

Erich Fromm's Approach of Mental Health in Modern Society

Dr. Naushaba Anjum

Assistant Professor,
Aligarh Muslim University,
Aligarh, India

Abstract

The social psychologist and humanistic philosopher Erich Fromm was very much determining to exploration of the deep ills of modern society, and how overcome from them. Fromm's primary emphasis is on evaluating the sanity of contemporary society, which he suggests often deny its citizen's basic human needs of productive activity, self-actualization, freedom and love. He suggests that the mental health of a society cannot be assessed in an abstract manner but must focus on specific economic, social and political factors at play in any given society and should consider whether these factors contribute are conducive to mental stability. Fromm's foremost interests were analysing social systems and their impact on the mental health of the individual as well as society. In this way he reaches further and asks: "*Can a society be sick?*" He finds that it can, arguing that Western culture is immersed in a "pathology of normalcy" that affects the mental health of individuals.

Keyword: Erich Fromm, Humanism, Karl Marx, Mental health, Sanity.

Introduction

Fromm is a social psychoanalytic visionary moralist. The ideal essence of man being in conflict with his existential conditions cause psychic tensions to arise as a matter of the fact of his existence. A modern society in this way to stop someone from doing something that is fulfils the needs of human essence. Its result into the loss of physical and psychic energy that is required for the conciliation of the struggle for the existence. This, in turn, leads to a situation of what Fromm calls as madness. Mental illness consists of at the failure of people themselves can bring out of himself from his own abilities as such development.

The criteria of mental health are a universal one, valid for all, of giving a satisfactory answer to the problem of human existence.

Discussion

The condition of mental health depends to some level on individual factors such as absence of brain tumors, functional families, 'healthy' cognitive structures, but it is highly valuable question of what society makes possible. Mental health cannot be defined as the modification of the individual to society; for certain extent it has to be defining in terms of the adjustment of society to the needs of man. Fromm says:

“Mental health is characterized by the ability to love and to create, by the emergence from incestuous ties to clan and soil, by a sense of identity based on one’s experience of self as the subject and agent of one’s powers, by the grasp of reality inside and outside of ourselves, that is, by the development of objectivity and reason.”(Fromm E, 1955, p. 69)

The experience of mental disorder for individuals can be extremely painful, even causing death. Madness for them is not a social construct. It is an experience within themselves as individuals, and it is very real. Empirically there is similarity between traditional ideas of locating madness within the individual and the individual’s experience of it. Fromm’s pathology of normalcy is needed to go beyond from the conception of madness to deal with the issue of social madness. It may be the individual struggling to maintain sanity is the center of insane societies and the normal functioning of society is actually pathological

The positive mental health is linked with in a range of developmental outcomes, including better health, education; improve earnings, improved relationship, chilled care, good social relations and quality of life. The positive mental health is also fundamentally to coping with adversity. On the other hand, poor mental health under an individual’s capacity to realize their potential, work productively and make a contribution in their community.

The basic human need for the human being is too judged, to be self-worth, self-esteem, self-confident that give one a sense of self-value, self-satisfaction etc. The realization is posited as a result of self-esteem. The freedom to be, essential freedom, does not appear

in the psychological area. A large number of the inability of the mental illness to perform the common tasks of life is supposed to be the result, not of lack of essential freedom, but of low self-esteem. The need to actualization potentially known only in the unknown, beyond the limitation of ego is not reflection. This concept of being true to one self is considered by the glow of satisfaction experienced in the elusive self-esteem. Fromm has a clear idea of what is favourable for a “sane” society and which ways of being related have productive effects on mental health, on human growth and on the successful outcome of human beings: by actively being related to reality, to others and to oneself with reason and love.

Mental Health of Society

Mental health implies belief in a positive set of moral standards, principles and a view of the reason of one’s life. A healthy body has a non-diseased brain. The mental health is the absence of mental illness; it is closely connected with physical health. Fromm says:

“Mental health is defined here as the absence of mental illness. The logic of this concept is that a person is healthy if he is not ill, hence we need to be concerned primarily with illness, because the very absence of it is enough to be sure that there is mental health. This tendency to define health in terms of absence of illness is quite widespread among the general public, among physicians and among psychiatrists. However, this negative definition of health makes a great deal more sense with regard to somatic illness than with mental illness, because as far as the body is concerned, we have at least the relatively satisfactory picture of its anatomy and of its normal physiological functioning. We have something definite to start out with, and hence there is some meaning to define illness as a deviation from the “normal.” (Fromm E, 1961, p. 1)

Physical health and mental health are closely associated through various mechanisms. The importance of mental health in the maintenance of good physical health and in recovery from physical illness is well communicated. Mental health status is a key consideration in changing the health status of a community.

“To speak of a whole society as lacking in mental health implies a controversial assumption, contrary to the position of sociological relativism held by most social scientists today. They postulate that each society is normal inasmuch as it functions, and that psychology can be defined only in terms of the individual’s lack of adjustment to the ways of life in his society.” (Fromm E, 1961, p. 12)

The study of healthy personality was ignored for a long time in psychology; in its place, mental illness was broadly examined. However, a growing number of researchers have made us become familiar with the capacity for growth and change in the human personality. Many psychologists have taken a new look at human nature and observed a different type of person from that described by psychoanalysis and the traditional schools of psychology. Whereas behaviourists see individuals as passive responders to external stimuli and psychoanalysts see people as victims of biological forces and childhood conflicts, the humanistic psychologists can attempt hard to study the progress from normality to healthy personality.

Fromm gives a clear image of the healthy personality. Such a person, he says, loves fully and is creative. He has highly developed powers of reason to perceive the world and the self objectively, and he possesses a firm sense of identity that is rooted in the world. The world is the agent of self and destiny, and is free of incestuous ties.

“If follows... that mental health cannot be defined in terms of the “adjustment” of the individual to his society, but, on the contrary, that it must be defined in terms of the adjustment of society to the needs of man, of its role in furthering or hindering the development of mental health. Whether or not the individual is healthy, is primarily not an individual matter, but depends on the structure of his society. A healthy society furthers man’s capacity to love his fellow men, to work creatively, to develop his reason and objectivity, to have a sense of self, which is based on the experience of his own productive powers. An unhealthy society is one, which creates mutual hostility, distrust, which transforms man into an instrument of use and exploitation for others, which deprives him of a sense of self, except inasmuch as he submits to others or becomes an automaton. Society can have both functions; it can further man’s healthy development, and it can

hinder it; in fact most societies do both, and the question is only to what degree and in what directions their positive and negative influence is exercised.” (Fromm E, 1961, pp. 72-3)

Fromm calls the healthy personality the productive orientation, a concept comparable to a grown-up personality and self-actualizing person. It represents the full understanding of human potential. The word ‘orientation’ here indicates a general attitude or viewpoint that encompasses all aspects of life. Being productive means utilizing all of one’s powers and potentialities and is synonymous with terms such as full functioning or self-actualizing. Four additional aspects of the healthy personality are included in the productive orientation: productive love, productive thinking, happiness, and conscience. Productive love comprises an equal relationship in which the partners maintain self-identity and independence. This concept involves care, responsibility, respect, and knowledge of the other.

Productive philosophy involves a close relationship between the object of thought and the thinker such as the person can study the object in an objective, respectful, and kind manner. Fromm supposed that all great discoveries have behind them such productive thinking in that there is anxiety to evaluate objectively the totality of the problem.

Pleasure is a significant outcome of living within the productive orientation. It is a situation thought to boost energy and completion of one’s potentialities. Productive people are happy people.

Fromm talks about two types of conscience: authoritarian and humanistic. The authoritarian conscience represents an internalized outside authority such as parents. Parents regulate our behaviour through fear of punishment for violating particular moral law. This is however counterproductive to productive living and the opposite of the humanistic conscience, which is the voice of the self, internal and individual, rather than the voice of an external agent. Thus, the productive, healthy personality is self-directed. Fromm says:

“The concept of mental health follows from the very conditions of human existence, and it is the same for man in all ages and all cultures. Mental health is characterized by the ability

to love and to create, by the emergence from incestuous ties to clan and soil, by a sense of identity based on one's experience of self as the subject and agent of one's powers, by the grasp of reality inside and outside of ourselves, that is, by the development of objectivity and reason." (Fromm E, 1961, p. 69)

The productive orientation is an ideal objective of human development and it has not yet been attained by any society. Fromm visualized this society as one in which no one exploited or manipulated the other; in its place the objective is the highest development of the self. In this society, our humanness is to be the centre and the purpose of economic and political systems and the goal will be to advance human growth and full functioning. The principles of this society are love, harmony, unity, the contribution of each person in his or her own society, and the productive exercise of every human being. Fromm believes that it is not likely we reach complete productivity in our present social structure but that it is possible to attain partial productivity.

Many distinguished thinkers have collectively accepted the nature of a healthy personality to consist in healthy persons using their subjective view of reality on the basis of behaviour. Some propose that work is crucial and others make no mention of work at all. Moreover, these theorists differ on the main inspiring force in life. Agreement however abounds with reference to healthy persons rationally directing their behaviour and being in charge of their destiny, having self-awareness, being anchored in the present, and increasing somewhat rather than reducing tension all the way through seeking fresh challenges and experiences.

The approaches of many thinkers to healthy personality differ not only for different persons, but also for the same person at different ages. Our needs for morals change through life. One model may be successful at the age twenty but not at age forty. We may not remain fixed as we develop from one stage of development to the next. One may ask the question, how we find the road to healthy personality at each stage of development. The reply may lie in having the freedom and internal security to experiment with different models of healthy personality to decide which one works for us.

“The moral problem of mankind in all past history has been the problem of good and evil. Some philosophies and religions have stressed good, others have stressed evil, most have seen the conflict between the two forces, but whatever one’s view on the relative weight of good and evil in the human soul is, evil is human as good is human, and hence we can say that even the most evil man is not outside of humanity.” (Fromm E, 1961, p. 4)

The questions such as these transcend the traditional boundaries of psychology. Yet these same questions, though basically personal and spiritual, signify our human mission. How can we classify ourselves as human beings, as psychologically healthy and productive beings? Existential analysis is a positive psychotherapeutic move toward that which first focuses on the fact that we are spiritual beings, oriented towards the investigation of its significance and followed by its constructive emphasis on the endless potential and possibility within each of us to transform our suffering into healing, strength and enduring health. Erich Fromm wrote,

“Psychology can show us what [human beings are] not. It cannot tell us what each one of us, is. The soul of [human beings], the unique core of each individual, can never be grasped and described adequately... the legitimate aim of psychology thus is the negative, the removal of distortions and illusions, not the positive, the full and complete knowledge of a human being.” (Fromm E, 1963, p. 195)

For Fromm Marxism is a direct link between healthy societies free from capitalist alienation and a strong system of education. In *The Sane Society*, while interpreting Marxism for a popular audience, he wrote, “a sane society must provide possibilities for education, much as it provides today for the schooling of children.” (Fromm E, 1955, p. 346) Education as a force for confrontations to fake consciousnesses makes people aware of ideological exploitation and teach them for participatory democracy. In such a democracy, he claimed, people get back control over the social, economic and political system to make “optimal human development and not maximal production the criterion for all planning.” (Fromm E, 1968, p. 101) The psychologist wanted to understand how psychology intervened to construct a social character that focuses on the power of

automaton conformity. Children or young people cannot overcome the difficulty entailed in this form of learning. In Fromm's opinion:

“The fact that we aim primarily at the usefulness of our citizens for the purposes of the social machine, and not at their human development is apparent in the fact that we consider education necessary only up to the age of fourteen, eighteen, or at most, the early twenties. Why should society feel responsible only for the education of children, and not for the education of all adults of every age? Actually, as Alvin Johnson has pointed out so convincingly, the age between six and eighteen is not by far as suitable for learning as is generally assumed. It is, of course, the best age to learn the three R's, and languages, but undoubtedly the understanding of history, philosophy, religion, literature, psychology, etcetera, is limited at this early age, and in fact, even around twenty, at which age these subjects are taught in college, is not ideal. In many instances to really understand the problems in these fields, a person must have had a great deal more experience in living than he has had at college age. For many people the age of 30 or 40 is much more appropriate for learning in the sense of understanding rather than of memorizing-than school or college age, and in many instances the general interest is also greater at the later age than at the stormy period of youth. It is around this age also at which a person should be free to change his occupation completely and hence to have a chance to study again, the same chance which today we permit only our youngsters.” (Fromm E, 1955, p. 346)

Mental illness begins before adulthood and frequently continues through life. Improving mental health in early life will reduce inequalities, improve physical health, and reduce health risk behaviour. Mental health increases life expectancy, economic productivity, social functioning and helps protecting and promoting mental health across generations. Promotion and prevention are also important in adulthood, with people in later life having specific needs. The mental health strategies will improve well being of people and resilience to their mental illness.

Concluding Remarks

All people of society have a role to play in improving the mental health of the society just as physicians are playing important role for the promotion of physical health. Many psychiatrists already adopt a public mental health approach in their work when assessing the needs and assets of their local populations. They inform commissioners of the expected prevalence of specific disorders while anticipating levels of service provision, as well as opportunities for health promotion. Clinical engagement in commissioning for public mental health is essential to ensure that effectiveness, quality, safety is maintained by the physician, and the waste of resources is avoided. Psychiatrists, similarly, could have a key role as advocates and leaders for public mental health. All health professionals should be involved in informing local and national policies and actions and in local implementation of public health policy.

For all these reasons, policies and funds to promote public mental health are needed, as well as dropping associated personal and social costs. Such investment will lead to important economic savings, which will have an important role in wider economic recovery. Social costs rise from the lack of such investment. Cost-effective involvements exist to both prevent mental illness and to promote wider population mental health initiatives that complement the treatment of mental illness. The public mental health action will reduce the present and future disease burden and cost of mental illnesses.

Healthy persons are capable of autonomous growth and most importantly their lives for the most part unaffected by childhood events. There is exists in an inherited tendency for psychological and mental growth and actualization, an integral natural part for motivation for health of mind.

The effects of these upper approaches to healthy personality differ not only for person to persons, but also for the same person at differently in different ages. Due to changing human nature, our needs also changes from beginning to end, life suggesting one model may be effective at the age twenty but not at age forty; we may not remain stagnant as we develop from one stage of development to the next level.

Thinkers of different ages or group have shared their understanding about the nature of healthy personality as well as healthy society. The analysis of thinkers shows agreement and disagreement among the theories. Some disagree that perception must be objective while others indicate that healthy persons use their subjective views of reality as on the basis for behaviour. Some suggest that work is vital and others make no mention of work at all. Moreover, these theorists differ on the major motivational forces in life. Agreement abounds with respect to healthy persons and healthy society rationally directing toward their behaviour and being in charge of their destiny having self-awareness, being anchor in the present, and rising rather than dipping tension through seeking new challenges.

References

1. Fromm, E. (1961.) *The Humanist Concept of Mental Health* Mexico: presented at the Primas Jornadas Universitarias pro Salud Mental at the UNAM.
2. Fromm, E. (1955). *The Sane Society*. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul Ltd.
3. Fromm, E. (1947). *Man for Himself: An inquiry into the psychology of ethics*. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul Ltd.
4. Fromm, E. (1941). *Escape from Freedom*. New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston, Inc,
5. Fromm, E. (1963). *The Dogma of Christ and Other Essay on Religion, Psychology and Culture*. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul Ltd.
6. Fromm, E. (1968). *The Revolution of hope: Toward a Humanized Technology*. New York: Harper and Row Publishers.
7. Fromm, E. (1951). *Psychology and Religion*, New Haven: Yale University Press.
8. Fromm, E. (1963). *Marx's Concept of Man*. New York: Frederik Ungar, Publishing Co.
9. Fromm, E. (1978). *To Have or to Be*. London: Jonathan Cape.
10. Fromm, E. (1978). *The Crisis of Psychoanalysis*. England: Penguin Book Ltd.