

# Reddit Is a Window Into the American Nightmare

The Internet, among other things, is a compendium of human nature; an emergent portrait of everything that we are. Discussion forums in particular, most especially Reddit, are an endless encyclopedia encompassing all of humanity's creativity, kindness, brutality, eccentricity, and boredom. Reddit can occasionally inspire, and the right corners of the site can teach you a lot, but it often demonstrates what kind of person you don't want to be – or what kind of person you might have been, had different circumstances intervened.

Some of the people who feature in these latter Reddit realms – featured mostly in subreddits like [Tales From Retail](#), [JUSTNOMIL](#), and various threads about buffets, debt, consumerism, and other ersatz Americana – merely exhibit poor tendencies compounded by poverty or force of habit. Some of the anecdotes are amusing: there is the miserly old woman who spends half a tank of gas driving around to find a payphone that only charges 25 cents. Some sit on the line between humor and desperation, like the poor renter and compulsive shopper who searches the house for unopened items to return every time rent comes due.

There are plenty of stories of antisocial entitlement: callous manager after callous manager, extreme couponers who hold up a grocery line for 20 minutes and verbally abuse the clerk when an expired coupon doesn't scan. Or on the more extreme end, the [visiting mother-in-law who surreptitiously throws out 200 pounds of hunted elk meat](#) – a year's supply for the family – because her recently adopted veganism doesn't allow her to stay in a house with meat.

And then there are cases that involve senility, mental illness, or evil. There are, for example, the parents who take

their kids to the buffet and force them to eat until they vomit, and then force them to eat some more, in order to “get their money’s worth.” Or the [grandmother who kills her granddaughter because she thinks her parents are lying about a food allergy.](#)

And, of course, there are countless eccentrics: some amusing, some dangerous, and some, lonely and sad, just staying alive. These are just a smattering of the people you’ll read about out there, and the broader conditions in which their miseries play out. They pop up unexpectedly in threads that should be lighthearted, and of course they are often the main characters.

One can laugh at all this, dismiss the most extreme and offensive stories as the Internet era’s tall tales. Many probably are. There is no way to verify them, and many are eventually deleted or redacted. It is impossible to link to every story or vet it; hundreds of similar stories are out there on the web right now. The examples above are a small handful of what I came across in a few hours of disquieting reading. It is emotionally difficult, but otherwise very easy, to find reams of similar content on your own.

To be sure, some of these postings are simply one-offs, particularly those centering around toxic family relationships. But many, especially involving things like debt and finances, hoarding, eating disorders, and similar social dysfunctions, may point at something bigger. What you are doing is driving down the information superhighway into the places where today’s other half lives. You used to have to walk to the poor side of town or buy a copy of a tawdry magazine. Now you can call up American misery on demand.

Much of what you’ll find evinces an unsettling, macabre mix of seemingly malformed consciences, mental illness, social alienation, and quasi-addictions. It’s a window into the underbelly of the American psyche, where a kind of antisocial,

atomizing, soul-distorting individualism is so deeply embedded that it sometimes feels like the foundation on which everything is built.

For example, the relationship between buffets and eating disorders, or big-box stores and hoarding, cannot be neatly explained, but the line can probably be neatly plotted. Such things are probabilistic, not deterministic. Doctors cannot take any given woman and determine whether exposure to airbrushed, pencil-thin models will cause her to develop anorexia. But we know that in a society suffused with such airbrushed models, some number of women in the aggregate will indeed develop anorexia. A population suffused with endless cheap stuff, endless overly processed food, and a dearth of economic security and healthcare – including mental healthcare – will likewise probably develop quite an array of social maladies.

When we call things like alcoholism, eating disorders, and hoarding “diseases,” we mean that they are matters of physiology, not of free-will choice. We do not mean that, like genetically-induced cancers, they arise in a vacuum (though in some cases, they can.) They are in some sense *social diseases*. Most obviously, despair can trigger addiction to alcohol or drugs. There is evidence that the sizing of clothing, and the pressures exerted by the fashion industry, can trigger eating disorders. It is hard to believe that the availability of endless calories and endless stuff does not in some people trigger obesity and hoarding as our lizard brains, finely tuned by evolution for scarcity, clash with the surfeits of modernity.

This is not to excuse behavior that does in fact follow from poor choices or habits. Illness aside, to be influenced is not to be programmed, and it would be wrong to surrender what agency we do have to the idea that, because human responses can be plotted like those of lab rats, that humans therefore harbor no greater willpower.

Yet we increasingly understand that many people are *latently ill* – latent alcoholics, anorexics, hoarders, compulsive gamblers. A society that goes out of its way to trigger these tendencies is not kind or just. A society that pretends they are merely bad choices, and that whatever follows from them is deserved, is positively cruel. A sole focus on personal responsibility demands herculean effort against long odds, and is indeed a kind of complacent bravado. Any of us might bear the seeds of an illness waiting to be triggered or inflamed; any of us have the capacity to do evil. In Christian terms, we pray that we do not undergo the test. In policy terms, we do not run the test. Yet contemporary American culture is a great big testing ground, testing the bounds of greed and willpower and the ability of individuals and families not to crack under soul-crushing stress and deleterious incentives, many of which we euphemize as “economic growth.”

A lot of what you read in these subreddits isn't very different from the vignettes in [Chris Arnade's "Dignity."](#) It is rather eye-opening for someone like me, who grew up securely in the New Jersey exurbs and who now owns a home in Northern Virginia, to read about the sorts of things that go on in the lives of people with a little less money or security. For every character who inspires you not to be like him, there is more than one who fosters empathy. If everyone deserves the exact situation he is in, then there is no need for social policy at all. This, of course, is the low-grade magic trick that constitutes much of American socio-political thinking.

In the end, the overarching question of how to divide the blame between individuals and the system might be besides the point. The Right will argue that too much social policy amounts to rewarding and incentivizing problematic behavior. The Left will counter that food, housing, healthcare, and a modicum of stability and security should not be rewards for people who manage to prove their virtue while drowning. Both

perspectives are in some measure correct, but as the social ills pile up, understanding their metaphysics seems less and less urgent.

News and political chatter in the last few years have begun to notice things like the uptick in deaths of despair and the geographically uneven nature of the post-2008 recovery. But nothing captures the diverse, granular texture of American misery, the sheer wreckage of human life, like a sampling of Reddit. It's an exhausting exercise that should really inspire anger at the degeneration of the American way of life. But most of all, perhaps, it should inspire a deep and terrified humility. A Reddit thread, but for the grace of God, go us all.

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