

Hans Lobstein

# How Healthy is Mental Health?

Michael is a young man of 25, brought up in a deeply religious home, Baptist and Pentecostal, as he tells us. He has never had a girl friend, never made love, too shy from way back. He smiles with a placating smile anxious to please.

There are degrees of mental health as there are of mental illness. Dr. Benians said (at the AGM of the Ealing Association for Mental Health) that most children who come to the child guidance clinic have one problem in common, that of forming good open relationships with their parents or their mates or their teachers, or rather of not forming them. They cannot learn to read or write or enjoy anything much in life, or they may become destructive and rebellious and anti-social. These children, when they go too far, come to Dr. Benians. But what about the rest of us who may have similar problems but not to that extreme, so that we can learn to read and write and even go to university, and yet and yet . . .

We get by. Or do we? If the rest of us are held back from developing our full potential abilities, can we be helped? Is this the province of mental health or not?

Teachers are taught not only to teach but to develop the human potential of their charges. And many of them try valiantly to do just that. Is this a function solely to be left to teachers?

I feel that we in the mental health field can help. It is part of our new thinking, we can look at it from a new slant. Not particularly from an educational viewpoint, not from educational psychology, the emotional blocks to learning, but from a much more positive angle. If Dr. Benians is right and relationship problems beset us all in varying degree, we have a strong role to play to find ways of improving relationships among us all. Psychiatrists study and research the person with mental or emotional illness. Psychotherapists study and help the person who comes for treatment. Mental illness is their domain. My point is that we are now in need of studying mentally healthy people, so-called, to see how they keep that way, how they manage to function effectively even under stress, while others do not.

Futhermore we want to know what we can do not only to avoid mental illness but how to enhance mental health. How to grow, to develop, to become whole. The National Association for Mental Health needs to divert some of its attention and perhaps funds to this study, or else re-name itself. For instance, what are the social factors that make for health and happiness?

Michael is good looking, with curly brown hair, and beneath his lowered eyes he glances around the room as he speaks. *Michael, Michael, I say to him, open your eyes! Look at us. How do you feel about us?*

He hesitates for a long time. In my teens, he tells us, when I went to dances, I was always last to ask a girl to dance. By then there was no-one left except the shyest, like myself. At university I saw the girl I loved walk on the other side of the street and she looked at me and smiled. But I never asked her. I only admired her from a distance. Weeks later I saw her walking with another boy, happily smiling into his face. Too late, too late. That is the story of my life. *Michael Michael*, I ask him, *look around you and see if there is anyone here you think can help you. Is there anyone here whose help you want now?*

I can do without sex, he says. I don't want to want what I cannot have. I can do without. I turn to God and I can be fulfilled without missing something. Am I missing something? What is it that I am supposed to be missing? *Michael, Michael*, I ask, *look around you and see what you can see. Turn to whom you feel will understand. Look around you, Michael*, I said, *see if you can find anyone to help you*. Michael chose Jane. Jane sat in front of him. 'I could love you Jane' he said to her' and I think perhaps you could love me too.' *Say it again, Michael*, I said, *but this time freeze your body and see what it feels like—what are you doing with your head?*

'My head wants to be close to my body . . . I have a pain in my body and I let my head hang down. I feel like I am crucified . . . my mouth is twisted and I smile apologetically.' *Try and stand up straight and firm* we all say to Michael. *Turn to each of us in turn and say I am and convince us . . .*

There are now in the process of development various alternative support systems, groups and organisations that by-pass university nurtured analytically oriented psychiatry. These new groups are starting their own community based programmes. And they work as well.

But they are still alternative therapeutic systems, mostly self-help, for ex-patients on the lonely road back to everyday life. Or they are centres for those in distress, with help and advice. They are not growth centres.

*Both sexes have lost touch with their inner selves, replacing them with roles. To achieve a society of 'whole' people, our ultimate goal, it is essential that these lost selves be found and realised.* (Angela Hamblin quoted in *Self and Society* Vol.3 No.5).

We need these self-help centres now and we need to train people to act as facilitators to set up these centres. We need resources: we need energy, time, money, buildings. We need organization commitment creative drive. We need you and what you can give.

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