

Mental Health in the Homeric *Iliad*

Abstract

Although the notion persists that classical medicine focused on physical care (Nutton 2013, Padel 1995), a close reading of the *Iliad* provides an important corrective. As a war story it involves both wounding and healing (ἀκεσίς), reflecting ancient views of both physical and mental health. The *Iliad* constructs mental health in three ways: In relation to (1) consciousness or spirituality; (2) trauma; and (3) cultural views of the body. The resulting paradigm is more holistic than previous scholarship has understood. Harmful unconsciousness (ἄτη) is core to the Homeric concept of physical and mental illness: Apollo, the god of mentality, brings both health (ὕγεια) and illness (νόσος), and he sends disease to the Achaeans because of their spiritual failings; the disease, however, be healed through prayer (1.8–52, 100). Prefiguring our own conceptions of post-traumatic stress, Achilles' psychological crises likewise result from spiritual damage, and study of his symptomology has influenced recent clinical approaches to PTSD (Shay 1996, Nagy 2003). Cultural views of the body also shape Homeric views of mental health: Hephaestus is insecure because he is lamed, while Helen, Briseis, and Chryses lament that lust for their bodies causes male insanity (3.38–57, 6.343–358, 9.335–343). Because the *Iliad* frames mental health as both a personal crisis and communal (political) issue, it remains relevant to current medical and psychological discourse. In fact, the Homeric idea of spiritual affliction bears intriguing similarities to the Social Determinants of Health thesis, which posits that mental constructs (racism, sexism, homophobia) can cause disease in marginalized communities (Allen 2021, Fani 2022). Finally, the cross-disciplinary partnership between psychologist Jonathan Shay and Classics Professor Gregory Nagy, applying *Iliadic* insights in the clinical treatment of PTSD, suggests that archaic concepts of health and illness may hold still-undiscovered potential to enhance our own paradigms and treatments.

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