

Mental Health for Students

By Dr. J. J. Gable, '15, and Dr. M. P. Prosser, '35

OCCASIONALLY a University student abruptly ends a promising college career by leaping from a third story window, the suicide the result of an undetected mental illness which had been affecting the student's mind for several weeks.

Some other student may be suddenly taken from his classes and confined in a hospital, the victim of a severe mental collapse.

Headlines in our newspapers proclaim such unfortunate incidents in schools throughout the nation almost every week. Yet little is said about the hundreds of students who are unhappy, dejected, and depressed; haunted by the phantoms of fear, futility and frustration, and unable to find any lasting freedom from these thoughts. It is this last group of students who should be receiving the most attention, for something can be done to help them with their problems, to guide them to success and happiness and to prevent them from suffering from a more serious mental illness than the one they already have.

Few people realize that mental illness is really as common as physical illness, and that among a group of highly socialized, educated and civilized people there are more neuroses than sore throats, more anxiety states than cases of pneumonia. Many mental illnesses seem to be the offspring of civilization, and the more complex our civilization becomes, the more profound are the illnesses that accompany it.

The background of these unfortunate mental changes lies in the host of minor disappointments or frustrations that we suffer each day. In itself, each disappointment is unimportant, almost negligible; but as these disappointments accumulate throughout the months and years, the feeling of frustration deepens and some persons seek relief from unpleasant reality in the phantasy life of a psychosis, or insanity.

This problem is particularly important to a university group, for it is among the potential leaders of civilization that these illnesses most frequently occur; especially those illnesses that should be most easily prevented.

It may seem odd to our readers that higher education and the "fuller life" should be conducive to the formation of the insanities, but on analyzing the circumstances, the reasons become apparent. Certainly as knowledge broadens our horizons, it increases the number and scope of our ambitions. We begin to expect

more of ourselves, and our friends and families expect greater things of us. This is quite ideal as long as we attain a reasonable number of ambitions, at least those which we think to be most immediately important. But a series of failures so wounds our pride that we begin to feel discouraged and incompetent.

A person who has lost confidence in himself is a sick person indeed. While not fatally or even hopelessly sick, he has lost that portion of his personality that permits him to live happily and work efficiently.

It is at this point that a peculiar thing occurs, an incident that frequently changes the entire course and purpose of one's life. For the mind sets about to cure itself of this illness, but the cure is often worse than the disease.

As human beings, we are peculiarly proud of ourselves, and the only thing which we will die for is our own sense of pride or egotism. The old song, "I love me" is brutally and honestly frank. Thus when the mind finds its pride wounded it promptly begins to apply home remedies. These remedies may be quite effective, but sometimes they are so unintelligently applied that the result is disastrous.

This is when mental guidance is needed. The first aid kit of the mind consists primarily of "suppression" and "redirection," and these two mechanisms act as an anesthetic and balm to soothe our wounded pride. In suppression of our former ambitions, we first try "sour grapes," and deny that these ambitions were as important as they seemed. We then attempt to forget them and redirect our energies toward other goals which appear more attainable. This is a healthy solution of the problem, and thus is formed a motive from which great deeds may emanate.

Sometimes these remedies are poorly used, and we find that our formerly useful mind is now bogged down in a quagmire of poorly suppressed disappointments, laboring in no particular direction and spending all its energies in futile attempt merely to pull itself out of the mud. Such a person has become neurotic, but this neurosis is not a useful one and its owner is unhappy, dissatisfied and exhausted. Such persons sleep poorly at night, wake up tired, and spend all day working hard and accomplishing little. Really they do not know what they want to accomplish.

A third group of minds are still more unfortunate. They find their first aid kit

empty, and are unable to apply either of these soothing lotions to their wounded and expiring pride. If they are entirely unable to remedy this situation, they soon become even more discouraged and depressed, and will resort to one of two methods of avoiding unpleasant reality. They will either take refuge in the fantasies of insanity or they will escape from their anguish by committing suicide.

Actually these processes are not as simple as we have described them, but we have drawn these three pictures in an attempt to illustrate the basic mental functions in our every day life.

Of course most of us meet our disappointments and our failures with a healthful and well equipped attitude, but the high frequency of failure will be demonstrated by the great host of us who do not know just where we are going, who feel fatigued and exhausted without adequate cause, who are unduly depressed and blue, and who are devoting most of our energy in really useless directions.

In the mind of every parent arises this question: "How can I prevent my son or daughter from becoming mentally ill?"

The answer is, dogmatically, handle the child sensibly. But what does it actually mean to treat a child sensibly? Certainly the many conflicting theories on child psychology complicate rather than simplify the problem of the novice in the field. In this article we shall set forth no picturesque theories, but will merely attempt to give a few simple rules; rules which are admittedly easier to learn than to apply.

1. Be consistent in your own attitude. Do not scold or discipline the child one day for an act you have previously ignored or praised. And similarly, do not laugh at deeds that have previously been forbidden. A change in viewpoint must be supported by adequate reason.

2. Be sure you can enforce the orders you give. To do this your commands must be logical and just.

3. Instruct your children that all honest work is honorable work, and that the world will expect them to earn all they receive.

4. Encourage an optimistic and cheerful outlook, conservatively flavored. The young person should learn to be prepared for the worst, but expect the best. Armed with this preparation, his chances for success and happiness are much greater.

5. Attempt to estimate accurately the ability of the young person in question,

(TURN TO PAGE 27, PLEASE)

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(CONTINUED FROM PAGE 14)

and help him to get into that field or level of work where he is most likely to succeed.

This is the most difficult task we have assigned to our adoring parents; for to each one, his own son is a genius in every way. Nevertheless it is true that many young persons can develop into master craftsmen, but will be failures as engineers. However, having taken a college course in engineering, such persons often feel that they are too good to work at a craft. This is one of the dangers of higher education; not that the education itself has damaged the young man, but the various contacts associated with college life have so warped his perspective that he feels he will be a total failure in life unless he becomes both famous and rich. And of course few ever become either famous or rich.

Here is a point of danger, for when our college man perceives he is not doing creditable work in school, he begins to feel that he may make a similar failure in his life after his school days are over. This feeling of failure and of impending disaster stirs up the abnormal mental state we discussed at the beginning of this article, and serious mental illness may result in any but those who are well equipped with common sense.

If we were to try to set forth a scale whereby we may decide whether a boy should go to college, we can do little better than to take the standards advanced by Dr. Robert M. Hutchins, president of the University of Chicago.

He states that anyone should go to college who had demonstrated both an aptitude and a desire for more education than he has been able to get in elementary and high school.

He further states that the following persons should *not* go to college.

1. Children whose parents have no other reason for sending them than that they can afford to.
2. Children whose parents have no other reason for sending them than to get them off their hands for four years.
3. Children whose characters are bad and whose parents believe that college will change them for the better.
4. Children who have no other reason for going to college than to have a stadium in which to demonstrate their athletic ability.
5. Children who have no other reason for going to college than the notion that it will help them achieve social or financial success in later life.

These children should not go to college, for with only these motives, they have a poor chance for mental health for four entire years.

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