

The Problem With Letting Therapy-Speak Invade Everything

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If the language of the internet is anything to go by, America’s collective mental health is in shambles. Before the midterms, some of us were suffering from “[election stress disorder](#)”; others have left Elon Musk-acquired Twitter as an act of [boundary-setting](#). Our political lives have

become saturated with the language and imagery of therapy. Our personal lives too: The language of “trauma” and “attachment styles” has become a common way to understand ourselves and our relationships.

Increased awareness of the importance of mental health is no bad thing, especially in the aftermath of a punishing pandemic. But in many cases, the prevalence of what The New Yorker’s Katy Waldman has termed “Instagram therapy” has exacerbated a broader cultural trend toward solipsism, masquerading as “self-care.” The idea of self-care, in turn, has been largely divorced from its links to activism and is now often used to frame individual pleasurable actions, like taking a bubble bath or canceling plans, as morally worthy, even necessary. The exhortation to take care of ourselves, to protect our mental well-being at any cost, has become a mantra for a newly dominant ideology.

It’s not just that this Instagram therapy gives its adherents a convenient excuse to bail on dinner parties or silence our phones when friends text us in tears. Rather, it’s that according to this newly prevalent gospel of self-actualization, the pursuit of private happiness has increasingly become culturally celebrated as the ultimate goal. The “authentic” self — to use another common buzzword — is characterized by personal desires and individual longings. Conversely, obligations, including obligations to imperfect and often downright difficult people, are often framed as mere unpleasant circumstance, inimical to the solitary pursuit of our best life. Feelings have become the authoritative guide to what we ought to do, at the expense of our sense of communal obligations.

A representative September article for Self, “3 Things to Do If You REALLY Want to Cancel Plans but Feel Guilty,” cites a therapist who encourages readers to ask themselves “what are some of my needs that are not being met” in order to weigh the pros and cons of bowing out of plans with friends. The therapist urges readers to “find a solution that will meet as many of your needs as possible.” The needs of the bailed-on friends in question go unmentioned.

“We have withdrawn to a highly subjectivist form of individualism,” said Eva Illouz, a professor of sociology at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem and the author of “Saving the Modern Soul: Therapy, Emotions, and the Culture of Self-Help.” “This means that our emotions have become the moral ground for our actions.” The prevailing mentality, Dr. Illouz said, is: “I feel something, therefore I am entitled to make this demand” or “to withdraw from a relationship.”

This diagnosis isn't new. In 1966, the sociologist Philip Rieff published “The Triumph of the Therapeutic,” a critique of what he saw as a culture obsessed with self-actualization and personal fulfillment at the expense of concepts like duty, virtue and collective obligation. More than a half-century later, with the technology of the internet at our disposal, it has never been easier to make our private feelings public — or to find people who will affirm them and validate them through online engagement.

Of course, plenty of therapists note that the mandates of therapy culture aren't representative of actual, clinical therapy. It's important for clinicians to help patients differentiate between how they're experiencing something and “if that experience is actually being triggered by their own past trauma,” said Traci Bank Cohen, a Los Angeles-based psychologist. She draws a distinction between validating a patient's feelings — making the person feel listened to with compassion and care — and affirming a false reality. But as therapy-speak has left the clinician's room, its remit has expanded, and its subtleties have been lost. We have become more and more used to thinking of ourselves as the main characters in our own lives and other people as the obstacles in our way.

It is easy to be cynical about the proliferation of therapy culture and the attendant self-focus it promotes. But I believe the growing popularity of therapy discourse is less about generational or cultural selfishness than it is about a cultural hunger: the shared need for a framework to talk about the questions foundational to our existence as human beings and a shared sense that the good life relies on more than just our material circumstances.

Historically, the project of making sense of our lives was often dominated by religion. Our churches, our synagogues, our mosques offered answers to life's most wrenching questions: *Why do we suffer? What is my purpose in life? Why do we keep making the same mistakes over and over?* But religious institutions don't have the cachet, or public trust, that they once did.

Americans are leaving organized religion; Pew estimates that 30 percent of Americans were religiously unaffiliated in 2020, a share that may exceed 50 percent by 2070 if recent trends continue. Public trust in civic institutions more broadly — from the political to the journalistic — continues to decline.

For some, the language and worldview of therapy fills that gap. Therapy, Dr. Illouz said, “helps us find meaning in the chaos of our lives. It helps us explain why things are not working and how we may attain salvation.” From that perspective, too, the apparent solipsism of therapy culture — its encouragement to look inward rather than to external authority — may also be its greatest asset: After all, if you don't trust the society around you, your own feelings and perceptions start to look far more reliable than those of anyone else.

Yet it is precisely that rejection of our communal lives that makes therapy culture — at least the version of it on social media and in wellness advertisements — such an imperfect substitute. The idea that we are “authentic” only insofar as we cut ourselves off from one another, that the truest or most fundamental parts of our humanity can be found in our desires and not our obligations, risks cutting us off from one of the most important truths about being human: We are social animals. And while the call to cut off the “toxic” or to pursue the mantra of “live your best life,” or “you are enough” may well serve some of us in individual cases, the normalization of narratives of personal liberation threaten to further weaken our already frayed social bonds. “We are a relational species,” Dr. Cohen noted, adding that we need connection “to really thrive and survive.”

It turns out that we may not be enough — at least not on our own. We need a shared cultural narrative that reflects that fact.

