

Harvard Health: Antidepressant Use up 400% in America

It's no secret that a lot of Americans are taking anti-depression medication. The uptick has been so high, though, that it is raising eyebrows and questions about what's causing it and whether or not the medicine is helping.

Over at *Harvard Health*, the publication [reports](#) that,

“According to a report released yesterday by the National Center for Health Statistics (NCHS), the rate of antidepressant use in this country among teens and adults (people ages 12 and older) increased by almost 400% between 1988–1994 and 2005–2008.”

Harvard Health also notes,

“Here are a few other stand-out statistics from the report on antidepressants:

- 23% of women in their 40s and 50s take antidepressants, a higher percentage than any other group (by age or sex)
- Women are $2\frac{1}{2}$ times more likely to be taking an antidepressant than men (click here to read a May 2011 article in the Harvard Mental Health Letter about women and depression)
- 14% of non-Hispanic white people take antidepressants compared with just 4% of non-Hispanic blacks and 3% of Mexican Americans
- Less than a third of Americans who are taking a single antidepressant (as opposed to two or more) have seen a mental health professional in the past year
- Antidepressant use does not vary by income status.”

The publication then goes on to state that some will argue that the incredible uptick in anti-depressant use is the result of under-treatment of depression, while others argue that the pharmaceutical industry is “responsible for the surge in prescriptions.”

Now, most of us know people who have taken anti-depressants. Some credit the medicine with stabilizing their lives and even making life possible. Others have had horrible experiences while still others didn't see much of a change.

What's curious about the article on anti-depressants is that it doesn't ask whether or not there are deeper reasons for our depression. The point about under-treating depression may be legitimate, but what if it's also the case that more of Americans are showing symptoms of depression (or even anxiety) at higher rates than would have occurred in the past? Would that point to a genetic, cultural, or environmental change?

Perhaps a bit of the last two.

When it comes to our environment things have certainly changed a lot since Enlightenment thinkers set out to free man from the constraints of nature through scientific knowledge. There can be no doubt about the success, but we also have to admit that such power has fundamentally altered our social order and divorced us from nature.

If man is at heart a social creature and not an autonomous individual, then changing the social order will have major ramifications. Through industrialism we saw traditional family moved from the farm and small-town shops and trades to large cities and factories. The family, which had traditionally worked together, was now fragmented through work with even wives and children working in different factory jobs. The human bond was broken down.

As technology and the economy progressed, we saw the perpetual fragmentation of families and communities as individuals

commuted multiple towns away for work or members of families moved far away to pursue careers. Today the condition continues as families rarely stay together in the same community.

The economy is itself dependent upon the process of creative destruction for growth and progress as global competition has become the highest end. In such a state, there is a great deal of insecurity regarding employment and the ability to provide for oneself. This condition is very different from that of a farmer or a tradesman of previous centuries who weathered droughts and pestilence, but found ways to survive. In the modern economy, our success is tied to the success of large corporations and the overall economy. We can control less and less in our lives.

Culturally, we've also gone through enormous changes that have culminated in the present. Western Civilization was built upon the Christian religion. Meaning in life and work was derived from that framework of belief. The Enlightenment grew out of the Protestant Reformation, pursuing meaning through reason. Over time, the roots of the West were slowly abandoned, arguably helped along with the empowerment over nature provided by technological progress. We now come to a time when there is no overarching purpose or meaning to life that is understood by the culture at large. For the most part, it is up to the self to find meaning in life.

In the seminal book *The Triumph of the Therapeutic*, Philip Rieff writes about the profoundness of this change:

“...in order to save themselves from falling apart with their culture, men must engender another, different and yet powerful enough in its reorganization of experience to make themselves capable again of controlling the infinite variety of panic and emptiness to which they are disposed. It is to control their dis-ease as individuals that men have always acted culturally, in good faith. Books and

parading, prayers and the sciences, music and piety toward parents: these are a few of the many instruments by which a culture may produce the saving larger self, for the control of panic and the filling up of emptiness."

"Panic and emptiness" would be good ways to describe our modern afflictions of anxiety and depression. Having done away with the traditional, cultural view of the meaning of life and the idea that God was ultimately in control, have we found it difficult to find our meaning for life? Has that increased feelings of panic and emptiness? Such a problem, compounded with the insecurities of the modern economy and the lack of close social ties to family and community might go a long way in explaining the uptick in depression.