

Book of the week: Good Reasons for Bad Feelings by Randolph M. Nesse

Psychiatry is the least successful branch of [medicine](#). Unlike other medical practitioners, psychiatrists don't have any reliable biological tests with which to confirm their diagnoses. Indeed, the whole concept of psychiatric diagnosis is a vexed issue and many would argue that there have been no significant advances in psychiatric treatment for decades.

The number of people suffering from mental illness — especially in developed countries — is placing enormous strain on largely inadequate care systems. Clearly, psychiatry is underperforming. What can be done to achieve better results? Perhaps psychiatrists need to rethink their discipline.

In *Good Reasons for Bad Feelings*, American psychiatrist and research scientist Randolph M Nesse makes a compelling case for locating mental illness within an evolutionary frame-work. His book is wisely subtitled *In-sights From the Frontier of Evolutionary Psychiatry*. This is a relatively new field and it's too early to ascertain whether it will have a significant impact on the way psychiatry is practised, but given the indisputable power of Darwin's thinking, one can be reasonably optimistic.

He contends that emotions have been “selected” because they increase the chances of survival and the transmission of genes from one generation to the next. Mood elevation in favourable circumstances allows individuals to take advantage of opportunities. On the other hand, when circumstances are unfavourable, lowered mood will reduce risk-taking and wasted effort, and encourage revision of goals and strategies. Unfortunately, moods can become dysregulated. We can

experience too much or too little. This applies to good moods as well as bad. Too much good mood (mania) can be as debilitating as too much bad mood (depression).

Some emotions are particularly prone to dysregulation. Anxiety, for example, encouraged our ancestors to avoid dangerous situations; however, it obeys what Nesse calls the “smoke detector principle”. Smoke detectors are usually extremely sensitive and can be triggered by burnt toast. Living with this trivial inconvenience is preferable to the alternative: a delayed alarm when the fire is real. In much the same way, for our ancestors the benefits of being excessively reactive far outweighed the costs. Experiencing frequent false alarms was preferable to being killed by a predator. We are predisposed to become anxious for good reason. This could explain why anxiety disorders are so common.

Consideration of why particular emotions were selected and what purpose they served can be very illuminating. When people are suffering from depression, they are usually urged to “keep going”. Perseverance is widely acknowledged as a valued attribute. Under certain circumstances, however, it may be better to simply give up, because depression is telling you that your goal is unachievable.

Our foraging ancestors would not have benefited if they had continued searching for berries when most had already been picked and consumed. Sometimes decreased motivation is nature’s way of moving you on.

This approach is philosophically attractive. It erodes the traditional distinction between normal and abnormal — a distinction that has led to the stigmatisation of “mental patients” for centuries.

"If men took a long time to orgasm this would also diminish the likelihood of reproductive success."

David Sexton

As one would expect, evolutionary psychiatry has a great deal to say about sex. Men, for example, tend to experience premature ejaculation whereas women tend to experience delayed orgasm or difficulty achieving orgasm. This difference has clearly been shaped by evolutionary pressures. If women climaxed swiftly and orgasm was followed by a period of “sensitivity”, making continued intercourse uncomfortable, then getting pregnant would be difficult.

Similarly, if men took a long time to orgasm this would also diminish the likelihood of reproductive success. Orgasmic disparities between the sexes are a reminder that evolution is all about the transmission of genes — not our personal satisfaction.

For many years Freudian psychology was rejected by mainstream academics; however, evolutionary psychiatry provides plausible reasons for why psychoanalytic defence mechanisms like repression exist — sometimes we need to deceive ourselves to conceal our selfish motivation from others; we function better if upsetting thoughts are kept out of awareness; banishing some desires into the unconscious is good because only a small number of our desires can ever be satisfied.

Story continues

Good Reasons for Bad Feelings is an excellent and timely account of the history, development and implications of evolutionary psychiatry. Although psychiatry has many problems, with a little help from Darwin its future could be very promising indeed. Evolutionary psychiatry has the potential to refine research agendas, resolve controversies, deepen our understanding of mental illness and (dare we hope) inspire new and more effective treatments.

Dr Frank Tallis is author of [The Incurable Romantic and Other Unsettling Revelations](#) (Abacus, £9.99)

[Good Reasons for Bad Feelings: Insights from the Frontier of Evolutionary Psychology](#) by Randolph M. Nesse (Allen Lane, £20)