

Our distress & mental health issues are not caused by biological defects

It's colonialism, not chemical imbalances

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“Modern medicine” tells us that we are sick simply because there is something defective or broken within us. Our pain is reduced to symptoms of innate biological defects. Our suffering is dissected, studied, tested and eventually pathologized or framed as a disorder that requires individualized cures.

As someone who trained within colonial systems of academic medicine and biomedical research, I fell for these colonial lies but coming from collectivist land-based communities I also knew that **something was very wrong about how I was being taught medicine and science**. These systems claim to be the epitome of “live saving” innovation and cutting edge research but the impact I saw on our communities, especially the most marginalized, argued otherwise. I was in denial for a long time but the more I grew politically, the more I couldn’t un-see that these so-called “modern” systems were colonial systems built by empires through past & present violent erasure and suppression of collectivist systems of care that address individual health as part of community health and ecosystem/ land health.

It’s week 8 of the settler colonial state of Israel’s genocidal bombing campaign on Gaza. As we witness the brutal intensification of a 100 year old genocide in Palestine unfold live on our phones, we’re confronting realities of what overt colonial violence looks like for communities who face the worst of it.

A young man who grew up in Gaza held hostage under a total siege, drowning in violence his whole life, surviving the zionist state’s serial bombing sprees, lacking access to clean drinking water or consistent food, watching countless loved ones murdered before their eyes, now suffering from incapacitating injuries after his home was bombed & his neighborhood leveled to the ground — **how many anti-depressants or anti-anxiety medications will he need to “fix” his mental health issues?** *Can you really look at him and tell him that his distress, sadness and anxiety are caused by chemical imbalances in his brain? A dopamine or serotonin deficiency? How much lexapro, zoloft, prozac, wellbutrin, effexor, paxil or remeron will he have to shove down his throat until the occupation, apartheid and blockade disappears? How many stimulants will he have to take to “focus” and be productive while his community lacks stable access to electricity or internet and is completely cut-off from the rest of the world?*

The child who grew up in the West Bank regularly brutalized, tortured and maimed by the Israeli occupation forces (IOF), not allowed to move or freely exist on their own land but instead degraded and treated as subhuman— What sort of mental health & mindfulness app or neurodivergent tip & trick should he use to boost his “**executive functioning**”? How should he “**self-regulate**”? What self-care tips would make his life better?

What about Ahmad Manasra who was 13 years old when his cousin was shot & killed before him while he was run over by a car and lay on the ground bleeding as settlers stood around him shouting insults? He was arrested for a crime Israeli courts admitted he never committed. Ahmad is still in prison— *a child who grew up spending most of his life in solitary confinement in cells that are the size of graves*. Painful videos after his arrest show a young, distressed, manic, terrified Ahmad being harshly treated, interrogated & abused by the IOF without the presence of his parents or lawyers. A team of Israeli psychiatrists diagnosed Ahmad with **severe depression & schizophrenia** and are giving him “**extensive psychiatric treatments**” in prison— treatments that are not disclosed to his family or the public. How long should he be institutionalized “for his own good”? How many anti-psychotics will it take to numb Ahmad into total dissociation & “treat” his condition? **How many drugs & forced treatments will it take to free Ahmad?**

The absurdity of the colonial framework of “medicine” is more apparent when we apply it to Palestine. The mental health of Palestinians cannot be separated from the settler colonialism, siege, occupation & apartheid they live under.

Of course, there are layers of oppression that make our lives very different from the lives of people on the ground in Palestine. Even in countries like the US/ Canada/ NZ/ Australia/ Europe, some have more boulders of systemic oppression on their back compared to others. **Yet, we are all made of the same stuff.**

Our biology is undoubtedly impacted by nature and also PART OFF nature- it’s a complex interdependent relationship. Our individual biology is part of collective biology and our individual bodies are pieces of the Earth’s body. However, ***the idea that pain solely emerges from within an individual to cause disease in a vacuum with no context of the sociopolitical conditions in which said disease emerged is absurd.***

Palestinians or any severely oppressed, dispossessed community facing a daily, unavoidable barrage of overt colonial violence— **if we can accept that their health issues, mental & physical, are shaped by the systems they live under then why are you & I the “exception”?** Why would we operate any differently? Most importantly, what are the consequences to believing that we are the exception and that our bodies somehow can generate distress solely from within?

Why we should all be wary of depoliticized western neurodivergent, disability spaces & approaches

Disability is not an individual issue, it is a collective crisis. Disability justice, through a decolonized lens, is not about individualized advocacy, it’s a struggle for collective liberation.

Entire communities are disabled by oppressive systems even if select individuals within said communities are perceived by some as “able” or “neurotypical”. **Palestinians are disabled by settler colonialism, as are indigenous people everywhere.** My communities have been systematically disabled by centuries of colonialism and the ugliest forms of racial capitalism. **Entire communities are labeled “insane”.** For example, mainstream media orchestrates the dehumanization of Palestinians, Arab/ SWANA, Muslim communities (and other racialized communities) to frame us as savages where everything from our moral compass, motivations, ability to critically think, desires, hopes, traditions etc are brought into question to garner public support for our massacres & genocides. *What are the Brown & Black “savages” if not “mad & insane”? What are the “barbaric “human animals” if not “crazy & psychotic”?*

Learning about how our struggles are connected can ultimate get you to better understand the political context of your pain, suffering & distress and open up a path to solutions that you would never otherwise have thought of.

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