

THE HAPPINESS OF PEOPLE WITH A MENTAL DISORDER IN MODERN SOCIETY

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Abstract

Richard Layard (2005) holds modern society responsible for an 'epidemic of mental disorder', which he sees as a major source of contemporary unhappiness. Yet average happiness is high in modern society and most people with a mental disorder feel happy most of the time. This appears in an analysis of a representative sample (N = 7076) of the Dutch population that was screened for mental disorders. Happiness was measured using a single question on how often respondents had felt happy during the last four weeks. Of the respondents with a mental disorder 68% reported they had felt often happy during the last four weeks. People with mental disorder may be victims of modern society, but they also benefit from modern society.

"Mental health is now our biggest social problem - bigger than unemployment and bigger than poverty," said Lord Richard Layard, in the Guardian September 12 2005 . Layard is an emeritus professor in economics and a Downing Street adviser in the UK. He was trying to persuade the government to train an army of psychotherapists.

In his influential 2005 book 'Happiness: lessons of a new science' Layard marks mental disorder as a major of unhappiness in modern society. For that reason the pleas for investment in curing mental disorders and to put more effort in preventing the occurrence of mental disorders. In his view prevention should not only involve interventions at the individual level, but also social reform. Societal determinants of mental disorders are part and parcel of modern market economies. Modern societies overlook key facts of human nature (Layard, 2005). In this line he states we should tame the rat race and dampen the pressures of modernization, because of the 'crippling distress' involved. Layard is not the only one who holds modern society responsible for what is called the 'epidemic of mental disorders'. An early advocate of this view was Thomas Scheff (1974) and among the current supporters are reputed social scientists such as Lane (2000) and Wilkinson and Marmot (2003).

In this commentary two aspects of Layard's claims are scrutinized. Is mental disorder really such a big problem? And: Is Layard right that human nature does not flourish in modern market economies?

Mental disorder is not synonymous with unhappiness

How can we reconcile Layard's misery statistics with the fact that most people in modern countries report to be happy? Headey and Wearing (1992) show that suffering is not the opposite of happiness. They grouped people on two dimensions that are called 'well-being' and 'ill-being'. It is no surprise that a lot of people score high on well-being and low on ill-being, while a small group combines high ill-being with low well-being. Yet, there is also a substantive group that is not distressed, although they lack positive well-being and also group of people who are highly distressed and nevertheless experience high well-being.

Aspects of well-being, such as satisfaction with life, positive moods, happiness and meaning in life, appear to be closely linked and seem to have a common genetic basis (Bartels & Boomsma, 2009). The same is true for aspects of ill-being. Depressive symptoms,

anxiety and low moods are highly interconnected as well. However the well-being cluster only shows a moderate negative correlation with ill-being cluster. Emotional experience can be mixed (e.g. Carstensen et al, 2000; Ersner-Hershfield, 2008).

The conclusion is that we should be careful to equate mental disorders with unhappiness. This also becomes apparent if we look at the results of the Dutch NEMESIS study (Bijl, Van Zessen et al., 1998). A representative sample of 7076 adults aged 18 to 64 years was interviewed three times and diagnosed for mental disorders by trained interviewers with the help of the Composite International Diagnostic Interview (CIDI) developed by the World Health Organization (Robins et al, 1988). They also answered a question on how happy they had been during the last four weeks, with response options ranging from 'never' (1) to 'continuously' (6). As expected, people diagnosed as having a mental disorder reported to have felt happy less often than those without; the average score for people with disorders being 4,1 and for people without disorders 4,9. The average difference is 18% of the scale range (Bergsma, Ten Have et al, in press).

Figure 1

Responses to the question 'How often did you feel happy in the past four weeks' by people with and without mental disorder

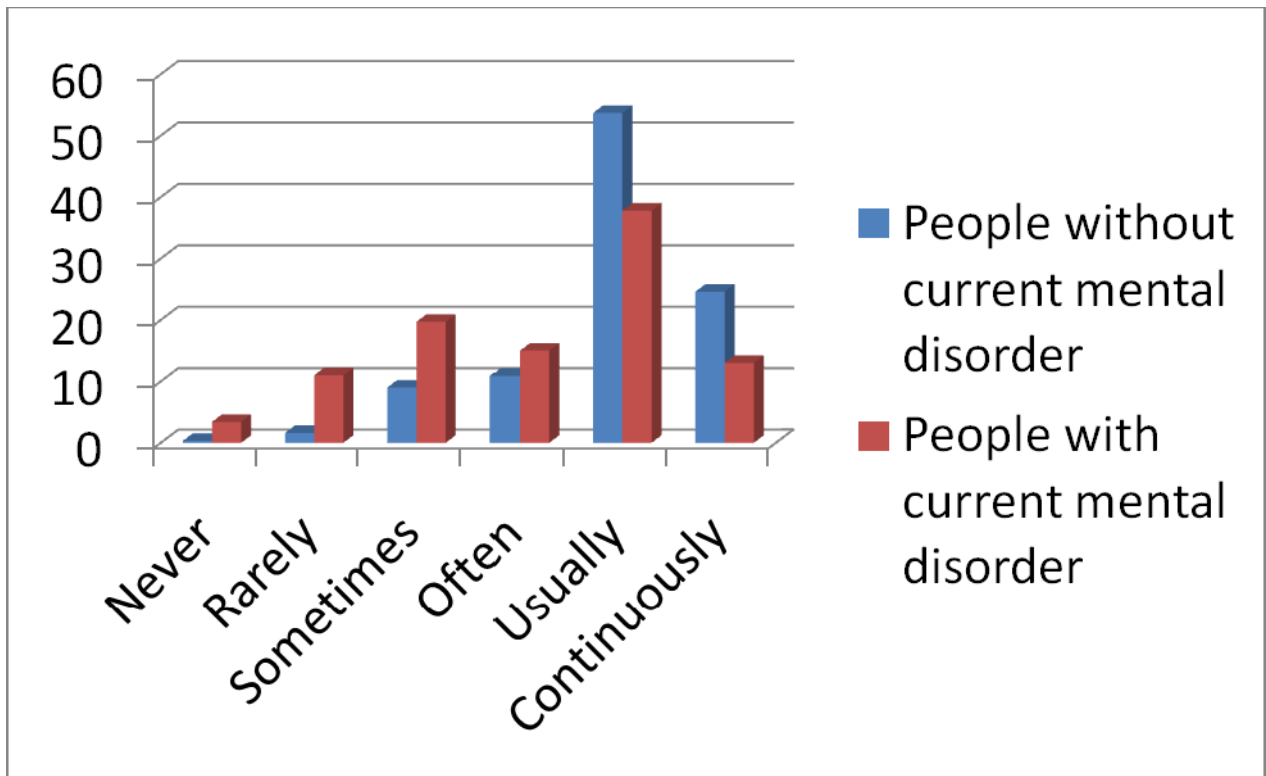


Figure 1 shows the distribution of happy moods among people with and without mental disorder. It is apparent that the difference between the two groups is more pronounced on the negative side of the happiness continuum than on the positive side. 57.7 % Of the people who never or rarely felt happy during the past four weeks suffered from a mental disorder and an additional 26.9 % had a history of a mental disorder. We also mention lifetime prevalence because psychopathology is associated with the residual functional disability when a disorder is cured or in remission (Bijl & Ravelli, 2000).

Figure 2

% of people with a mental disorders that felt happy during the past four weeks.

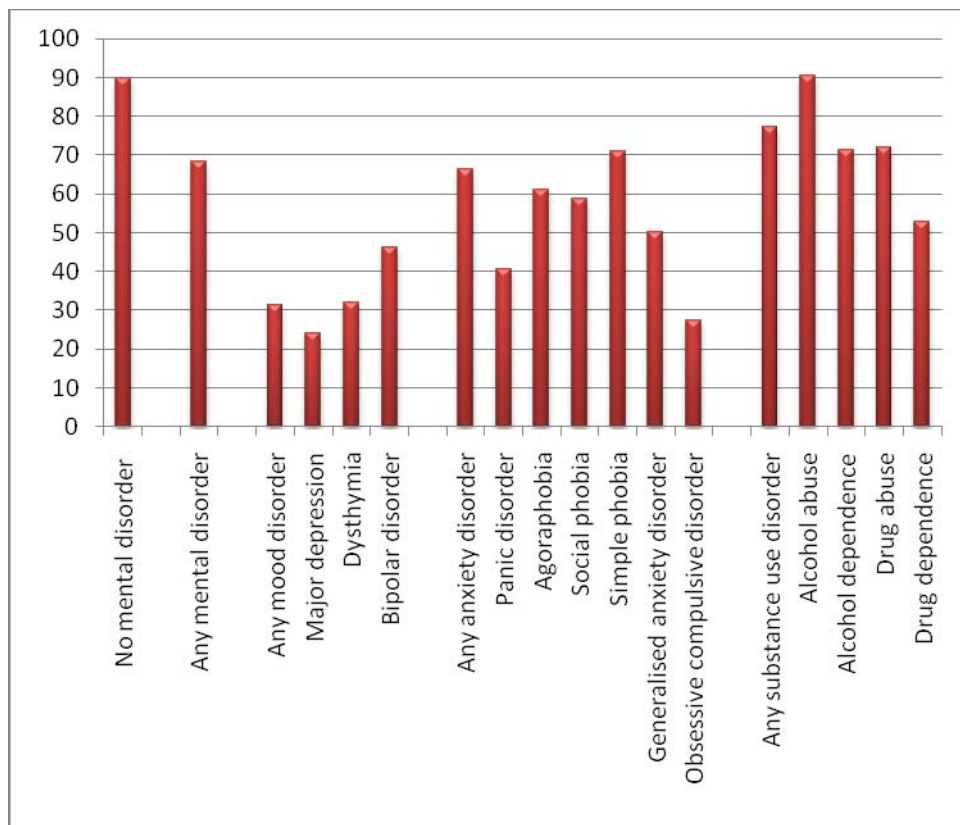


Figure 2 provides more detail about the kinds of mental disorders involved. A first thing that stands out is that people diagnosed as having an alcohol problem are no less happy than people diagnosed as not having any disorder. Another noteworthy thing is that the percentage of people with anxiety disorders that feel at least often happy goes up to 80 if we exclude people with co-morbid mood disorders from our sample. This figure is hard to align with the ‘crippling distress’ Layard mentions. There is more suffering among people diagnosed as depressed, but even in this category some 30% reports to have felt happy in the last four weeks.

Why are people with mental disorders happy often?

The fact that so many depressed people feel happy often is surprising. One possible explanation is that these people were misguided or not honest about their happiness. However, the data do not support this explanation. Happiness of people with and without mental disorders turns out to be associated in the same way with other indicators of wellbeing. People with mental disorders who feel happy most of the time are less absent from work, use health care facilities less often, and use less pain medication than people with mental disorders who feel happy less often. Disturbed but happy people also function

better psychologically, they are less neurotic, have better self-esteem, higher energy levels and a more relaxed attitude (Bergsma, Veenhoven et al, in press).

This leads to a somewhat paradoxical conclusion that people with mental disorders are happy if they have the characteristics that are usually associated with good mental health. This conclusion goes well with the idea put forward by Horwitz and Wakefield (2006) that the high levels of mental disorders in the general population may be a survey artifact. A lot of people that are diagnosed as having a mental disorder, will have symptoms of mental disorders, but may still be quite able to cope, and consequently feel happy most of the time.

Another thing to keep in mind is that modern society appears to fit human nature fairly well. A look in the World Database of Happiness (Veenhoven 2010a) learns that most people are happy most of the time, and that the level of happiness is particularly high in modern western nations. Average happiness on scale 0-10 is 7,4 in the USA and no less than 8,4 in Denmark. We live now longer and happier than ever before in human history (Veenhoven 2010b).

How about the 'rampant individualism' that Layard holds responsible for the 'crippling distress'? Research shows that people live happier in individualistic society (Veenhoven 1999) and one of the reasons is probably that individualism enhances the chance that one leads a life that fits one's preferences and capacities. How about the modern time stress? Research shows that people tend to be happier in countries where the pace of life is high (Garthammer 2002) and one of the reasons seems to be that such societies appeal more to the human need for challenge.

Even if modern society causes mental disorder (which is not at all sure), its victims still enjoy its benefits. Like other citizens, people with mental disorders can count on good health care, freedom of choice and the protection of the constitutional state.

Why is mental disorder still the main cause of unhappiness?

Still Layard is right in that mental disorder is a main source of unhappiness in modern society. How can that be? One reason is that modern society has eliminated a lot of traditional sources of unhappiness, such as hunger, oppression and sexual abstinence. The better the external living conditions in society, the more the remaining differences in happiness depend on inner life ability. As a result, the negative effects of mental disorder

will catch the eye more in modern society. Possibly modern society sets also higher demands to mental health, because of its greater demands on self-direction .

Layard is also right in that mental disorders form a huge social problem, that should be addressed with priority. Yet the medicine he recommend seems to be worse than the disease.

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