

Change and Maturity

*Exploring the McFall
Method of Changework*

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Introduction

It's a mess out there. Stress, anger, resentment, hostility, and outright violence are now features of everyday life. The economy is struggling, money is short for many, and every day that passes we appear to get better at hating each other for this or that. There have certainly been times in our history when we've been more stressed, and dysfunctional, but it's been a while.

You might even be inclined to tell yourself that this is as bad as it could possibly get, but based on what we're willing to do, and say to each other on any given day, it's hard to believe that. It's a mess out there, and there's every reason to believe it's going to get worse. In the middle of all this, there is a storyline coming at you that's trying to explain what's gone wrong.

The story line is a detailed explanation of a very problematic, and worsening mental health crisis. Regardless of the angle, the story suggests that we're stressed, isolated, and unhappy. That the last several years simply wore us down to a point that we're struggling to cope with the pressure of the lives we live, and the world we live in.

That we're losing our sense of meaning, and that many of us have simply given up, and checked out. The story suggests that depression, and anxiety are increasing steadily over time, and that aggression, and violence are not an if, but a when. And finally, we're told that the mental health field is overwhelmed, and there aren't enough professionals available to work with the people who need help.

At this point, I should tell you that I've been a C-suite executive with two of the largest for profit behavioral health providers in the United States. I've had direct responsibility for many hundreds of clinicians, working in multiple states, serving many thousands of patients each month.

All total, I've worked in the mental health field for more than 25 years, and I spent all of that time trying to find more efficient, and effective treatments for mental health issues. I've been lucky enough to work with some of the most creative people in the business. All of them devoted to getting effective services to the people who needed them.

For more than two decades this was my mission, and for the most part, I loved my work. Having said all this, I need to tell you the conclusion that I've at. I don't believe we're in the middle of a mental health crisis. I believe we're in the middle of something else. To find treatments, strategies, and programs that were useful and effective, I had to develop an particular ability.

I had to be able to quickly, and completely let go of ideas that a moment earlier I thought were true. I had to develop the ability to see past my education, my training, my assumptions, my effort, my fears, and even my hopes, and acknowledge what actually worked, and what didn't. And I had to do this regardless of what I thought, or how I felt about it.

Only by seeing reality as it was, not as I wanted it to be, could I arrive at something that would be useful and effective for other people. With this in mind, consider for a moment the possibility that what we believe to be a "mental health crisis" may, in fact, be something else.

We're taught, and told, that issues such as depression, anxiety, and behavioral disturbance are the product of a conglomeration of influences. Whether it's a chemical imbalance, negative thinking, lack of social support, or environmental stress, these issues interact in a way that results in the symptoms that we identify as a mental health disorder.

But I want to invite you to consider something new. I want you to consider the idea that the majority of what we call mental health disorders, as well as the "mental health crisis" all around us, are in reality the result of a pervasive lack of maturity. After spending more than two decades in the mental health field, I no longer believe that what we're experiencing is a "mental health crisis".

What we have instead is a crisis of maturity, brought on by changes in our culture, our society, and in ourselves. As human beings, it's hard for us to step away far enough to see ourselves changing. We tend to believe that we change very slowly, very little, or in many cases not at all.

But during the last 40 years or so, we've been engaged in an accelerating circular loop of cultural change, individual adaptation, more cultural change and more adaptation. The result of this loop has left us individually, and collectively less mature. As well as completely blind to what happened to us.

And now we're locked in, unable to find a useful way out. And worse... we don't seem to realize we're the problem.

At one time, our culture embodied, and then taught a whole assortment of learnings that each of us was expected to take in. Our culture used the institutions, groups, and systems that made it up to teach the lessons we needed to have as a member. Then it required us to come on board, or at least make a reasonable effort to join the group.

We could either surrender into this learning, and be inter-dependent with the group, or we had to stand outside the group and watch. I'm not suggesting that all these learnings were good/correct, rather that there was a core set of beliefs, attitudes, values, and behaviors that were not just useful, but necessary to our ability to function in the reality that we share.

What these beliefs, attitudes, values, and behaviors moved us toward, and what our cultural group wanted from us, was maturity. You were required to surrender into, and accept the idea that you had to grow up, and become a mature member of the group. At 18 you were legally an adult, and you were expected to act like one.

You needed to take your place among the adults around you, regardless of your individual situation or circumstance. You were expected to tolerate frustration, cope with your anger, lose with dignity, refuse to tattle, carry our own weight, be dependable, acknowledge your mistakes, and take complete responsibility for yourself in the world.

You were also expected to surrender into the knowledge that nothing in the reality we share, is fair, just, or reasonable. These are the attitudes, and beliefs of a child.

A mature adult is required to surrender into all this, and more. Not only were you expected to accept all this, but your behavior had to reflect it. All day, every day. There was a clear, and present baseline of functioning that you were expected to meet. To be part of the intra-dependent group, there was a bare minimum of maturity required to work effectively with others, and make something useful out of you in the world.

There's nothing new about these ideas. If you're over the age of forty this is exactly what you were taught by your parents, schools, churches, civic groups, teachers, and coaches when you were young. These were the expectations set out for you, and you had to come to terms with them if you wanted to function usefully in the world.

You could refuse all this of course, but doing so meant that you would be outside the group, and that your ability to function usefully in the world would certainly be limited. It started small, but at some point around the turn of the century, we began to entertain the idea that we should not have to tolerate words, ideas, feelings or experiences that we don't wish to.

Any effort that requires you to tolerate an experience you feel to be negative, is a form of abuse or violence. Over time this idea grew in popularity until it became larger than any wisdom that opposed it. As a result, all subsequent generations have come into the world believing this is the way reality works.

They do not have to tolerate experience they don't wish to... and you can't make them. And just so we're clear.

Saying I don't have to, and you can't make me, is the definition of immaturity. Even more disturbing, is the realization that people over the age of 40 have started to embrace this idea as well. I guess it's understandable if you think about it.

The notion that you don't have to accept any experience you don't agree with, and that you don't have to take any responsibility for the impact your choices have on yourself, others, or the world, isn't a hard idea to sell. It will eventually sell itself. The reality is, that if you refuse to surrender into maturity you simply will not be able to usefully function in the world.

You are refusing to take feedback, learn, and change. You are saying that regardless of what happens, you are always right, and any feedback to the contrary, is a form of violence. This is a prescription for dysfunction and suffering.

With so many people refusing to mature, and validating the refusal of others, our culture has become a circular loop of suffering. It's this ongoing and expanding pattern of individual and collective suffering, that we've come to mistake for a mental health crisis. But to identify it as a mental health crisis, is to focus on the symptoms, and not the problem.

I want you to take a moment, and consider the idea that most of the suffering around you is the result of our profound lack of maturity. Individually, and collectively we are simply refusing to accept the lessons that reality is trying to teach us.

We are refusing to take responsibility for ourselves, and the impact our choices have on others and the world. We are hiding behind a conspiracy of people, all of whom have decided that they don't have to learn, and change, and you can't make them.

I want you to consider the idea that we've rejected a common-sense, reality-based wisdom that was once passed from parent to child, and generation to generation in favor of something easier. That it was this very wisdom that unified us, supported us, connected us, empowered us, and kept us from the disaster of thinking that we should be immune from the stress that comes from the requirement that we must learn and change if we want to function usefully in the world.

When we rejected maturity, and opted for the safety of never having to be responsible for any part of our own lives... we got lost. And now, we're so completely lost that we don't even realize it. We do have a crisis on our hands, but addressing our mental health is missing the point entirely. The first step to changing anything is to see the problem, and admit it that it exists.

If we don't, and we continue to focus on the symptoms, our suffering will not only get worse, it will also become increasingly harder to change. We need to start right here with an effort to recognize and own the problem. Then we need to take a hard look at what's useful and what isn't. Some of the places we need to go may be difficult for us.

But as I pointed out a moment ago, if you want to find what works you're going to need to step away from what you already believe.

If you don't, what you already believe will be the limits of what you can see. These limits will ensure that you will never see the problem, or take responsibility for it. The remainder of this book is a map you can use to discover the attitudes, values, beliefs, and behaviors that can move you toward maturity.

We will focus on the skills you need to see what's useful, and then act on this every day. We will outline an approach to learning, and change, that's based on what moves you toward success and happiness. The goal of all this, is to interrupt the circular loop of suffering, in a way that allows you to see something new.