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Les Témoins de Jéhovah Jehovah's Witnesses

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The Pessimistic Sect's Influence on the Mental Health of its Members : the Case of Jehovah's Witnesses

L'auteur de cet article a tenté de voir dans quelle mesure la structure religieuse et l'environnement social des Témoins de Jéhovah ont une influence sur ce qu'il est socialement convenu d'appeler « la santé mentale ».

L'analyse critique de leurs écrits semble indiquer des fréquences de ce que l'on appelle communément « pathologie mentale » plus élevées que la moyenne. Mais il faut être réservé sur cette affirmation, car ces fréquences sont variables et diffèrent selon les groupes de Témoins et les moments de l'investigation.

L'étude de certains facteurs à l'œuvre au sein de la Société de la Tour de Garde se révèle également utile pour mesurer les influences bénéfiques ou nuisibles à la santé mentale des membres. A ce propos, l'auteur analyse l'opinion courante des Témoins et la position officielle de l'organisation vis-à-vis de la maladie mentale. Il lui semble que deux facteurs importants d'explication du taux relativement élevé de maladies mentales parmi les Témoins de Jéhovah sont le statut socio-économique des membres et l'emprise incompétente des « Anciens » sur ceux-ci.

An extensive study of the influence of the religion known as Jehovah's Witnesses (JW's) on the mental health* of its members clearly finds both positive and negative influences present. Involvement with the Witnesses, as involvement with any other social group, exposes the adherent to factors that both facilitate and hinder emotional adjustment. The effect of the Watchtower (Wt.) Society's teachings on its members is difficult to study because most members are converts and the Wt. movement tends to attract certain types of persons. Even of those raised in the movement, only certain types of individuals elect to remain in the sphere of the Wt.'s influence. It is also difficult to separate the influence of the Wt. from the pervasive tendency for members to be recruited from, and remain in, the lower socio-economic

(*) This article must be read in the light of current sociological discussion on the social definition of mental illness.

classes of society (Cohn, 1955), a tendency which is a direct result of the Wt. Society's teaching. As the topic of the mental health of Jehovah's Witnesses has only been touched upon by other researchers, this discussion is, by necessity, only an exploratory pioneering attempt to examine the effects of Wt. belief and the JW social structure on the Witnesses.¹

The effects of the Wt. teaching depend on the individual member, his personality, and the relationship between his personality and the Wt. environment. We can, however, separate several factors within the Wt. movement which clearly influence mental health. The Witnesses, of course, are prone to relate in their literature those incidents which facilitate one's emotional adjustment, and clearly are factors that aid in emotional adjustment, although these are not necessarily unique to the Witnesses but tend to be common to many smaller religions. First there are many social needs satisfied by belonging to a small cohesive group. While most distinct fraternal organizations satisfy many of the same needs, the Witnesses, in some ways, are able to satisfy them to a greater degree. The exclusiveness — "We are God's people in 'The Truth' — all non-Witnesses are part of 'Satan's system of things' soon to be destroyed," and consciousness of being part of the "New World Society" cause the Witness to see himself as clearly different, this reinforcing in-group cohesion. The Wt. activities reinforce this — one must be baptized, fairly regular at the meetings, and involved in at least token door-to-door and proselyzing activities; and one must be fairly committed to continue in these many activities, although many continue out of sheer habit. Even though most Witnesses are not an active part of the ongoing movement, but passively follow a familiar ritual, they identify themselves with the movement as a whole.

The belief that the Witnesses will have everlasting life on this planet facilitates emotional adjustment, especially in the face of illness, old age and death. Many religions teach a mystical, rather vague, afterlife in some unknown place which is to most believers only a name, usually called heaven. The Witnesses hope not for an afterlife, but an everlasting life in this world. Thus the fear of death is somewhat blurred for most Witnesses, no matter how old they are. As the expectation of the Witnesses has been, at least since 1874, that Armageddon is no more than a few years away (Zygmunt, 1970), most adherents since 1874 have felt they will not die, but pass through the experience of Armageddon, which is confidently felt to occur soon — very soon — (and felt even sooner in times of sickness, misfortune, or trouble as if these very things are signs of its nearness). Survivors of Armageddon are assured of everlasting life, or at least everlasting life until the end of the millennial reign of Christ. Even here the belief prevalent among the Witnesses is that if one passed through Armageddon, there should be no problem passing this last test; thus this last judgment elicits little fear among the Witnesses. Clinical experiences have demonstrated that this belief in, not an "afterlife," but an eternal continuance of

¹ Jehovah's Witnesses are often called just "Witnesses."

this present life in one's present body, in a familiar world, facilitates emotional adjustment, especially in the face of death, sickness or misfortune. This belief, called "Ur delusions" (Masserman, 1953, pp. 324-333) is, in essence, the denial of the eventual reality that one will, someday, die. Observers who work with a large number of chronically ill and terminally ill cases find that patients with a belief in an afterlife tend to fare much better (Chesen, 1972). Conditions which reduce the Ur delusion tend to be associated with rising suicide rate (thus suicide rate is quite high among the retired, those over 65, and the widowed, and those who have recently experienced a death of a loved one, shocking their sensibilities to this reality).

On the other hand, the belief of an "impending Armageddon" also tends to work towards considerable harm. Among the Witnesses it influences their tendency to be less concerned about the taking of human life than non-Witnesses — "after all, most people will be resurrected anyway — death is only a short sleep." After the death of one lifelong Witness who refused to seek medical treatment because of his belief that his illness (which happened to be diabetes) was a result of demons, the Witnesses, feeling that he died "in God's favor and will shortly be resurrected" did not feel as guilty as they otherwise might in accepting his refusal to consult a medical doctor when he was alive.² Relative to the Witnesses' beliefs about blood, it is felt more serious to accept a transfusion than to lose one's life (or less serious to be instrumental in losing another person's life than to encourage him to accept a transfusion) because the "sin" of transfusions is actually believed to be a "higher" sin than murder. When given a choice of what may amount to self-murder or accepting a transfusion, the Witness is taught to risk death and refuse a transfusion. This devaluation of life because of a belief that "if I obey God's law I will be resurrected anyway," may also explain the high murder rate among the Witnesses, although their low socio-economic class and the generally large amount of pent-up hostility that the Witnesses experience are also highly instrumental.

For life to remain meaningful and purposeful, one must have something to work for, live for, and hope for. Whether it be intellectual, emotional, spiritual or practical growth, goal-oriented growth is imperative to mental health. Involvement with the JW's can satisfy all of these need areas. *Intellectual growth* can result from the Wt.'s stressing "taking in knowledge," usually in connection with the required 5 meetings per week and the preparation thereof. The once a month written review gives Witnesses some idea of their progress, and, importantly, a reward for their intellectual accomplishments. Answering at meetings is quite rewarding for many — a reward which encourages intellectual achievement resulting from studying, understanding and repeating what is learned. *Spiritual growth* can result through pondering both doctrinal and metaphysical concepts. To facilitate spiritual growth both prayer and personal study are stressed. Importantly, it is difficult for a Witness to measure his "spirituality." A general sense of well-

² Witnesses usually do, though, consult medical doctors.

being tends to be the indicator used to measure spiritual well-being. *Emotional growth*, too, is considered, although it is not stressed as such and the "growth" is not always in a positive direction. For example, increased commitment and identity with the Witnesses cause the student to identify with them emotionally and, as expected, become defensive against ideas which are considered "non-Witness" or seen as incompatible with Witness theology. The result is often a mistrust of all non-Witness sources of information, even though most of the information published by the Wt. Society is from non-Witness sources.

Practical activities, at least practical relative to religious requirements, are also stressed. At least one meeting per week is devoted to the practical aspects of becoming a better Witness, including improving one's door-to-door presentation, one's incidental witnessing, and, more recently, improving one's family life, budgeting one's money, time, etc. Even here Witnesses are highly goal-oriented. They, as the Wt. Society stresses, should, and often do, have a definite purpose in life. Even if achievement is difficult and tangible rewards are few, the dominant concern of JW's is with convincing outsiders of the validity of Witness theology; although with many, proselytizing is somewhat perfunctorily performed, it is an important part of their general goal-oriented behavior. The Witness theology too, is such where one's purpose is very specific and defined — true, defined by the Wt. Society, but nevertheless defined.

The exact rate of mental illness among JW's is difficult to determine, but it is clear that it is significantly higher than the rate for the population as a whole. There have been relatively few published studies which document this level. One of the most recent was done by Spencer (1975). During the 36 month period from January 1971 to December, 1973, Spencer examined the records of all 7,546 in-patient admissions to all West Australian Psychiatric Hospitals. Utilizing the patients' self-reported religious affiliation, Spencer found 50 cases that stated they were active JW's. Utilizing the Witnesses' statistics of approximately 4,000 members in West Australia and a population of 1,068,469, the ratio of general admissions to the ratio of the JW admissions was determined. Spencer found for all diagnosis a ratio of 2.54 per 1,000 for the population as a whole compared to 4.17 per 1,000 for JW's. The rate for schizophrenia is .38 for the population compared to 1.4 for the JW's. The neurosis diagnosis shows the least increase over the population, .39 for the general population compared to .76 for the JW's. Thus, according to these figures, the incidence of schizophrenia among the Witnesses is about 3 times as high as for the rest of the population and paranoia schizophrenia is about 4 times as high.

There are several reasons to believe even these high rates for JW's are significantly underreported. Spencer had to rely on self-reporting. It was possible that a patient could state he was an active member when he was not, but this is unlikely. The reverse is much more probable. Of the many religions one would want falsely to claim to belong to one of the lowest on the list would be the JW's. This writer, in about 10 years experience working in a research capacity for both a large mental hospital and a large circuit court, has never seen even

one case where a non-Witness claimed to be a Witness.³ Possibly in criminal cases a person may want to claim he is a JW, feeling this religious claim would cause the court to look more favorably upon his case. But considering the Witness teaching that "we are the most hated of all religions," and their general reputation for being "crackpots," religious fanatics, etc., it would seem that even this is unlikely. As the Witnesses play up greatly their persecution, one endeavoring to present a martyr complex may blindly identify with JW's, but would not commonly do so in an effort to make his person appear better. The opposite distortion, though, is quite common. This writer has worked with numerous cases whom he knew from his work in the community to be active JW's (or raised as Witnesses) and who tried to hide their religious affiliation. Especially Witnesses who were committed to a mental hospital, or were charged with felonies, tended to deny their affiliation with the Witnesses. In the writer's work as a therapist, a significant number of Witness patients clearly would never have sought psychotherapy if the writer had not been seen as an active Witness. Witnesses are often ashamed of the fact that they have emotional problems, and will commonly not consult medical help due to the concern of "bringing reproach on Jehovah's organization." The feeling that just being in "Jehovah's organization" should prevent emotional problems is common; its presence is actually a frightening contradiction of the JW faith. This reluctance to seek out professional help does not just include Witnesses with neurotic problems. The writer has worked with a large number of JW's who were clearly psychotic — some in a "catatonic state," suffering from severe depression or even brain damage, who would not consult a psychiatrist because of the fear of tarnishing the Wt. Society's image. Further, many of the hundreds of thousands of persons raised in a Witness environment, active in youth, who later disassociated themselves from the Society (although many later reassociate), often fail to identify themselves as Witnesses. Many of these cases, even though they had a Witness upbringing, and were highly influenced by Witness theology often still accepting the basic Witness belief structure, are not reported in the literature.

Using the same technique that Spencer utilized, this writer estimates that the mental illness rate of JW's is approximately 10 to 16 times higher than the rate for the general, non-Witness population. About 10% of the publishers 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. It is a common experience to hear hours of verbalizations, expressing severe hopelessness, hostility towards both insiders and outsiders, regret and serious doubt from a Witness who 20 minutes later can effectively convince a householder that "JW's are marvelously happy people, happy in God's organization."

³ Because of his interest in the Witnesses all cases claiming to be JW's were carefully researched.

Another study which examined the mental health of JW's was done by Pescor (1949). He found, of the total group of Witnesses he examined, all of whom were imprisoned because of conscientious objection to the Selective Service law in the USA, 16 % were on hospital status, and, of these, 44 % were diagnosed as psychotic and 50 % were chronic medical patients. Thus, 8 % of the total number of Witnesses imprisoned were classified as psychotic. This is about 40 times higher than the rate for the non-Witness population using a psychosis rate of about .2 % for any one year. His sample would be a good cross section of all young male Witnesses, considering that the majority of draft age Witnesses who were drafted went to prison at the time the study was done in the late 1940's. As some JW's took alternative service, contrary to the Wt. Society's instructions, and possibly those who accepted alternative service were better adjusted, the rate Pescor found is likely to be higher than is actually the case among JW's as a whole. Unfortunately, Pescor does not give the percent who were imprisoned compared to the percent who took alternative service, but the number is probably quite small. It is also possible that some JW's feigned psychotic states in a desire to be released from prison; but the fact that this action did not serve to release one from prison, but simply resulted in prison hospital status, would reduce this possibility. It is quite possible, though, that hospital status was a more desirable status within the prison and the Witnesses feigned illness so as to improve the conditions during their prison stay, but this factor would be more likely to increase the number of medical diagnoses not the number of psychiatric diagnoses.

The only other psychiatric study done on JW's is that by Janner (1962). Janner examined 100 random cases of Swiss citizens who objected to military service and were imprisoned in a Swiss prison. About 85 % of the C.O.'s were JW's. Of this 85 % Janner found a significant number who had a high level of fear anxiety, were severely introverted, were loners, or severely neurotic. Of his group, one third were unskilled workers and more than half were involved in some type of semi-skilled trade. Only 3 could be considered semi-professional or professional workers (one technician, one teacher and one college student). Of the JW's 10.4 % had been previously convicted of a crime. Of these, about half were sexual offences (including pedophiliacs and exhibitionists) and the rest were offences against private property or persons. As a whole Janner found the JW's "quite colorless persons, and somewhat removed from reality, although some JW's demonstrated intense religious feelings." Thus, all past studies demonstrate the level of mental illness is well above that of the population. The staff of most large mental hospitals are usually quite familiar with the JW's. One hospital, a doctor told this writer, is "clogged with them." Another mental hospital is even nick-named "The Watchtower House" because it has so many Witness patients.

The fact that JW's are overwhelmingly lower class is a very important factor influencing the mental illness rate. Upper-middle-class

and upper-class members are almost totally unknown.⁴ One branch overseer stated, "of 40,000 Witnesses, I know of only 2 families that might be termed upper-middle class, but no one else. University professors are almost totally unknown." There are very few medical doctors — very few — and probably a fair number of chiropractors. But to be a chiropractor a few years ago required as little as 3 years schooling beyond high school. Even the few JW's with a high school diploma tend to be less serious about the Witnesses. A large number quit high school in the 10th grade or so. Witnesses also tend to marry quite young partly because marriage is one of the few acceptable pursuits open to young Witnesses besides pioneering that do not result in social pressure to conform.

Very few intelligent or well-educated people join the Witnesses, and those few who do involve themselves with the Witnesses generally do not stay. It is difficult for an active, intelligent, aware person to remain a Witness — not because their beliefs are unfounded, but because the Wt. hierarchy tends to want to control the belief structure of its members in even minor areas. Even a Witness endeavoring to serve as an apologist is not tolerated. The authoritarian Wt. hierarchy prohibits religious publishing among members and even discourages most theological research and discussion. JW's are constantly encouraged not to "run ahead of the Society" as though this was even possible according to the Society's own teachings. Many Witnesses, through their independent Bible research, have anticipated major changes that the Society later brought out. Until that time, those who have the audacity to mention the results of their own research have often been severely reprimanded, even if the Society may later on confirm the results of their research. One prominent Witness stated:

"One of the things that bothers me most about the Society is the incredibly arrogant attitude of those at Bethel — refusing to listen to reason or even give credit for the individual members having a mind. Although eventually I feel the Witnesses may become an upper-class religion and will tend to attract the more intellectually oriented, at present it is predominantly a lower-class religion with extremely few college graduates. Actually, virtually everyone I know that is fairly well educated has left them, even though there were a few bright members who were, at one time, in the movement."

Witnesses are encouraged to give up a wide variety of things when they become a Witness, often including their careers, whether it be an artist, a journalist or an executive, and take on menial occupations. Thus the more intelligent or better educated have more to give up. Many avocations not directly connected with their Witness work are dropped, under pressure. Witnesses are commonly discouraged from involvement in a wide variety of things. This researcher has worked with a number of cases where a Witness has, in time, become disillusioned and extremely bitter as a result of what he was persuaded to give up when he accepted Witness teachings. Even if the Witness does not

⁴ There are, though, some wealthy Witnesses.

leave the movement, what he gives up is often later a source of conflict. For example, the Witnesses glamorize pioneering — and those who become pioneers often become disillusioned, wishing they had pursued their previous goals, often feeling that it is too late to resume them.

The more intelligent JW's are less likely to rely on the defence mechanisms which the typical Witness overuses. Further, the value system of the average Witness is often quite antagonistic to the more intelligent members, including their tendency to listen to opposing arguments, to be less suspicious of statements perceived to have their source from "big government, big business or big religion," and especially general intellectual pursuits. Even efforts to find support for the "faith that is within you" are, in effect, squelched. One psychiatrist (who was raised a Witness) stated :

" In my clinical work with Witnesses I have noticed there is a distinct tendency for the better educated, more intelligent, more conscientious Witnesses to have emotional problems.⁵ This is the opposite of what many studies indicate is true among non-Witnesses. This is partially because the more intelligent Witnesses are more aware of the contradictions and problems in JW teachings. This awareness causes them to question and doubt, and this doubt is influential in developing their mental illness. The more naïve Witnesses 'accept everything' (or almost everything) and thus live with less dissonance. And, importantly, there is a lack of acceptance of, and in some cases actually a strong prejudice against, better educated or more intelligent Witnesses on the part of the typical Witness. About the only way one can be fully accepted is if he, in essence, ensconces his education and fully adopts the Witness' essentially lower class culture, including obtaining work which is, more or less, unskilled."

The typical Witness tends to be highly defensive,⁶ relying totally upon the Wt. Society and its explanations, even if it is somewhat foolish and founded on little fact (such as the teaching that the literal heart is the real source of human feelings, emotions, attitudes, and values ; something which cannot be explained by the fact that a patient with a transplanted plastic heart still has feelings, emotions and attitudes) and even a strong tendency not to read non- or older Society publications.

Another important causal element in the high mental illness rate is the Society's practice of discouraging Witnesses from consulting or seeking professional help (Salisbury, 1964, p. 202). Among the quotes from the Wt. publications which illustrate the attitude of JW's towards psychiatrists and psychologists is one which, after citing an experiment where psychologists were to diagnose emotional problems from drawings supposedly done by children (but actually done by chimpanzees) stated : " Without doubt psychologists do know a little about human and animal personalities, but also without doubt they have a lot to learn and they

⁵ This does not mean the more intelligent Witness is more prone to mental illness, only that less intelligent Witnesses solve their problems in different ways — often rebellion and aggression.

⁶ This is why paranoia schizophrenia is so common among them.

think they know more than they actually do, or they would not have let two chimpanzees make such monkeys out of them" (*Awake!* 1954). In answering the question: "Should a Christian consult a psychiatrist?" the *Awake!* of March, 1960, p. 27 said:

"... as a rule, for a Christian to go to a worldly psychiatrist is an admission of defeat, it amounts to 'going down to Egypt for help.' — Isaiah 31:1. Often when a Witness of Jehovah goes to a psychiatrist, the psychiatrist will try to persuade him that his troubles are caused by his religion, entirely overlooking the fact that the Christian witnesses of Jehovah are the best-oriented, happiest and most contented group of people on the face of the earth. ... They have the least need for psychiatrists. Also, more and more psychiatrists are resorting to hypnosis, which is a demonic form of worldly wisdom." (*sic*)

Interestingly, although comments to the effect that "JW's are the happiest..." were at one time commonly made, they have not appeared in Wt. publications, to this writer's knowledge, in a number of years. Evidently the Wt. Society is more aware of the high mental illness rate among Witnesses. This is not surprising in view of the fact that a number of very prominent Wt. officials have become severely mentally ill, including several branch servants, many members of the Society's former legal staff, and even several members of the board of directors. The above article concluded, "Yes, what is needed at such times is not worldly psychiatrists who may wholly ignore the change that the truth and God's holy spirit have made in one's life and who know nothing of their power to help one put on a new Christian personality. Rather, what is needed at such times is a mature Christian in whom one has confidence and who is vitally interested in one's welfare and who will not shrink back from administering needed reproof or counsel so that one may get healed." The advice is much the same in later publications in spite of recent statements such as "whether a Christian will consult a psychiatrist or any other doctor, is a matter for personal decision" (*The Watchtower*, 1975, p. 255). Yet the typical Witness is still quite hostile to consulting any mental health person because of statements such as the one found in the August 22, 1975 *Awake!* page 25 (which in effect reversed the ruling in the 1975 Wt., p. 255): "... Is the turning of people from the clergy to the psychiatrists a healthy phenomenon? No, for it really is a case of jumping from the frying pan into the fire. They are (the psychiatrists' clients) worse off than they were before... That they (psychologists and psychiatrists) are not the ones to go to for help when one is depressed and beset with all manner of problems is to be seen from the fact that suicides among them are twice as frequent as among the population in general."⁷ "... Instead of turning to psychiatrists and psychologists who likewise,

⁷ It should be noted that the Wt. Society often admonishes its followers in one direction and then shortly thereafter appears to encourage the opposite behavior.

⁸ The supposed high suicide rate among psychiatrists is a common misconception, which evidently had its origin in Freeman's article in the *American Journal of Psychiatry*, Vol. CXXIV, No. 6, 1967, pp. 846-847.

for the most part, are without such faith, let lovers of righteousness turn to the Bible for wisdom, comfort and hope . . ." Thus while *The Watchtower* of 1975 (p. 255) states it is up to the Witness' individual conscience whether or not he consult a psychiatrist, this article is written in such a way that it would be difficult for most Witnesses to do so. Thus Witnesses nearly always consult the Elders, who, unfortunately, as will be discussed, are very poorly equipped to deal with emotional problems.⁹

The JW Elders tend to apply one solution for all emotional problems, namely: study and pray more, in short live up more firmly to the dictates of the Wt. Society. Instead of trying to dissipate the intensive guilt that the Witnesses have by channelling it into constructive action and trying to work on whatever the Witnesses are being troubled by, the Elders tend to create more guilt. They often behave in a disapproving manner toward the Witnesses, tending to feel that their role is that of a disciplinarian. Having no training in dealing with people or emotional problems, they typically offer very poor advice.

Elders tend to feel that mental illness is caused by one of two things, sin and demonism, and thus commonly probe the Witness for sins he may have committed (which usually results in intensifying any guilt feelings). Elders often, but clearly not always, threaten to disfellowship or put the Witness on probation in spite of the fact that the Witness is often submissively seeking help. Often the very mention of "demons" is quite frightening to a Witness. Instead of receiving reassurance, comfort and positive helpful feedback, the Witness tends to be frightened and, at least later, resentful. This researcher has worked with many cases where the suggestion of "demon influence" has been the factor that caused a neurotic Witness to become completely psychotic. The concern over demonism is partially the result of the Witnesses' lower class background and the tendency for JW's to come from the more fundamentalist religions, and not necessarily a result of the Wt.'s explicit teaching, although the Wt. does little to counteract it. The most tragic result of the concern over demonism is a tendency to focus away from the true problem and on to such things as finding the "source" of the demons.

The Elders tend to have little insight into inter-personal dynamics. They recognize the needs of eating and sleeping (but even here they tend to glamorize sacrifices Witnesses make for their religion), but refuse to accept the validity of other basic needs, especially ego needs. As Witnesses are discouraged from seeking satisfaction of these needs outside of the congregation, they seek them within the congregation. This typically creates power struggles, constant verbal battles and personality conflicts. JW's tend to be both highly critical of the world, which they clearly see does not follow their set of rules, and highly critical of fellow Witnesses, who also fail to live up to the ideal picture of a Witness painted by the Wt. Society. One Witness stated to the

⁹ This is partly because the elders have no or little training in the laws of human behavior.

writer that "95 % of the Witnesses are very corrupt people — but that still does not mean it is not God's organization. Israel was also very corrupt, but that still did not change the fact that they were God's people." As a result of the frustration in satisfying their ego needs in the congregation (especially the need to be accepted, looked up to, respected, etc.) Witnesses typically withdraw into themselves, channelling inward the hostility which results from their frustrated attempts to satisfy these needs, creating depression and hostility which sometimes erupts into very violent, aggressive behavior. This is one explanation for the high murder rate and the large number of aggressive crimes against persons found among the Witnesses.

JW's are required to follow strictly all dictates, however minor, from the Wt. headquarters. Love and acceptance tend to be conditional upon rigid adherence to rules established by a few. Little consideration is given to the necessity for children to learn from their own decisions in view of the fact that growth requires learning from one's failures as well as successes. Witnesses are pressured to do things correctly the first time, if indeed they are expected to do something a first time. More recently the Wt. Society has stressed the need to examine the sinner's attitude, but for the past 20 years, in many congregations, if certain sins were committed — especially sexual sins — disfellowshipping was automatic, no matter what the sinner's attitude was. True, evidence of repentance is supposed to be taken into consideration, but it would normally be expected that at a disfellowshipping hearing the accused would be defensive, and any signs of defensiveness — a common reaction in this situation, especially when someone is being confronted with three Elders — tends to be misinterpreted as "displaying an unrepentant attitude," or even "attempting to justify the sin." Thus a normal and expected reaction is misconstrued, and an expected and necessary attempt to maintain one's own ego intact is seen as "evil, selfish and unrepentant." Only those who have a talent for turning most of their hostility inwards have, at least in the past, a good chance of escaping disfellowshipping.

Another common assumption is that a Witness who is mentally ill has displeased his Creator and thus has incurred the wrath of God, similar to the medieval idea. The Witnesses rarely phrase their belief in this way, but normally verbalize that the one mentally ill has displeased Jehovah and as a result Jehovah's holy spirit "has been removed" from the person. One who is a Witness presumably has Jehovah's holy spirit, and doing something to displease Jehovah merits the removal of His spirit. This concept often leads to a general lack of sympathy or concern on the part of most Witnesses towards their mentally ill brethren. One manifesting any symptoms of mental illness or emotional disorder is thus often seen as having "done something wrong," is poor association, and thus one to be avoided. Both the belief that human frailties can cause the removal of God's holy spirit and the resultant social withdrawing (or social aloofness) tend to intensify the mentally ill Witnesses' adjustment. Often, Witnesses who become mentally ill and seek out professional help are more intelligent than

the average Witness and yet more conscientious, endeavoring conscientiously to live up to the Wt. Society's high standards, standards that few Witnesses can live up to. Criticism elicits guilt which is seriously intensified when the symptoms that result from the guilt are construed to result from withdrawal of God's holy spirit because of one's personal shortcomings.

Summary

It is a common observation among mental health personnel, supported by all published studies, that the mental illness rate among JW's far surpasses that of the population as a whole. Many factors are found to contribute to this — JW's tend to recruit individuals with emotional problems; there is a great deal of pressure to conform within the congregation, and there is a belief structure which clearly causes emotional turmoil. The fact that JW's are recruited from the lower socio-economic statuses of society and tend to seriously alienate and often force out of the movement the more intelligent and better educated members is also highly instrumental in contributing to the mental illness rate. Once a JW develops emotional problems he is actively encouraged to avoid accepting "worldly advice" either from secular books or secular mental health personnel. The psychiatric profession as a whole is severely criticized, and Witnesses are encouraged to consult only their Elders, most of whom are poorly equipped to deal with most normal interpersonal relation frictions let alone what might be termed neurotic and psychotic maladjustment. In dealing with members, Elders tend to offer poor advice and rely on punitive criticism or threats ("If you do not... you will not survive Armageddon...") to change behaviour. This approach typically elicits increased guilt and/or a high level of aggression in the Witnesses. This factor is probably influential in the high rate of aggressive crimes found among Witnesses.

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