

# Jehovah's Witnesses

and

## mental illness

**"Happy is the people whose God is Jehovah!"**

**Psalm 144: 15**

by John Stedman

**NOTE:** The following article was written by a Christian psychiatrist who has had a number of Jehovah Witnesses as patients.

Discussion of Jehovah's Witnesses (JW's) often focuses on doctrinal issues, their errors regarding the person of Christ, His nature and purpose and, especially since 1975, the reoccurring failure of JW prophetic speculation. This is understandable—outsiders rarely know anything else about JW's and thus tend to confine their discussions to concrete issues, usually relying almost totally on the Watchtower (Wt.) publications themselves for "inside information." Only one who has lived the life of a JW can fully describe the experience, an experience which few outsiders have much direct knowledge about.

Increasingly outsiders are looking at the mental health of JW's due to the surfacing of the large number of problems JW congregations are having, involving both personality conflicts associated with the mental health of members and doctrinal differences. Often it is hard for a person who is relatively well-adjusted to understand the misery and plight of others, especially those involved in an authoritarian religion such as the JW's, but anyone who has contact with JW's should understand the serious problems rampant among Witnesses—indeed one must understand these in order to help a JW. This is page 2

especially true of Christians.

Psychiatrists and others who have worked with JW's have been aware for a number of years that both the mental illness rate and the suicide rate is very high among the Witnesses. The writer, when attending professional conventions where the subject of religion and mental health is brought up, has noted that invariably the JW's are brought into the discussion—cases of mental illness among JW's are so common that discussion of religion and mental illness generally involves the JW faith. Indeed the rate is so high that some hospitals are literally "stuffed with JW's"—one mental hospital is nick-named "The Watchtower House" because the number of JW's is so high.

This is common knowledge and the reasons are generally well-known among mental health personnel, but when the typical JW is confronted with this information he often violently refuses to acknowledge its validity. In rebuttal he may parrot the Watchtower's teaching that "... the Christian Witnesses of Jehovah are the best oriented, happiest and most content group of people on the face of the earth. They get along better with each other than do people of any other religion, tribe or social group. They have the least need for psychiatrists." (Awake, March 8, 1960, p. 27; see also Watchtower 1960, p. 95, which says: "The evidence (is) that Jehovah God has a New World Society operating earth wide today, and that it is through it that happiness can be found."; Witnesses tend to accept this as true, even though their

own experience often is contrary to this often repeated misconception.

Interestingly, even in articles about mental illness, the Wt. Society has not, to this writer's knowledge, since 1960 expressed the thought that JW's are "the happiest, etc.", although it was commonly expressed before 1960. The writer, in his experience with literally scores of mentally ill JW's has repeatedly experienced a Witness pouring out literally hours of doubts, troubles and fears (an important part of which is the perpetual personality conflicts within the congregation) and then, a few minutes later, when attempting to proselytize his neighbor, effectively convincing him that "JW's are the happiest, best oriented, most conflict-free group of people on the face of the earth."

Just what is the level of mental illness among JW's? The author is aware of four scientific studies which explore this question. They are as follows:

1. In 1949 Dr. Pescor found that 8% of his total sample of JW's were classified as psychotic. This means the level of psychosis among Witnesses is about 40 times higher than the rate for the population as a whole. His sample consisted of all young male Witnesses who were imprisoned because of refusing to comply with military regulations. Factors that indicate the level Dr. Pescor found is possibly not as high as the actual level include the fact that extremely psychotic Witnesses would probably have been hospitalized and

trius given a medical deferment. Only those who pass the required physical examination would be imprisoned because of refusing to obey the selective service law. Thus Witnesses in poor health would not be included in this sample. It is possible too, that this figure is higher than the real figure because some JW's may have possibly taken alternative service, contrary to the Wt. Society's teachings; and possibly these were better adjusted, as there is a tendency for the more maladjusted to cling to the Wt. Society's teachings. And too, possibly some JW's feigned mental illness in a desire to be released from prison, which does not speak very well for their Christian training. These cases would raise the rate Dr. Pescor found.

But the fact that faking mental illness generally would not release one from prison, but result in reassignment to hospital status in the prison, would reduce this possibility. Of course a hospital assignment may be a more desirable status within the prison and thus JW's may fake to be transferred to the hospital, but due to the negative feelings our culture has for those mentally ill, it would seem that if a JW was going to fake an illness he would fake a physical one and not "craziness."

2. Dr. Janner, a Swiss psychiatrist, examined 100 random Swiss citizens who objected to military service and because of their objections to military service were imprisoned. About 85% of his sample were JW's. Of this 85% Janner found a significant number showed a high level of "fear anxiety, were severely introverted," and were loners or severely neurotic. The majority of his group of JW's were unskilled or semi-skilled workers. 10.4% of all the JW's had been previously convicted of crimes which in about half of the cases were sexual offenses (sexual crimes against children and exhibitionism). The rest were offenses against private property or persons. As a whole Janner concluded that the JW's were "quite colorless persons, and somewhat removed from reality, although some JW's demonstrated intense religious feeling." Janner gave no statistics which compared the mental illness rate of JW's to the population but from his research we can conclude it is quite high.

3. Dr. Spencer, an Australian psychiatrist, examined the records of all admissions to all Western Australia psychiatric hospitals from January, 1971 to December, 1973. Dr. Spencer found 50 cases that were, according to the patients' own admission, active JW's. From his sample, Spencer concluded that the rate of serious mental illness among active JW's is 3 times as high as the rest of the population. Paranoia schizophrenia was found to be about 4 times as high.

This study probably significantly under-recorded the level of mental illness, partially because of the sample base which was used. As Spencer had to rely on the patients' own reporting of his religious affiliation, it is quite possible that a large number of JW's would not admit their true religious affiliation. Most Witnesses who are forced to seek psychiatric services are extremely reluctant to admit they are a Witness. A large number of JW's whom the writer has worked with put down "Protestant" or even "none" instead of their true affiliation. JW's are typically extremely ashamed of the fact that they are mentally ill and often will not be open and honest with the therapist because of the fear that his illness may bring reproach upon the Wt. Society. Often a Witness will undergo intense suffering to protect their beloved Wt. Society. Further, there is a great deal of personal guilt when a Witness becomes mentally ill, regardless of whether the reason is a poor environment, his religion, hormonal imbalance, a brain tumor, or hypoglycemia. The JW generally believes that if a Witness is faithful to the Wt. Society he will not have mental problems because mental problems are evidence of personal shortcomings on the part of the Witness, and usually a religious or moral shortcoming. An active JW should be a happy, well-adjusted person, and "if I am not happy, I must not be pleasing God or I am not doing what God desires of me," (as interpreted by the Wt. Society). Furthermore, the Witnesses are keenly aware of such scriptures as Psalm 128: 1-2, which says, "Happy is everyone fearing Jehovah ... (and) walking in his ways... happy you will be and it will be well with you."

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(NWT) The conclusion is, "if I am not happy it must be because I am not pleasing Jehovah—the problem must lie with me." This belief only further intensifies the JW's guilt and, ironically, only further intensifies the loyalty to what they believe is Jehovah's only organization—"the organization is right, I am the one that is wrong." This is the "I'm not okay, you're okay" life position, which is very difficult to overcome without becoming critical of the organization they so faithfully worship. Thus, often a Witness who has been active for a number of years, or was raised in the movement, can honestly say in his own mind, "I am not a JW—I could not be. JW's are happy, contented people—I am not. Therefore I could not be a Witness, God must have rejected me, God must not see me as one of His Witnesses."

Many Witnesses leave the Witness movement but by and large retain Witness beliefs. Especially are those raised under the influence of the Witnesses in their forma-

tive years essentially Witnesses in belief even though many leave the Wt. Society. Most of those that leave are not included in the statistics of mental illness among Witnesses. Although those who stay probably have more serious emotional problems than those who leave, many who leave are mentally ill. For instance, those who are psychotic tend to leave (or in many cases are forced out of the Witnesses) due to the Witnesses' feeling that they are "demonized," not kosher JW's, or for some other reason, undesirable.

Another reason that Spencer's statistics are probably underreported is that Witnesses are prone to avoid psychiatric treatment, especially institutionalized treatment. The Wt. Society is very critical of the psychiatric profession and professional therapy. Although the official Witness teaching is that it is up to the Witnesses' conscience whether or not he visits a psychiatrist, the undertone in most of the JW literature is strongly against psychiatry and any type of professional mental health treatment. The typical Witness believes that it is either very foolish or blatantly wrong to visit a psychiatrist, and the general Witness ethos is that visiting a psychiatrist is akin to celebrating the holidays, a definite "no-no", but not quite as serious as adultery or murder.

4. The last study this writer is aware of is that done by Dr. Tillyard, an American psychiatrist, who concluded that "The mental illness rate of JW's is approximately 10 to 16 times higher than the rate for the general non-Witness popula-

tion." Tillyard further concluded that "about 10% of the publishers (full members) in the average congregation are in serious need of professional help, even though many Witnesses are able to hide this fact quite well, especially from outsiders." Tillyard's extensive research with the Witnesses caused him to conclude that not only is the mental illness rate extremely high, but the suicide and crime rates are also very high, especially aggressive crimes against persons.

This, then, is the extent of published research about the mental health among JW's. It is an area that clearly needs to be researched, and presently there are several studies under way which should more firmly resolve not only what the rate of mental illness is, but what factors influence the high rate found.

Space limitations prevent going into detail in examining some of the reasons

which have been put forth by various writers as to why the mental illness rate is so high, and especially whether individuals who are mentally unstable are attracted to the Witness organization or the Witness organization itself causes an adherent to become mentally ill. Because the mental illness rate is high both among those born in the movement and those converted, obviously both of these factors are influential. The discussion of these and other issues will be reserved for further articles.

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In studying the high level of mental illness among JW's, there are often numerous objections by Witnesses to the above studies. These objectives will be considered in detail below.

Commonly Witnesses respond to the results of the above studies with the following rationalization: "It is well known that the true Christians will be persecuted for God's name sake—and what is God's name? Jehovah, of course. Thus Jehovah's Witnesses will be persecuted—and these supposed statistics about the high mental illness rate are just another example of the persecution against JW's."

Although generally Witnesses are paranoid about the world's feelings regarding them, by and large, the world could care less about JW's. Many people regard them as somewhat "strange," but most church goers know little more about the JW's than the fact that they refuse to salute the flag and take blood transfusions. Many pastors have commented to the writer that it is very difficult to stimulate the average church goer enough to study the Witnesses' theology in order to be able to present Christianity somewhat effectively to a JW when he comes to the door. Many JW's spend years going from door to door and never receive an effective refutation of their beliefs from a Christian—and the reason is, many church goers simply are not concerned about JW's.

For that matter, how many church goers are anxious to "do a neighbor in" because he is a Quaker—or an Elishaite, or even a Moonite or a devotee of the Children of God? Few of us know enough about these groups to have feelings one way or another about them and indeed few Christians know enough about JW's to realize the pernicious harm they do. To most people, JW's are simply another religion—somewhat strange, but no stranger than Catholicism, Eastern Orthodoxy, or Copticism. The writer, in doing research on JW's called a large Baptist Church in endeavoring to locate a researcher he knew was interested in JW's. The pastor he was talking to (not the researcher he was trying to locate) in response to the query, "I am

doing research on JW's and understand there is someone there who could help me," referred the writer to the local Kingdom Hall! When the writer said he would rather contact someone from the church, the pastor insisted that "the best place to find out about JW's is directly from them, let me get their address for you. I'm sure we have a Kingdom Hall not far from here, let's see. . . here it is. If you call them I'm sure they would be able to help you." Many modernist ministers, especially when

confronted with JW's will respond with "It's a fine religion, if you want to stay a JW, I think that's just fine." One keeping up with the literature about JW's is struck with the fact that in the last 10 years most articles about JW's have been favorable, or at least neutral. I am told that many publishers do not want to handle any anti-JW literature—they see no purpose in criticizing a religion as respected as the JW's.

Although in times past JW's have experienced some degree of persecution—much of which they recognize today was clearly brought about by themselves and their own stubbornness (for example, refusal to pay a small fine or obtain a permit)—JW's have not been persecuted nearly to the degree that a large number of racial, ethnic and religious groups have. Even in Nazi Germany the only reason the JW's were imprisoned was because of their refusal to fight in Hitler's army—and a JW could easily be released if he would just agree to join the army. By and large, the only JW's that were imprisoned were the young, draft age male Witnesses—most Witnesses in Germany remained relatively untouched, although the government did not appreciate their anti-war view. There was no systematic attempt to exterminate JW's as there have been with many racial and religious groups. Thus the paranoid belief that JW's are "persecuted," is largely untrue. Several thorough studies are now underway to determine the extent of persecution against the JW's.

The above writers are all psychiatrists interested in doing research about what causes mental illness, and simply pursuing their research to find information which could help them in understanding mental illness. To assume that the above writers were trying to, by their results, "persecute" Witnesses and thus distort their results so they could do such, is a paranoid response made on the basis of emotion and not any concrete evidence. The fact that the results are probably somewhat under-reported and there is little rhetoric critical of Witnesses, indicates the researchers pursued a rather cursory examination of a fairly obvious conclusion. Any other con-

clusion is clearly unwarranted.

Another common criticism against the above studies by those few Witnesses who are aware of the research is that mentally ill Witnesses are "not really Witnesses, they couldn't be and be mentally ill. A good Witness cannot become mentally ill." This type of reasoning is fallacious, as the following example shows: "All Catholics are very good people. Mary O'Brien is a Catholic. She is a bad person. Therefore she could not be a Catholic because, by definition, all Catholics are good people and since Mary O'Brien is not a good person she could not be a Catholic." My definition of a Witness thus eliminates any exception. Another example will make this more obvious. All Swedish women are beautiful. Felicia Eckhart is Swedish but is ugly, therefore Felicia cannot be a Swede because Swedes are beautiful.

While a JW might define a Witness according to category, this definition is obviously very limited. Of course, it is somewhat difficult to determine who is a "Jehovah's Witness" and who is not. Even if we use the category that everyone baptized as JW is a JW and everyone not baptized a JW is not a JW, we still are faced with the problem of a person who was raised a Witness and yet is not baptized a Witness, thus technically "is not."

Further, what about a person who is baptized a JW and has only been involved with the JW's for a short period of time—a few months or so, where the JW belief structure has had time to permeate his thinking? One notices that Witnesses who are new usually are not given a position in the congregation until they have been baptized for several years. The elders want to insure that Witness theology, doctrine, etc. is fully absorbed by the neophyte. And what about a person who is baptized as a Witness and is active, but is not regarded by his peers as a Witness because of conduct which they do not feel is proper, such as going to college? Witnesses going to college are usually not disfellowshipped, but are, to some extent, ostracized: "He could not be a Witness—he is going to college; I don't care if he is still active and does give talks, he could not be much of a Witness, rejecting Jehovah's marvelous provision to pioneer and spending his time filling his mind with worldly ideas." It is clearly difficult to determine just who is to be counted as a Witness and who is not. One must look at the number of years a person was active, the extent of his association, whether or not the person was raised in the movement, the date of baptism, his involvement in the congregation, official positions, etc., avoiding the dichotomy "Witness—non-Witness", but specifying the involvement. Unfortunately, Witnesses generally will not cooperate in any type of research, especially research which may bring reproach on the Society. Thus it is difficult to examine these demographic factors. The typical JW is not interested in

truth or principles but the image of the Wt. Society, regardless of the level of corruption it is involved in.

While there may be some question in a few cases, most of the JW's the above researchers examined were highly committed to the Witness theological system, committed to the extent that they went to prison for it or identified themselves as Witnesses in spite of being institutionalized at the time. As discussed, the reporting probably represents a much lower rate than actually is the case.

Another claim is made that is that the subjects in the above research would claim they are JW's when this is really not the case. Of the many religions one would want to falsely claim as belonging to, probably one of the lowest on the list would be the JW's. Dr. Tillyard, for example, stated that "In about 10 years experience working in a research capacity for both a large mental hospital and a large circuit court, I have never seen even one case where a non-Witness claimed to be a Witness." Although many people may not feel inclined to persecute Witnesses, they generally do see them as strange or at least different. Further, especially among older people, JW's do have a reputation of being crack-pots or religious fanatics and thus,

among this age group it would be highly unlikely that a non-JW would claim to be such. One with a martyr complex may identify himself with the JW's, but few people would commonly do so in an effort to make their person appear better. As discussed above, though, the opposite distortion is quite common.

In spite of the denial of the above statistics by some lower level JW's, it is this writer's experience that the higher echelon workers are keenly aware of the serious problems. After becoming an Elder, many JW's report it is an enlightening experience—as one Elder stated, "I never realized all of the endless problems the JW's have." For many JW's, promotion to a position where they become aware of the gross unhappiness rampant among the JW's is one cause for later leaving the group.

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Occasionally a JW will claim that he is aware of a study which indicates the mental illness rate is lower among Witnesses than among the population as a whole.

This writer, though, has yet to see any study which hints at this. Usually the claimant states, he "can't find the study" or "doesn't have the time to look for it." In an exhaustive review of the literature, stemming from this writer's 10 years interest in the JW's, he has never come across even one study which indicates that the mental illness rate is average or below average. If these studies exist, it would be invaluable to examine the results. The only studies that do exist, though, that this writer has seen are the above four. In the absence of other material, we have to go on what empirical data is available. Future studies may indicate problems with the above conclusions, but these studies must exist before this possibility can be dealt with.

The reader may wonder, "How can Christians use this information?" First of all, by realizing that one of the main reasons JW's look elsewhere to satisfy their spiritual need is not necessarily because of doctrines but because they are very unhappy spiritually, emotionally, and intellectually, in their congregation. True, some become aware of some of the problems in the JW theology and upon questioning their Elders often get "the cold shoulder," and the inference that "who are you to question information from the Faithful and Discreet Slave?", forcing them to continue questioning at an increased tempo. And there are many exceptions, but the fact that, as a whole, JW's are very un-

happy is often a main motivation to seek elsewhere for a spiritual home. The Scriptures promise us that "Happy is the man that findeth wisdom, and the man that geteth understanding. . . her ways are ways of pleasantness and all her paths are peace. . . and happy is everyone that retaineth her." (Prov. 3: 13-18, KJ). Sooner or later the JW realizes that he must not have "wisdom and understanding." Christians by being aware of this, can offer the kindness and concern that the Scriptures stress should be the trademark of Christians, the concern that Christ, on the Sermon on the Mount so eloquently stressed, the concern that a shepherd has towards a lost sheep, leaving his other 99 to find that *one* lost sheep, and rejoicing when it is found. The illustration of the prodigal son probably fits the situation quite appropriately, especially since most

JW's were at one time church members (and many were members of the evangelical churches). By showing this genuine concern and letting our light shine, we can help those astray find the peace and happiness found only among those who have a personal relationship with Christ and are free of the bondage of man.

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