

The Limits of “Mental Health”

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Another week, another set of violence-soaked disasters. “We must address mental health issues” gets trotted out and passed around like a party favor that everybody knows is just for show. When I saw another headline about “mental” health, my mind sputtered and said, wait a minute. There are real contextual problems with viewing our problems with violence as simply mental health issues to be corralled and subdued.

First, when we say mental health we imply that our heads are actually in charge and in control, despite years, centuries of mental faculties falling dismally flat in creating any real change. Mental health doesn’t actively account for emotions, hormones, the power of the environment (e.g., who you hang with) to shape choices in the moment. Nor does it account for intuition, habit, and, most of all, the impact of unacknowledged fear. Society continues to overvalue thinking and undervalue the impact that emotional health can contribute to solutions. People might say, “Well, of course mental health includes your body and emotions!” To which I reply, really?-- show me how we would know and what concrete actions use that perspective?

Second, a mental health focus completely excludes the facets of life that give most people the most growth opportunity and most trouble when ignored—responding to the world of feelings, emotions and their impact. Most people stumble over our society’s suck-it-up perspective that feelings are a nuisance and need to be controlled and certainly not spewed in public. I’ve seen, and I imagine you have, many people employ holding their breath, contracting and shaming themselves for experiencing a wave of sadness or a burst of anger. Young boys get schooled in not being a sissy, which is basically not to show any feelings that contain tears. When we don’t include and welcome emotions we can’t access whole-body learning and whole-person responding. Learning to befriend feelings and give curious attention to the power of body intelligence, emotional wisdom that we’ve each inherited over many generations, may be the most important learning that humans can engage in now.

Third, “mental” health promotes control rather than connection and communication. If you’ve absorbed the extensive messages about the superiority of thought over feelings, you might fear any loss of control that freely showing emotions might convey. And worse, you might develop patterns to control other’s feelings so you don’t have to experience the wild and random sensations of aliveness, vitality and spontaneity that come with a rich emotional life. You get deprived of the amazing inner landscape that presencing and learning from full engagement with life can develop over a lifetime.

We call this group of skills in our 4 Pillars of Integrity Emotional Literacy, and we have been exploring them for several decades. You can learn more about how to befriend your feelings with the Integrity Deck here:

https://foundationforconsciousliving.org/big_leap_home/integrity/