

The Human Givens – an explanation

Searching for better explanations and treatment options for emotional distress is very confusing. So much that does not make sense. A lot of disagreement as to what it is and what to do about it. What if there were a set of principles that we could all agree on, foundation truths that applied to humans everywhere regardless of race, gender, culture or status? Well, there are, called the 'human givens' – a set of ideas based upon basic truths to which there can be little disagreement; ideas that better explain emotional health.

It is a given, for example, that all humans dream. Perhaps better phrased as all humans experience the rapid eye movement (REM) sleep phase – if they didn't they would die. No exceptions. Nothing to argue about there.

So, what's that got to do with mental health? Well, a lot actually. The REM sleep phase is when mental housekeeping takes place, discharging unfulfilled expectations and freeing up processing capacity for the next day.

What expectations? To answer that I need to define emotion. It is probably a definition you have not heard before. *Emotion is a preparation for action with an expectation that the action will meet a need.* Let's say you are threatened by something; you feel anger and are prepared to fight because you need to protect yourself; or you feel fear and you are ready to run away because you need to be safe.

However, not all emotions are discharged by action, often we inhibit the action of fighting or running away. Sensible, but the emotional arousal still needs to be discharged, if not by action, then metaphorically during the REM sleep phase. Too many expectations and too little purposeful activity leads to excessive time in REM sleep and waking tired and unmotivated. As you can see, it has a lot to do with mental health.

Another thing we can't argue about is a basic law of organic life: *every living organism interacts with its environment to get its needs met.* No exceptions. If it is alive, this law applies. Now humans have more in mind than staying alive, so their interaction is more involved and their needs are more complex. Sufficient to say that emotional health relies on effective interaction, and needs, particularly emotional needs being met. Met appropriately. I say that, because one can stay alive with poor sleep, no friends and a diet of coke and chips, but problems will arise. Fertile ground for addictive behaviours to take root. You can be sure of that.

Understanding REM sleep has also told us something else important. It gives us an insight into the emotional brain which is below awareness and before thought. *We make sense of ourselves and our environment through a process called 'pattern matching'.* We match what we see hear taste touch and smell through our sense organs with a pattern already on file. It's a bit like a bar-code scanner but not that accurate, it is approximate. Sometimes, especially in emotional distress, far too approximate and people either cannot make sense or can't see things as they really are. This can lead to a cycle of poor interaction, needs not being met, lack of purposeful action and poor sleep.

The human givens approach doesn't just provide new insights; this better understanding informs better therapeutic practice. Research in the UK where the approach originated tells us how much better, treatment that is simple fast and effective. You are welcome to explore this site and find out more. I am sure you will agree it makes a lot of sense.

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