

# THE MYTH OF MENTAL ILLNESS

<http://psychclassics.yorku.ca/Szasz/myth.htm>

Though the psychiatrist Thomas Szasz later expanded the ideas in this 1960 essay into a book, for the purposes of PIPS it's sufficient to read the paper itself.

Szasz began to doubt the fundamental axioms and practices of his chosen specialism in the 1950s and since he didn't have his own private practice (he was employed by the Navy) he felt able to express his views freely.

It's usually accepted that the reason we seek treatment for mental "illnesses" (the quotes are here to avoid assuming they really are illnesses before starting the discussion!) in order to resolve issues we have that manifest themselves as inner mental states we find distressing, or behaviour that makes it difficult to maintain a "normal" life. Examples might be extreme phobias, depression or anxiety, drug addiction, Obsessive Compulsive Disorder and so on. Occasionally we might be \*forced\* to accept treatment as we are deemed a danger to ourselves or others: something that does not apply to "physical" illness.

The two main arguments are

1. "Illness" refers to a clear "pathology" – an infection, injury, organic disease or congenital problem causing visible damage to the body, or impaired body function, or pain. None of these apply to mental "illnesses". We only notice them because of our inner mental world causes us distress, or because we have difficulty behaving in a socially acceptable way (eg going to work, sitting quietly on the bus without lecturing the other passengers on our recent alien abduction).
2. The definition of these phenomena as "illness" means we abdicate responsibility for our own actions and delegate it to therapists.

Are these points valid? (disclaimer – personal views!)

- (1) Seems to indicate a dualist world view, and is a hostage to the future – in that we MAY discover physical causes of mental problems. It's not clear how "neurological" disease fits into this duality – the famous case of [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Phineas\\_Gage](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Phineas_Gage) appears to show that a "personality disorder" can be caused by brain injury – and it is clear that vascular dementia, which has a known physical cause, can cause changes in personality and a range of mental problems that are similar to those commonly encountered in psychiatry that have no known cause.
- (2) This looks like morality masquerading as science. We might equally tell someone with a bad back to take responsibility for their own physiotherapy, or a diabetic to change their diet, without calling into question the reality of their illnesses.

Is there anything further we can take from this?

Oliver James has suggested that our mental problems are caused by environment, whether it be parenting or the political and economic systems we live in. This does echo Szasz's argument to some extent – mental "illness" clearly has a social aspect – for instance, a claustrophobia patient would not suffer such severe practical difficulties if he or she were not forced to go out to work, shop etc.

Personal experience suggests therapy can deal with symptoms, but that a more permanent solution can be available by removing the source of one's difficulties by changing one's circumstances (change job, retire, leave a bad relationship) or that they may gradually improve with time (after bereavement).

Also, one might suspect that some aspects of our personality are merely what makes us who we are, and the psychiatric profession is "over medicalising" them. For instance, ADHD diagnoses have increased rapidly – but is ADHD (in all but severe cases) merely the observation that kids find it difficult to sit still and listen in class, something known to teachers throughout the ages?

These ideas are discussed by Tamler Sommers and David Pizzaro here

<https://www.verybadwizards.com/198> (Start at 30 minutes into the podcast.)

**Neil.**