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MENTAL STRAIN MASKING AS PHYSICAL DISEASE

By JAMES F. MacDONALD, M.D.

Fordham, Professor and Director, Department of Anatomy, 1912-18
Mayo Clinic, Neuro-Psychiatry Fellowship, 1918-21
Creighton Medical, Professor and Director, Department of Physiology, 1921-30
Vienna, Neuro-Psychiatry, 1930-31

PSYCHOLOGY should teach us to understand ourselves and, by revealing to us the workings of our own minds, should enable us to manage our affairs successfully in the difficulties of life. Yet how many unfortunate people are ill because, not understanding themselves, they break down, partially or completely, through mismanagement of their lives. Let me tell you briefly the story of a few cases which illustrate how the mind, laboring under a greater strain than it can bear, may produce, automatically, one form of mental breakdown under the guise of crippling physical symptoms, in people who are entirely free from physical disease.

First, I shall tell you about an attractive girl who suddenly became totally blind. Her parents, in alarm, sent her to the nearest eye specialist, who sent her to the nerve specialist. It was found that she had no physical disease affecting her eyes or nervous system. When so informed, she cried out, "If my eyes are normal, why can I not see?" She was sincere in the belief that she was blind when she asked that question.

We, also, may ask why a sane girl, whose eyes and nervous system were free from physical ailment, should suddenly in the hey-day of her life, develop such an apparently devastating affliction. I may say that this is not an unusual case. Daily we see patients, free from physical handicap, losing effective function of the body as a whole, or of one or more of its parts.

Always, behind such a breakdown, the doctor finds a disagreeable life situation which the patient has been unable to master. It can be laid down as a basic principle that when a person of a certain consti-

tution believes that his fight to realize his self-ideal is lost, he becomes ripe for a breakdown.

In the case of this young girl, she had an impulse to dominate others. In the interest of what she considered a higher refinement, she sought to control the behavior of her parents, brothers and sisters. Meeting a strong defense reaction from them, she was frustrated in her efforts. Instead of facing the facts squarely and meeting them rationally, she kept up the conflict until she had a mental breakdown, in which her mind, by unconscious processes, turned off, as it were, the light of her vision, leaving her apparently totally blind.

In order to visualize the origin of such symptoms, one must realize that every human mind is a battlefield from the morning till the evening of life. The driving forces are the desires and the impulses. The desires are inborn tendencies to use the faculties of the mind and the body. The impulses are inborn tendencies to satisfy these desires through action. These impulses and desires are as numerous as the human faculties, and they battle for satisfaction without consideration of consequences.

The infant is equipped at birth with an array of blind, driving forces. The baby uses crying, not only as a means of showing its needs, but also, unless properly trained, as a weapon to dominate tyrannically the entire household.

For the adult the situation is less simple. His drives towards self-realization meet mighty opposing forces. On the outside, his drives are blocked by the immutable laws of nature, and by the inflexible will of man. On the inside, they are blocked by his self-ideals, acquired through experience from his parents, teachers, associates, spiritual directors and from the printed page.

A character can become well balanced only when the native impelling desires and drives to action are brought into harmonious relation to the forces of nature and man and the later-acquired demands of the self-ideal.

In the case of the young girl who lost her vision, the impulse for domination was especially strong, and, when frustrated, was the principal cause of her functional blindness. Conditions like this are generally curable by explanation, suggestion and re-education.

Let me state more briefly a somewhat different sort of case where, as a result of mental strain, a woman developed apparently serious physical symptoms.

A man brought in his wife, a cultured young woman, explaining that she had frightened him by spells of jumping around the house in a disorderly manner. At times during the day, he said, "With no apparent provocation, she starts leaping around like a wound-up toy

that is rapidly running down." She explained that these attacks were involuntary, and we knew that she was honest in her statement.

In her case there was found, as usual, an unpleasant life situation. She, a proud woman, once well-to-do, was forced, as a result of the depression, to live in her country home the year around. She had come to hate the place, and could see there only the sordid and the disagreeable. Her heart was set on returning to live in the city, which she loved; but this seemed to be financially impossible. She was unable to face the facts of the situation, make the best plan which the circumstances would permit, and carry out this plan in action. Instead, she lived in a world of passionate protest against conditions that seemed unendurable, until her mind, by unconscious automatic processes, produced these dramatic, physical symptoms. In her case the symptoms were useful, for they stimulated her husband to make the necessary sacrifice to bring her back to the city, where she became free from these spells in a short time under treatment by a nerve specialist.

Here is another case in which a nerve strain resulted in the closure of a man's eyes by muscular spasm. This young man was referred because he had been unable, for several months, to open his eyes, even with the greatest effort, more than a fraction of an inch. It was found that there was no physical disease affecting either the muscles involved or his nervous system.

But he, too, was enmeshed in an unpleasant life-situation, and was unable to cope with it. As a bookkeeper and confidential assistant he had yielded to the temptation to use the funds of the company for speculation, intending to replace the money after winning profits for himself. He lost the money and was unable to replace it. For a long time he managed by skillful bookkeeping to cover up the loss. The strain was great. Finally he imagined that his employers, looking at him, could read in his eyes what he had done. Suddenly his lids refused to open more than a fraction of an inch, so that even by dramatic efforts he could barely see to do his work and to walk about. This condition, produced by unconscious mental processes, was useful. It relieved him of the necessity of facing his employers, and at the same time diverted attention from his books. Supposed suspicion was replaced by sympathy. The increasing strain of his conflict was expressed automatically in the form of spectacular physical symptoms.

Let me tell you of a case that represents a very common type of nervous breakdown. A young woman was sent in complaining of a severe headache with which she had suffered for months. It was feared that she might have a brain tumor, or other serious brain disease. But no organic affection was to be discovered.

It was found that her headache was of a special type. It was more like a pressure than an ache. Questioning brought out several other symptoms, typical of her condition. She had an unreasoning fear of crowds, and of narrow and wide spaces, so that she could not remain through a church service, ride in a subway, walk down corridors, or cross a street, without a great deal of fear and anxiety. She slept poorly, was upset and unhappy. She was unable to work at home, and was beset by morbid doubts, which would compel her to return several times, when retiring, to make certain that she had locked the door.

As you may suspect, her trouble was precipitated by a mental strain from conditions which she had been unable to master. She felt humiliated and disgraced because she had learned that her father, a wealthy man, who had always, more or less, neglected her mother, was maintaining another household. After struggling unsuccessfully with this problem for months, she suddenly developed these symptoms which, however, disappeared when she understood the cause and made a rational adjustment to her life situation. The fears and other symptoms were not based on physical disease, but were distorted images, as it were, of her mental distress.

We see many people, in these days of depression, suffering from nervous breakdown of this, and other, types. One patient gives way because his fortune has shrunk from forty million dollars to three or four millions; an office woman suffers similarly because a few thousands, representing her life's savings, have been swept away; or a laborer with a family of children, when he loses his job.

The basic causative principle is the same in all these cases. The driving forces of human personality are blocked by outside or inside opposing forces. Some people are capable of facing the facts of difficult situations, and of adjusting themselves to them without undue mental strain. Others, lacking this plastic power to adjust, develop a nervous strain through a feeling of defeat. When the strain, in the type which I have been discussing, becomes unbearable, the mind may produce automatically symptoms and signs that copy more or less closely those of serious physical disease. Such signs and symptoms do not cause death; the parts of the body seemingly involved are structurally entirely normal.

Time does not permit me to discuss here other types of mental breakdown resulting from maladjustment to the conditions and opportunities of life. Some of these are the fanatics, the cynics, the scolds, the disturbers and several types of the insane.

It should be emphasized that happiness can come only when the

whole personality is adjusted to the conditions and opportunities of life.

A person who is dominated by desire and impulse on the one hand, or by distorted ideals on the other, is illy equipped to battle with life's stern realities.

Domination by basic drives, though normal in the infant, is a prolific cause of unhappiness and mental breakdown in the adult. This condition is found with pathetic frequency by those whose task is the rehabilitation of broken human lives. The control of behavior by distorted self-ideals, with its tendency to force the individual into conflict with society, becomes a source of mental strain, which assumes various guises, not infrequently that of physical disease.

Both of these forms of personality defect, control by basic drives or by distorted ideals, may coexist in the same individual. Other forms of imperfect organization of the personality shall not be considered here.

It should be noted that mimicry of physical disease in the cases of nerve strain here recounted were automatically produced by unconscious mental processes. Other types that come to the physician are voluntarily fabricated with craftily calculated dishonesty. Between these extremes, mixed types occur in which voluntary and unconscious factors are variously blended, just as the conscious state may itself vary from full to slight degrees of awareness.

It should be clearly visualized by educators that mental adulthood begins only when the individual has placed his will, informed by right ideals, in full control of the affairs of his life. This type of organization of the personality is in the adult a necessary condition to happiness.

Those familiar with the history of human thought know how frequently systems of philosophy have been formulated which have attempted to justify and to dignify in adult relations a form of personality organization based essentially upon uncontrolled domination by basic drives. This, being in principle an infantile arrangement, falls short, of necessity, in the complicated affairs and responsibilities of adults. In the past it has led, and must always lead, the aspiring human spirit into blind alleys of disillusion and unhappiness.

Those skilled in study with the microscope, the telescope and the test-tube realize that the reign of law is universal in nature. The psychologist knows also that law dominates the mind, and that happiness grows only out of the harmonious adjustment of life to law.

It is a law that pleasure comes or goes, willy-nilly, with the satisfaction of the senses; but that happiness can blossom only from the

adequate adjustment of man's desires and impulses to the laws of nature and to the intellectual and spiritual forces of life.

Human impulses and desires, being numerous as the human faculties, represent a seething mass of drives at various levels to conflicting ends. Clearly it is fruitless for an adult to go through life aimlessly, like a child in toyland, expending his efforts, now at one thing, now at another. The practical needs of life, as well as the demands of happiness, require the organization of life's driving forces into one worthy life-plan, dominated by a single guiding principle.

Happiness comes automatically to those who plan and live the worthy family life. Happiness may come also to those who organize the energy of life's driving forces upon a higher plane, as in music, science, politics, art, literature, philosophy, education and social service. This expression of life's energies on a higher plane is called, by psychologists, sublimation. One sublimation alone, religion, enables man to face serenely the greatest success or victory that the world can offer, or the loss of all that he loves, even life itself.

Only education in the broadest sense may cope with the problem of the maladjusted. How one marvels to see emerging from the rough, unformed block of white marble, under the hands of the sculptor, vital figures of enduring vigor and loveliness. Character, also, based of necessity upon intellectual and spiritual values, which are the hope of the world, emerges from education only when educators realize essential factors in personality building, and possess the skill and the will to teach the young how to organize their conflicting desires and impulses into harmonious outlines of character, dominated by will and right self-ideals, which shall rise always to meet adequately the demands of life.

It is an arresting fact for the consideration of the taxpayer and the citizen that more hospital beds are devoted to the mentally ill than to all the physically sick combined.

And this does not include, of course, the thousands upon thousands who, suffering from lesser degrees of mentally produced illness, manage to avoid the hospital and the asylum, yet live always, more or less, dependent, unhappy lives. It is often astonishing to see how much can be done for these people by correct mental adjustment.

If what is already known of psychology could be applied sensibly to the education of the young in the home, the school and the university, much of this ancient toll of human wreckage could be prevented.

One after another, physically produced diseases are being mastered by man's increasing knowledge of the forces of nature. For example, many of us remember how, thirty years ago, tuberculosis was rightly called the great white plague, until a successful fight was waged

against it by the science of medicine, which was able to introduce a regime of correct hygiene and sanitation, with the aid of an aroused public opinion.

So, also, an aroused, enlightened public opinion is a necessary motive force for the application in the education of the young of known psychological principles, which can prevent the grave danger of much of this immense quantity of human wreckage resulting from maladjustment to life.

A nation is civilized in proportion to the degree that it applies basic knowledge to the solution of the problem of its existence. The increasing complexity of human affairs demands more and more the application of such knowledge as a condition of survival. In many fields urgent problems press for solution, but in no field is there a greater need than in that which trains the minds of young people to cope sensibly and basically with the problems of life; and in no field will the effort expended yield, in the long run, greater dividends in material saving and in human happiness.

ALONG HIGHWAY AND BYWAY

THE LINACRE ADVANCES. Each successive issue of THE LINACRE has excited increasing interest. The article on eugenics by Dr. Alexander Fraser, in the December issue, was sent out to all the Catholic papers by the N. C. W. C. News Service. Father Wilfred Parsons, S.J., Editor of *America*, in his issue of February 10, 1934, writing under the caption "Sterilization is Criminal Folly," says, "Dr. Fraser completely demolishes its pretensions, basing his demonstration entirely on the known laws of Biology."

DEATH OF DR. JOHN J. O'REILLY. The Catholic Physicians' Guilds suffered a grievous loss in the death of the well-known Brooklyn physician. Commenting on his departure, Mr. Patrick Scanlan, Managing Editor of the *Brooklyn Tablet*, says in his column, "Catholic Action loses a stalwart champion in Dr. O'Reilly. He was a credit to the Great Physician who was born, lived and died in the service of mankind."

GUILDS SPREADING. Under the leadership of Mr. Arthur T. O'Leary, a New York lawyer, there is being formed a Catholic Physicians' Guild for Sullivan and Rockland Counties, New York. Miss Dorothy Willmann, formerly attached to medical missions and now with the Queen's Work, St. Louis, Missouri, is engaged in forming a Physicians' Guild for that city. If every diocese in the country