

The Tide Illusion

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SUMMARY: Are mental health problems on the increase? This article shows that such concerns are not new, more of a recurring theme. It looks at a variety of factors, including medicalization, trends in psychiatry, and social conditions that create this illusion. That being the case, it is suggested that the current awareness of so called mental health issues is, in fact, a positive aspect to contemporary culture that results in more people receiving the help they need.

KEY WORDS: Mental health, history of psychiatry, medicalization, social change

In Britain and elsewhere, concerns about an apparent ‘rising tide’ of mental health issues are commonplace reporting in the press. Jowit (2018), for example, confidently asserts that depression is on the rise. Similarly, Wakeford (2017) talks about a ‘university crisis’, where almost 90% of new students find it hard to cope with the demands of the first year of academia, leading to an upsurge in mental health issues. This paper will argue that, as with so many things on the field of psychiatry, all is not as it seems, and that this phenomenon is far from new. In fact, when viewed in a historical context, the apparent tide of mental ill-health can be seen as a perennial phenomenon. Some of the reasons for the illusion are explored, and the discussion will examine the modern version of this problem and ask whether, due to specific sociopolitical factors, there are grounds for optimism, particularly in relation to the recognition of mental health as a positive development.

In his analysis of madness and literature, Max Byrd points out that ‘every age believes that madness is increasing’ (Byrd, 1974). It seems that every generation wrestles with such issues and viewed within a historical context, the tide illusion is revealed as an ongoing phenomenon. As the late Roy Porter noted, ‘from Georgian