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# Broken Brains and Genes Cannot Explain Away Our Global Health Problems

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## Having Known Sadness Aplenty

In an era when every human problem is chalked up to genes and brains--we should pause. The broken genes and broken brains story is false, at least in its interpretation. If the story is a story of genes and brains, it is a story about environments that are toxic to genes and brains. You are not a broken human being. We need a science of healing, not a science that makes living with social and environmental toxins tolerable.

I am not anti-medication. I am anti the current common use strategies of medications. I would not be anti disease model in psychological problems if it had produced the identification of diseases, but it has not. Syndromal classification is a fancy way of saying we group together signs we see in people and things they tell us they experience--signs and symptoms. Syndromal classification has produced the identification of many diseases, especially in infectious medicine. We identified, treated, and dramatically reduced yellow fever, measles, and many other infectious diseases.

However, I think it is the wrong model in psychological difficulties, at least in many if not most instances. The disease model certainly does not deserve to have the hegemony that the DSM, the psychiatry bible of mental disorders, has. No way. Not on track record. Reliable sorting does not equal disease identification. We still do not have a single sensitive and specific biological marker for any major psychiatric syndrome.

Even a marker does not mean we have identified a cause. It could as well be a pathoanatomy, pathophysiology, or sequela of some other cause. For example, if I put a stone in the shoes of a hundred people and made them walk around for a year, I could find bone deformities, scar tissue, etc. Nice biological markers. But I would not have found the cause. The cause was the stone and leaving it in the shoe. And, we still do not even have reliable markers. Let alone identified diseases. Depression is not a disease. It is a syndrome-a cluster of signs and symptoms of unknown origin. I am not saying it is not a problem. Just that there has been no disease identified.



## Eat Well

I am not even convinced the disease model is a particularly good model for many of the current crop of physical ailments that burn the vast majority of our healthcare dollars. Our hospitals and doctor's offices are filled with people experiencing the sequela of behavior problems. We live in a toxic environment. We eat too much and the wrong things. We smoke too much. We drink too much. We stress over a million things that we just made up (prestige, status, accomplishment). We move our bodies too little. Our patterns of sleep are disrupted. Often our social environments are too lean in terms of meaningful social interactions. And, all these things make us sick.

Is the sickness a physical problem? Of course. Look at what we are dying from....cancer, heart disease, pulmonary disease, diabetes, obesity and the many, many sequela of our horrific processed pseudofood dietary excesses. We are dying from having a stone in our shoe and not taking it out. Will statin drugs lower cholesterol? Yes. Will proton pump inhibitors lessen GERD? Yes. Will blood pressure drugs lessen blood pressure? Sure. But these are mostly methods of making it so we can tolerate living with that stone in our shoe.



## Move Your Body

Are these things genetic...well, here the answer simply must be in epigenetics if it is genetic in any meaningful sense...that is to say environment impacting genetic expression. Consider obesity. Look at the map in the middle of this page that clicks through a series of slides showing obesity rates by state at the Centers for Disease Control <http://www.cdc.gov/obesity/data/adult.html> . Just twenty years ago there were five states in the US with obesity rates below 10 percent. The highest states were 15-19 percent. Now states like Mississippi are at 34% and the lowest state in the country is 20-24 percent. Obesity doubling in 20 years!? Not one single state is currently at the level the fattest state was 20 years ago! Shocked? You should be.

How about mental health. In 1987 there were just over 16,000 children on disability for mental disorders in the US. In 2007, there were more than 561,000. That is a 35 fold increase. I would also point out that this is an interesting number because it is not just a marker of prevalence of mental disorders, it is a marker of chronicity. One simply cannot get onto disability with a bout of major depression. One must get sick and stay sick, very sick, for a good long time. We are not just getting sicker, we are becoming more chronic when we do get sick. We get sick and we stay sick. And all of the miraculous drugs we are producing? If they are so incredibly effective, why are these rates skyrocketing in both physical and psychological chronicity? Why are they not going down?

Genetics? Broken brains? It is simply not possible except in the sense that there must be something, something in the environment that is turning genetic expression on and/or breaking brains. Gene pools simply do not change that rapidly. We have a stone in our shoe. In fact, I think likely a whole gravel pit full of stones. And the drug companies are happy to find drugs to help us tolerate that. Consider my stone in the shoe example. Imagine I prescribed oxycontin to these foot pain individuals. I guarantee that a sufficient dose of oxy compared to placebo would reduce pain, increase mobility, and improve quality of life. And if the person was then able to walk for years with the "help" of those medications, what would the outcome be. Their feet would be twisted and tweaked. Their gait would change. Their knees and hips would change. Eventually they would be crippled by that stone.

I think that this is what we are doing. Not in all cases, but many many cases. What is the stone in our shoe? I think there are many, but a few that interest me. Treating healthy living problems like medical problems fixable with a pill. The global feelgoodism agenda, where not feeling good feelings and thinking happy thoughts is treated as a disease--sending people scrambling to feel "good." Big Pharma is happy to oblige. The social meaning and stigmatization (including especially self-stigmatization) of not complying with feelgoodism is rampant. Corporate food which is poisoning us in droves and addicting us to the poison. Globalization of all of these toxins--social, food, and lifestyle is spreading these things wherever modern communication and industry reach. I am sure there are more, but these interest me.

I am not saying there is no role for medication, but the current use patterns, and, not just in psych drugs, but across the board are a huge concern. Nothing less than massive public health efforts will stem the tide. At the current rates of increase in many of these problems, the cost of health care will disembowel the economies of developed countries in the world. I do not lay this all at the feet of pharma, of course. They are just capitalizing on a larger set of global problems.



### Take Time to Really Be with People

For my part, I go to yoga six days a week. I eat well, very well. I make an effort to get good regular sleep. I have good and meaningful social interactions every day of my life. And, I preach the gospel of healthy living to anyone who will listen.

P.S. A note to people taking medications of any sort. Do not just stop taking your meds because some loony like me says these things. I myself have spent the last year slowly, very slowly, dramatically reducing my GERD drugs--down by 7/8ths over a one year period, combined with diet changes and exercise. It is worth exploring under the care of a good doc whether there might be healthy living alternatives to the drugs you are taking. Even if there are, go gently, slowly, and with proper professional care. And, you might have to hunt for the right professional. And, there may be some medications that are appropriately taken for short periods or even for life. But do not assume that this is true for all medications.

Healthy living is good medicine, eat well, sleep well, move your body, interact with your fellows, and the better off you are in these areas, the more likely you will be able to reduce or possibly even eliminate some of these other medical strategies of self-care. If environments can make us sick, they can also heal us. We need to take the stone from our shoe. So above all, we owe it to ourselves to care for ourselves, to offer ourselves healthy living, and to reduce these toxins in our lives wherever possible. Live well.

Namaste Y'all,

Kelly G. Wilson

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Photo in sepia tones at the top is of me by friend Estelle Mae, Other photos are just from my life--my wife, Dianna with baby buddy Aidan, friend, student and fellow yogi Jenny Kim, and a really great salad:)

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