



The Culture of Our Discontent: Beyond the Medical Model of Mental Illness

Meredith F. Small

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By many estimations, the Western medical model of mental health is dangerously incomplete. If we step outside of the traditional disease model there are many new and different ways to understand, treat, and even accept mental illness. Culture--how we collectively live, interact, and view the world--frames our mental outlook. Arguably, culture even creates it. Western culture, for example, has completely embraced the medical model of mental illness. We quickly turn to physicians if we are unhappy or otherwise mentally discomfited, seeking solutions on a prescription pad. We expect brain chemistry to be at the root of any mental malady, forgetting the deeply entwined relationship between the biology of the brain and the environment in which we think, feel, and react. But every culture has a different view of the world, a lens through which normal or insane are viewed and defined. Anthropologist Meredith Small contends there is much to be learned from stepping away from the traditional Western medical model to explore and embrace alternative perspectives. By examining culture itself, rather than focusing on biology and medicine, we can fully understand the nature of our discontent. Looking at social, evolutionary, cross-cultural, and nutritional influences, Small deconstructs mental illnesses like depression and anxiety conditions that appear in different forms and for different reasons within the culture that defines them. By rethinking assumptions and questioning standard treatment programs, she helps us gradually relax our grip on the medical model to discover a new perspective on mental illness.

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