



Why Understanding Your Environment Matters to Your Mental Health

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The Starts With Me approach to mental wellbeing asks us to look inside and take personal responsibility for our thoughts, words and actions. It entails playing an active role in the change we want to make for ourselves and for others. It asks us to resist blaming those around us for our problems and demands that we stop seeing ourselves as powerless victims. Instead, it encourages us to find our own solutions to whatever challenges and obstacles we face in life.

This approach to mental wellbeing has a long history in both Western and Eastern traditions. Promoted by French existentialists, Swiss psychoanalysts, Indian independence leaders, American novelists, Tibetan Buddhist spiritual leaders, and Sufi Muslim thinkers, among many others. For instance, according to a Sufi proverb dated back to the 13th century: “the sage battles his own ego, while the fool (or ordinary man) battles everyone else’s.”

Despite its long and illustrious past, emphasizing personal responsibility and individual agency to promote wellbeing has its critics. The most prominent critique is that it “individualizes” one’s problems, which can lead to blaming those who struggle as if their issues are solely their fault. Logic suggests that if the solution to one’s problems is more individual responsibility, than the cause of the problems must have been too much individual *irresponsibility*. This contributes to the problematic idea that mental illness and poor mental health reflect a character or personality defect that need fixing.

This critique of the individual responsibility approach to mental wellbeing is important because it reminds us that we ought to understand our thoughts, feelings, actions, and the problems we face, in the larger social and physical environments in which we exist. If we do not appreciate the role that context plays in shaping who we are and how we experience life, we end up assigning blame rather than offering compassion and understanding to ourselves and to others.

An extensive body of research shows how our behaviour in part reflects our social and physical environments, both past and present. In her book *The Birthright Lottery: Citizenship and Global Inequality*, Ayelet Shachar draws attention to the inevitable fact that there is a significant influence over our lives by factors beyond our control. We have no say who our parents will be, how much money they will have or what parenting strategies they will adopt. We also have no say over whether we are born in a refugee camp, a war-torn or

impoverished country, or a high crime neighbourhood. From the womb, we emerge into an environment that we did not choose and life proceeds from there. Shachar provides us with a useful reminder:

For those granted a head start simply because they were born into a flourishing political community, it may be difficult to appreciate the extent to which others are disadvantaged due to the lottery of birthright. But the global statistics are revealing. Children born in the poorest nations are five times more likely to die before the age of five. Those who survive their early years will, in all likelihood, lack access to basic subsistence services such as clean water and shelter, and are ten times more likely to be malnourished than children in wealthier countries. Many will not enjoy access to even basic education, and those out of school are more likely to be girls than boys. The odds that they will either witness, or themselves suffer, human rights abuses are also significantly increased.¹

Understanding our environment is therefore crucial for coming to terms with ourselves, including the good and the not-so-good attributes. Addiction, for instance, is said to occur in a context in which the addict is dealing with larger life problems and past traumas. Substance abuse ends up being a coping strategy, a way to numb the pain. As the saying goes, “alcohol isn’t the problem, it’s the solution.” There is evidence that changes to one’s social environment can have a powerful impact on addictive behaviours. As the psychologist Gary Greenberg has observed, some American soldiers who served in Vietnam in the 1960s and used heroine to deal with combat-related stress, stopped their use upon returning home. For these individuals, removing the main source of environmental stress, simultaneously removed their need to use heroin as a “solution” to cope.

We can also see the connection between our mental state and our environment in others areas. In his book, *Tribe: On Homecoming and Belonging*, Sebastian Junger notes that those who live alone, disconnected from social networks are less likely to be happy and more likely to be suicidal.²

Disconnection from nature can also be detrimental to our mental health. Research suggests that in cities, a lack of green space can contribute to higher rates of poor mental health.³ It is hard to see how this isn’t self-evident, yet our current state of confusion and disconnection from our social-emotional health, has led us to need scientific research to show how engaging in “forest therapy” or “forest bathing” has significant positive health outcomes. Some evidence finds that the practice of “grounding” or “earthing” – putting oneself in direct contact with the earth – can help to improve well-being, sleep, and reduce pain.⁴ It is therefore possible that the positive effects individuals feel after a silent yoga retreat in a rural

¹ Ayelet Shachar, *The Birthright Lottery: Citizenship and Global Inequality* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press), p. 3.

² Sebastian Junger, *Tribe: On Homecoming and Belonging* (Toronto: HarperCollins, 2016).

³ F. Lederbogen, *et al.*, “City living and urban upbringing affect neural social stress processing in humans,” *Nature* 474 (June 2011), pp. 498–501. Available here: <https://www.nature.com/articles/nature10190>

⁴ For a review of this literature see Gaetan Chevalier *et al.*, “Earthing: Human Implications of Reconnecting the Human Body to the Earth’s Surface Electrons,” *Journal of Environmental and Public Health* (January 2012). Full article available here: <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC3265077/pdf/JEPH2012-291541.pdf>

environment come as much from the spiritual guidance and meditation practices as they do from re-connecting with nature.

All of this begs the question: what does the importance of our social and physical environments mean for an approach to mental wellbeing that emphasizes personal responsibility?

To me, it means that an important step we ought to take in putting our lives back on track involves taking a hard look at our environment to understand why we struggle in the way that we do. Are we stressed because of economic concerns or because of the poor quality of our social relationships? Do we lack a larger sense of purpose? Are we spending too much time in front of screens and not enough time outside in the woods? Answering these kinds of questions can help us clarify what we need to enhance our mental wellbeing and to be a source of inspiration to those around us.

The Starts With Me approach requires that we discover the root of our problems, identify them, grapple with them, and accept them for what they are. We borrow this first step from many spiritual practices and modern psychology. It involves a sincere, honest acknowledgment that our environment has shaped us in profound ways. Approaching our struggles honestly with an open mind is an effective way to manage the inevitable impulse to blame others and play the victim card. The introspective soul-searching required will be painful, it will involve difficult conversations and trial and error. Nevertheless, it is a necessary step towards taking responsibility for our lives in a meaningful and productive way.

Thanks for reading and see you again in two weeks.