

Poverty makes people sick. That shouldn't be a news flash to anyone, right? And the sickness it creates is psychological as well as physical. So, on the physical end of things, we see rates of obesity and cardiovascular and pulmonary disease higher among the poor. But we also see rates of depression, addiction, and PTSD also much higher among people at the lower end of the socio-economic system. Further, research shows that when very young children are raised in poor conditions, their later cognitive development is stunted. Such problems are not only seen by psychologists and educators but can be seen on MRI's of the brain, which show the slower-than-average development of the pre-frontal cortex as well as the damage done to the hippocampus and the amygdala.

And it's not primarily the toxic environment or lack of decent nutrition and medical care that seems to cause these problem, but, instead, the direct damaging

effects of stress. The stress response system, when hyperactivated, hurts the body and the brain in multiple ways. It increases inflammation. It actually damages the tips of our chromosomes, and it greatly impacts brain development. The results are psychosomatic, they are neuro-psychological in other words. And such problems create a cascade of negative consequences. So, for example, when stress accentuates the functioning of the amygdala, which is responsible for alerting us to danger, the result is increased anxiety which then can lead to addiction or to making poor judgments which can worsen one's socioeconomic security.

Sure, some of the problem in poor communities might be due to poor lifestyle choices, like smoking or fast-food or poor access to medical care, but the research is clear that the effects are more direct. When

one has to worry about making ends meet, the harm done to our brains and psyches is profound.

Interestingly, it turns out that the mere fact of poverty, while damaging, is not the only cause of suffering. It is the degree of inequality in one's social environment that really piles on the stress. Regardless of individual income levels, people in more unequal societies become more worried about how they are seen and judged, and this "status anxiety" is translated into various medical and psychological disorders. Again, these status anxieties do their damage through affecting levels of stress hormones. If you think about this, it makes sense. Greater inequality increases the tendency in a society to regard people at the top as important and those at the bottom as almost worthless. Overall, in a highly stratified society, there is invariably an increased anxiety about where we "fit in" and where other people think we fit in.

Some people respond to this anxiety, this what sociologists call a “social evaluative threat,” by withdrawing and becoming depressed. Other people respond to increased worries about how others view them by exaggerating an overly positive view of themselves to conceal their self-doubt. Then we have an increase in narcissism. It turns out that both depression and narcissism increase with inequality.

Whether it’s depression or attempts to cover it up, people then resort to drink, drugs, and large amounts of prescribed psychoactive medications to help them with their anxieties.

We all have social anxieties, of course. I think it goes with being human and with living in social communities. Other people, after all, can be a great source of help and assistance or may become formidable adversaries and rivals for the necessities of life. It matters, in other words, how others view you.

The problem is that with increasing inequalities in income, wealth, and power, social threats become all the more pronounced. Those at the bottom or those who don't feel they have "enough," feel it's their fault and their self-esteem takes a hit. Such an outcome can and does result in various "solutions" that only make it worse, solutions like drug and alcohol abuse, violence, or promiscuous sexuality.

This myth that we live in a "meritocracy" in which people are somehow ordered from the most able at the top to the least able at the bottom is not only false but destructive. It's now clear that, given our growing knowledge about the malleability of the human brain, that differences in ability result *from* an individual's position in the social hierarchy, rather than being determinants of it.

Some of the most interesting work on these issues comes from those researchers who track the degree of

status anxiety in more or less unequal societies.

Richard Layte and Christopher Whelan used data on almost 36,000 adults in 31 countries in Europe that took part in a survey called “The European Quality of Life Survey” in 2007. To measure status anxiety, they looked at whether respondents agreed or disagreed with the statement: *Some people look down on me because of my job situation or income.* Turns out that there were big differences between countries in how people responded, depending on how much inequality there was in that country. In all countries, status anxiety increased as people’s income rank decreased. But status anxiety was higher *at all income levels* in more unequal countries. Inequality, in other words, makes everyone more worried about status and how they are judged by others. So status anxiety was highest in the more unequal countries like Romania, Poland, Lithuania and Macedonia and lowest in more

equal countries such as Denmark, Norway, and Sweden. And – no surprise - the United States is one of the most unequal societies in the world. Clearly, money has become entrenched as a measure of how much people are worth.

The reason that status anxiety is important is that such anxieties are a powerful source of stress and stress, we know, makes people sick. And mental illness is an important type of sickness related to inequality. As Atkinson and Pickett argue in their brilliant book, *The Spirit Level*, more unequal countries had at least three times as much mental illness as the more equal ones. (mental illness as defined by epidemiologists for the World Health Organization—you know, things like depression, anxiety, eating disorders, addictions, self harm, bipolar disorders) In Japan and Germany, for example, fewer than 1` in 10 people had experienced

any kind of mental illness in the past year; in the United States, Australia and the UK it was more than 1 in 4.

So, what do we conclude from all this? Again, on one level, it's common sense. One's socio-economic status directly affects your mental and physical health. If life is hard, then you suffer. But, more than that, if you live in a society that is highly stratified because wealth and income are so unequal, than this suffering becomes much worse. It becomes worse because, first, you internalize the notion that your status is an accurate reflection of your worth and, second, because you constantly find yourself in social situations in which comparisons are being made based on how much you make and how much you have.

In this sense, things are clearly getting worse. From 1920 to 1970, income disparities were steadily reducing in the United States. Thomas Piketty calls this The Great Compression. But beginning in 1970, they started

getting worse to the point where today. America's CEO's earned a staggering 14.5 million in 2018 on average compared to the average salary of \$39,888 of their rank and file workers. You all know the numbers. The top 1 percent have wealth that exceeds the wealth of the bottom 80%. These disparities only got worse after the Great Recession of 2007-08 and has galloped ahead under Trump.

These disparities certain may offend our sense of morality. But they are also injuring our bodies and hurting our psyches. The solution is not simply a redistribution of income and wealth, but has to include a change in consciousness away from material standards of living as the primary markers of someone's worth and value.