

YOUR NORMAL MIND



Evolution's Hidden Logic
of Suffering and
What to Do About It

JOHN HANNAN

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For Kati

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*'The task is, not so much to see what no one
has seen yet; but to think what nobody has thought yet,
about that which everybody sees.'*

Arthur Schopenhauer
German philosopher 1788–1860

'Paradigm change is hard.'

John Hannan

Introduction

WHAT IF SUFFERING MAKES SENSE?

There are new, more accurate and more helpful ways to understand mental health conditions and promote psychological wellbeing. What if mental health disorders are not disordered after all? What if they are perfectly ordered and follow a logic that makes sense once you understand the imperatives of your subconscious? Mental health conditions are most often a normal state of the human mind rather than a malfunction. Have you heard the suggestion that depression is caused by a chemical imbalance in the brain? This myth has been challenged by experts for more than a decade (Davies, 2013) including by those who wrote the international manuals used by practitioners (Frances, 2013). Yet this and other controversies in the field of mental health are not widely known, even among professionals.

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The accepted rate of individuals living with a diagnosable mental illness is 20 per cent of the population in any given year according to the National Institute of Mental Health (2023). If this were true it would be an astonishing failure rate. The human brain is the product of 3.5 billion years of life on earth. Evolution rewards successful organisms with ongoing life. Less successful organisms die out. Humans are the most successful of all organisms and we dominate the earth on account of our large brain power. As a result, the human brain is the most evolutionarily successful and complex object in the known universe. Its failure rate is low. We too readily accept that 20 per cent of brains will ‘malfunction’ and have a mental health disorder in any given year. In reality, ‘malfunction’ simply cannot be the correct interpretation of the suffering we see. Understanding the true paradigms of mental health is key to enhancing your own wellbeing. Realizing that your emotions are responding to events the way nature intended is the most anxiety-reducing experience my clients have in therapy. **In this book, I do not promise to repair you, because you are not broken.** Instead, I offer a way of understanding your distress that is grounded in reality and profoundly relieving. Trauma and difficult emotions are not signs of psychological failure but are an ancient survival system doing exactly what it evolved to do: protect your genes, not optimize your happiness. When people grasp this — truly grasp it — the fear that they are ‘going crazy’ dissolves, and with it much of the anxiety that has been shadowing their lives. My aim as a psychologist is to give you a framework that makes sense of your experiences, allows for self-trust and makes the pathway forward clearer. The transformation that follows is the natural outcome of finally understanding your own mind. Once this is the new normal for your mind, it becomes easier to move towards modern

treatments and be clearer about what will work and why. This allows for a more targeted set of strategies to help you manage and optimize your psychological wellbeing.

The existence of psychological suffering is not under question. A different question is the appropriateness of the term ‘disorder’ when discussing mental health. We all understand that an injured back will swell and cause pain. This is a perfectly ‘ordered’ occurrence. The swelling directly cushions and protects the injured part while the pain motivates us to restrict movement and thus prevent further injury. Yet we know that genetic abnormalities such as scoliosis can lead to poorly functioning backs and suffering. We would call scoliosis a ‘disorder’. A quandary in mental health is when to use the term ‘disorder’ and when emotional suffering is considered normal and ‘ordered’. When do individuals experiencing suffering have a ‘faulty mind’ and when do they have ‘a normal healthy human mind doing what we expect given the circumstances’? The difference matters dramatically to the afflicted individual’s wellbeing, to mental health stigma and to our understanding of what treatments will be effective.

Western society has made significant advances in recognizing and addressing mental health challenges. Many of our models refer to the role of evolution and a handful of individuals such as Randolph Nesse (author of *Good Reasons for Bad Feelings*, 2019) investigate this at some depth. Yet, despite these gains, a broader lens exists through which to view the vital role of evolution in shaping the mind’s responses. Without this lens, we can unintentionally imply that people are ‘malfunctioning’, when in most cases they are experiencing responses that make perfect sense in the environments our brains evolved to navigate. This gap in knowledge exists for the same reason there are gaps in knowledge in

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other areas of science: we just haven't worked it out yet. A contributing factor is that the evolutionary psychologists are not usually working with trauma and the therapist-psychologists are not usually focused on evolution. On a recent podcast a famous evolutionary biologist still echoed the common but inaccurate view that trauma is not adaptive (Coyne, 2023). A new graduate of a master's degree in psychology recently looked at me quizzically and asked, 'What has evolution got to do with mental health?'

 ***Trauma responses helped us survive and made sense in ancestral times. Evolution has everything to do with mental health.***

(Throughout the book there are a few highlighted key points. These will have this key symbol next to them.)

There are repeating patterns in the mechanisms of our brains that provide the explanations for our difficult emotions. The suffering brains produce can often appear irrational when viewed from a logical assessment of circumstance in the modern world. But there is an answer to the puzzle of these perplexing mental health conditions. It is an evolutionary answer that requires a slight change in our understanding of what our brains are interested in protecting. Most professionals in mental health still believe our minds are concerned with the survival of us as an individual person. The reality is slightly different. It is that our minds have evolved to ensure the enduring survival of our genetic lines. This is a subtle but important difference, and yet it remains largely unnoticed

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in mental health. Professionals certainly investigate survival of self and offspring as psychological motivators, but considering how the enduring survival of the genes relates to human suffering requires a broader lens. This book is that lens.

I learned the best things about being human before I went back to university in my thirties and became a psychologist. I have worked as a truck driver in a factory, a furniture removalist, a bank teller, a car detailer, a tour guide/bus driver and for twelve years as a white-water rafting guide in Australia, Japan and Indonesia. We flew helicopters into wilderness areas and spent days rafting through ancient rainforest, miles from the nearest help. There were accidents and deaths, court cases, depression, anxiety, panic attacks, manic episodes, difficult personalities, difficult management decisions, addictions and no small number of suicides. This was helpful in formulating concepts of the suffering in real-world individuals. Only in the second half of my life did I work as a psychologist. Employed for a decade with the Royal Flying Doctor Service in remote North Australian Aboriginal communities, I worked with clients experiencing the deepest of suffering. I counselled individuals, managed wellbeing centres, conducted community suicide interventions, was first responder to floods, cyclones and murders, and spent years reformulating databases and government reporting systems. Later I worked for the Australian Department of Defence and witnessed the surprising causes of suffering in veterans. I have worked across four cultures in three countries and have been a manager for twenty years. I have worked in high-end private practice and provided critical incident interventions in the mining and construction industries. I have conducted over 50 mental health training programmes to the public in which the response to these evolution-based ways of thinking about

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mental health is comments such as ‘Wow. You blew my mind. I had no idea, but it makes so much sense.’

For many others, the training also reveals what they intuitively *felt* anyway — that mental health conditions are almost always a response to events and circumstances. They are rarely a spontaneous and random illness. I have taught statistics in universities and understand research. I am aware that our understanding of mental health is not yet complete. Neuroscientist Andrew Huberman (Maher, 2025) recently suggested that modern medicine knows only about 10 per cent of what there is to be known about the human condition. I see this same gap in our approach to mental health and believe evolution can help fill it. I also believe any upgrade in our paradigms needs to be driven from the ground up, by the people it will impact the most. So, this book is for every reader, not just psychologists and academics.

I am a psychologist who uses evolutionary principles to help clients understand and manage the normal responses of their brains to events. Events the individual themselves may not even realize are traumatic. But this is not an overly technical book on the brain and evolution. There are no separate chapters on mental health conditions. They are discussed, but only to illuminate broader principles that will be helpful to you. Functions and mechanisms of the brain will be discussed in terms of how they are relevant, but the complicated labels given by science to various parts of the brain will not be mentioned. Similarly, with stages of evolution, that part of history from about six million years ago to two hundred thousand years ago will be referred to with a single term. Six million years ago our ancestors were forced out of the safety of the trees and onto the dangerous savannah. Between then and about two hundred thousand years ago there are many species of human ancestor

with various labels. For much of this period you would not distinguish our ancestors from apes and we lived in co-operative groups rather than villages in the strict sense. Nonetheless, for our purposes, the ancestor names are not used and this entire period is simply referred to as 'the evolutionary village'.

The evolutionary village is an ancestral filter that has produced brains with certain imperatives. We needed our whole tribe to survive if we were to also survive. Consequentially, we desire to be committed to and belong to something larger than ourselves. Yet within that tribal environment we needed to be on top of the mating hierarchy at every generation. Without a drive to do so we would not be the creatures whose genetic line continued through to be us. It is no accident that the structure of team sports reflects these imperatives. We want our team to win overall, and as individual players we seek to optimize our reputation within that team. These are not arbitrary paradigms set up by chance. They are set to match the inherent drives we all hold. Our brains have evolved mechanisms that optimize these imperatives. These mechanisms follow rules and patterns we call algorithms. The overarching logic of the algorithms is simple. The subconscious evolved to ensure the enduring survival of the genes, not individuals. It does this by being included in a tribe and by being on top of the mating hierarchy. The subconscious responds to emotional signals, not conscious logic. The subconscious believes the world is the same as it was in tribal environments and is unaware of the modern world.

Understanding this logic, the algorithms and the rules they follow lead to an improved model of psychological wellbeing.