concept of normality provides just this. Normality is comfortable. It's familiar and it's easy. It provides a safe haven with no real potential for opposition. So of course we submit to it. It's infinitely easier to stand apart in happy normality and keep your abnormality to yourself, to focus on emotional managing instead of problem solving and essentially bottle it up.

This individual craving of normality translates too to a much broader societal issue. A vital bane of the human condition is fear. It's inherent to every individual and consequently to society as a whole. It's because of the fear inherently branded on our psyches that are afraid of the conflict, the unattractiveness that comes with abnormality because of essentially a broader fear of, essentially, loneliness and unreturned love. It's this fearful conformity that has created a culture of taboos and shallow politically correctness. Our fear induces silence around all the things that threaten the order that society's purpose was to protect. The entire nature of a taboo is to protect social constructs. Human behavior is not governed by rational decision making and careful

consideration, as it should be. It's determined by fear. Taboos differ between cultures as the confines of accepted normalcy differ. A taboo is determined by the accepted normalcy of a group of people and the strength of it, by nothing other than the number of individuals that obey it. The specific taboos themselves are merely the result of a specific value or belief system. "The nature of taboo is the sign of a broader cultural issue beyond the taboos themselves," more specifically a fear of abnormality and being vulnerable. An individual's level of emotional constipation really just all comes down to what you do with fear and we tend to let it manifest, "doing nothing whatsoever about it except what needs to be done in order to be oneself." a socially-accepted version of oneself. We don't directly try to change/eliminate the "main cause." Instead, we've come together and prioritized external security, wealth, display of happiness, possessions because that way we can hold physical things as a defense of what we have acquired, but we are defending our success in happiness with the optimism and material success that has nothing to do with mental state. We miss that all that can be internally defended are imaginary, illusory, protective devices. Sarah Teasdale's poem, "Alone," provides an example of how social norms control us and inflict an inability to prioritize internal security. After stating that "in spite of love,…all I take and give,...[and] tenderness" she states that she is "alone" and "sometimes...not glad to live." She removes all external factors to explain why. "With earth hidden and heaven hidden,/And only my own spirit's pride/To keep me from the peace of those/Who are not lonely, having died." She is physically apart from society and social norms, "earth hidden." Since society is all we can know to set earth and heaven, life and death, apart, she is also in a place where earth and heaven become indeterminable from each other, so, "heaven hidden." What keeps her from the "peace of those who are not lonely, having died" is still present, though, in her "spirit's pride" the one thing she has with her from society. It almost comes down to the science of muscle memory and habituation, if you were raised as a member of society, even in its absence, society will still hinder your thought.

Eric Fischl's artwork is a perfect materialization of this fundamental problem in our society. In his works, "sleepwalker," "bad boy," and "cargo cult" specifically, he handles taboo subjects of sexual, racial and social tension. John Russell, in a review in The Times of Fischl's exhibit at the Whitney, captures the offensiveness of these difficult topics and calls them "the exposed nerve of our time." Russell goes further to say that, "He takes a certain kind of American topicality and deals with it in ways that often startle visitors who are perfectly well able to handle that kind of thing in the novel, or in the safe darkness of the theater and the movie house, but who do not expect to find it on the wall." We create taboos around certain things we are uncomfortable addressing and ironically submit to them once again because we're scared of the conflict in changing it. It all comes down to what we do with fear and we to let it manifest. This contemporary muckraking of taboos threatens social order. The concept of Fischl's work is very similar to that in the opening of Wulf Zendik's novel, *A Quest Among The Bewildered.* "Let's say the thing I do is light dark corners--I pick up rotten logs in the dark corner of my mind and look there--my hand shakes--my eye has difficulty focusing--yes, I am frightened. But wait, hand me the light, look at the evil with crawling over and through each other--they die in the light--doesn't evil always?" Light and dark is a very accurate analogy in this sense because we can always feel the evil, taboos are always unspokenly there, but seeing it is an entirely different ballgame. We employ a 'what you don't know can't hurt you' mentality and leave it be. We lack a general absurdist sensibility that in reality isn't absurd at all but simply realistic. If we illuminate it then we'll all just be facing the big existential questions that 'inordinately' preoccupy the depressed. To make a point you have to be a little offensive. Ever heard the quote "well-behaved women seldom make history." nothing will come of being comfortable and normal. "Yes, I am frightened." but if you face the fear and expose

the absurd abnormality, that in reality isn't absurd, if you illuminate the dark "evil with things crawling all over and through each other," we would see things for what they are and the evil, Zendik claims, would "die in the light" because "doesn't evil always?"

Just like how happiness and optimism as an inverse to depression is unrealistic, defeating evil doesn't call for a knee-jerk inversion of the evil it calls for exposition and change in perspective. In a podcast by Teju Cole titled, "How Temporary Blindness Taught Teju Cole How to See," he says, "it affords me a certain insight while looking at it from a distance." Sometimes the only thing you can change is perspective to see that the only way to get out of the rut of emotion-focused coping is changing perspective to externalize it and "directly try to change or eliminate it," to see that you should allow yourself to be vulnerable and reject social norms. "On how one orients himself to the moment depends the failure or fruitfulness of it" (Miller). In Howe's book, *War Dance,* he states that "the art of living" on an individual scale "is based on rhythm--on give and take, ebb and flow, light and dark, life and death." He talks about "the art of living" broadly as finding balance between all things. His claim applies well, though, to the balance needed between internalized coping and externalized coping. Howe also theorizes, "Life is conflict and man, a part of life, is himself an expression of conflict. If he can recognise the conflict and accept it he is apt to know peace and enjoy it." We are all a part of conflict. We are much more alike than we are different. We all possess the human condition. We all suffer from stigma and taboo. They are the secret we all share in solitude. Howe also says, "the awakened individual, when he realises that he is part of a great whole and in the realisation becomes himself whole." You don't have to prove yourself to anyone. Image and external security isn't going to get you anywhere. Finding peace within yourself and detaching your idea of self worth from external factors and facing the fear and shame of existing societally-held normality is how you eliminate the problem.

The individual cannot tackle these feats entirely effectively on their own, though. It must be resolved on a societal scale. By the claim of Anais Nin that, "understanding the individual is the key to understanding mass movements," the individual is simply a microcosm of society. On a larger scale we must do the same as required of the individual as societal thought. We have to learn how to communicate and be vulnerable. Any solution to the world's ills must embrace all mankind.