

## **What Causes Mental Illness?**

Very often when clients begin experiencing mental health symptoms (e.g., depression, anxiety, dramatic mood alterations), the natural question to a mental health professional involves the cause of these symptoms. Did I inherit traits from my parents or other family members? Is my dysfunctional childhood the reason I am struggling with these mental problems? The answer to the etiology (cause) of mental illness is not nearly as clear-cut as most clients would like it to be in order to understand their complications. Furthermore, an inordinate focus on the cause of the client's problems may impede coping and progress.

When I am explaining the development of mental illness to my psychotherapy clients, I start by describing the concepts of nature and nurture. "Nature" refers to heredity and the genes that are biologically transmitted from parents to their children. "Nurture" refers to the individual's environment (family, culture, regional) in critical stages in their maturation such as childhood and adolescence.

I proceed to discuss how neither nature (heredity) nor nurture (environment) are singularly responsible for the manifestation of mental illness; both are usually present to result in emotional and behavioral problems. Nature and nurture interact in a way I like to call "The Light Switch Metaphor". Essentially, the individual inherits the biological vulnerability to depression or anxiety meaning they "have the light switch inside of them". However, an event in the client's environment must occur to "turn the light on."

I have learned that sharing this information can be very liberating to clients. Frequently, clients search to pinpoint and occasionally blame their struggles on others or society. When they are able to grasp the idea of a process involved in the emergence of symptoms, many can begin

to focus on current coping skills instead of the anger of blame on the past. There is an additional benefit to counseling produced by the scientifically demonstrated “Light Switch Metaphor”. The metaphor helps clients realize it will take time to learn how to understand and deal with their mental illness because there was a similarly complicated route to its development.

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