

Mental Health in a time of Climate and Ecological Emergency

The climate and ecological emergency is connecting health professionals to new perspectives, new areas of knowledge and, for some, a recognition that their current ways of perceiving the world are inadequate. The purpose of this table is to place Biocentric Deep Ecology against three prevalent ideologies about mental distress and its causes. As such, and because mental health is already a field that is full of contest, it enters an existing debate between a mainstream position and two very common forms of scholarly resistance to that mainstream.

Disclaimers:

The table contains simplicities, of course. The collisions of concepts that the table attempts to articulate are far more complex than can be summarised by anyone completely and the categorisations are not always as distinct as may be implied.

It is not correct to imagine that all mental health professionals (or any other groups) share exactly the same views.

Although three positions are described that offer critique of mental health services, other positions are available.

The table implies that biomedical understandings of psychiatry are both right-wing and authoritarian; this is not at all a unique claim but is explicitly or implicitly the viewpoint of most common forms of its critique. However, the author recognises that this may be found to be offensive to some and offers this work as the beginning of a conversation and not as its end.

The table implies that mental health services are solely biomedical, but in reality they do contain other professions and other perspectives. However, partly because of the status of doctors and partly because of the very close links between mental health law and psychiatry, biomedical views widely dominate the service and are often seen as the core knowledge, with other approaches as more additional.

It is the author's firm understanding that all positions described here can be motivated by compassion and form part of a dedicated desire to help people who are suffering.

Unless otherwise stated, the word 'distress' refers to any degree of emotional pain right through to that which psychiatrists refer to as 'serious mental illness'.

'Biocentric Deep Ecology' and Extinction Rebellion have an important relationship but it is not the intention of this table to assume that everyone who chooses to be part of XR necessarily holds those views. Additionally, the author does not claim to have an exhaustive understanding of Biocentric Deep Ecology; it is a phrase taken from the work of Joanna Macy which leaders of XR have stated to be inspirational to them and it is an evolving term.

	Biomedical	Left wing	Libertarian	Biocentric Deep Ecology
Where does distress come from?	<p>The brain/body is viewed as the major driver, or as the key site of vulnerability that causes a person to become unwell when under pressure. Mental illness is a personal pathology suitable for compassion, diagnosis, treatment and monitoring.</p> <p>Usually views distress as distinct from illness and that psychiatry has the role of demarcation.</p>	<p>Inequalities as viewed as the main driver. Views the smallest unit of health as a community, not a brain or a person.</p> <p>Distress is a societal problem often caused by being alienated from each other by capital, suitable for compassion and seeking justice.</p> <p>Mixed views about whether distress and illness are a difference of degree, or two kinds of difficulty.</p>	<p>Views distress as a socially-driven problem suitable for compassion and justice, caused by the negative effects of power in society, attacking diversity and individuality.</p> <p>Wielding of this power is frequently through one person or group's ability to dominate or dismiss the knowledge or perspective of another, as well as directly through institutions. May therefore view distress as a form of isolated resistance to power.</p> <p>Less likely to view distress as distinct from illness.</p>	<p>Views sentient life as the consciousness of the planet, the planet 'thinking and feeling' about itself. Distress in an individual may be a 'symptom' of ecological disruption and suitable for compassion, actions towards environmental restoration and justice.</p> <p>Distress, whether seemingly individual or part of shared experience, is therefore not a negative aspect of a person or of life but a valuable ability for connection, understanding and compassion. It is an incentive to act to restore ecosystems.</p>
General understanding about mental health services	<p>Views itself as apolitical and an 'evidence based profession', through which it claims a value-neutral stance, part of the 'natural sciences'.</p> <p>Generally views the next two columns as not being evidence but value-driven (and therefore, less credible).</p>	<p>Views personal pathology models as falsely depoliticised, making inequalities less visible and thereby colluding with the causes of that inequality (often deemed to be capitalism).</p>	<p>Views personal pathology models as falsely depoliticised, making the negative effects of power in society less visible and colluding with oppression.</p> <p>May view the labelling of distress as 'mental illness' to involve decisions in which 'groupthink' makes something 'mentally healthy', and being outside of that as 'unhealthy'. This is viewed as inherently dangerous to diversity.</p>	<p>Views personal pathology models as furthering a reductionist and unscientific understanding of biology and promoting individual separateness from nature, interrupting the Earth's consciousness of its distress.</p> <p>Views the 'natural sciences' and more values-based scholarship of the humanities as falsely divided.</p> <p>May view all other perspectives here as anthropocentric/humanist.</p>
What actions are proposed to decrease distress?	<p>Tries to treat the 'underlying causes' of distress, typically through chemical (tablet/injection) interventions. Occasionally ECT or addiction rehabilitation, sometimes diet and exercise.</p> <p>Supportive social networks are also viewed as helpful.</p>	<p>Distress in society should be tackled by redistribution of wealth and the creation and upholding of minority rights to prevent marginalisation, de-monetising aspects of public life and increasing 'the commons'.</p> <p>Raising consciousness of the ways in which mental health services reinforce, protect and provide a market for capitalist interests.</p> <p>May invoke disability rights which are then viewed by some as in tension with a view that distress is not a personal pathology.</p>	<p>Sees the need for democratic processes that hold authorities to account, and/or other actions disruptive of power.</p> <p>Raising consciousness of oppression and the role of mental health services in maintaining the status quo. Critical of the Mental Health Act and psychiatry as part of a machinery to treat difference as deviance.</p> <p>May view de-monetisation as better than redistribution.</p> <p>May invoke disability rights which are then viewed by some as in tension with a view that distress is not a personal pathology.</p>	<p>Sees a need to challenge human-centric ideologies and raise consciousness of Earth as a super-organism of which humans are just a part. What is 'healthy' or 'unhealthy' is viewed as emergent from the interconnectedness of all of us in relation to all other planetary species and systems.</p> <p>Human distress should be validated as part of sense-making within toxic environments, signifying the need to take action, typically environmental protections and restorations, the dismantling of the 'Industrial Growth Society'.</p> <p>Views culture as part of nature and is therefore committed to processes that acknowledge and maintain plurality, difference and diversity. Would view capitalism, Marxism and libertarianism as unable to guarantee this.</p>
How is this view evidenced?	<p>Research is conducted into genes, neurochemistry and neuroanatomy. A large proportion of research is drug trials.</p> <p>Claims to be an evidenced profession and also views itself as pragmatic, motivated by attempts to mitigate risk and alleviate distress. Views expected or hoped-for outcomes of future research as evidencing current practice.</p>	<p>Evidence is about the effects of poverty and - in more recent years - inequality on mental health, beliefs, attitudes to others, etc.</p> <p>This demographic data is seen to promote the view that distress is a consequence of inequality and therefore mental health is found in (redistributive) justice.</p>	<p>Scholarship from the humanities, especially 'intersectionalist' views about the relationship between power and knowledge, is very important.</p> <p>Health is therefore argued to be found in democratic processes, minority rights and perhaps through acts of resistance or rebellion.</p>	<p>Views are drawn from epigenetics, ecology, systems theory, 'complexity theory' and other anti-reductionist models of science.</p> <p>Views are also drawn from spiritual practices and some of the knowledges of First Nations/ Indigenous peoples.</p> <p>Has an urgent belief that planetary degradation and the ecological and climate emergency are the proof that we have misunderstood life on Earth and our position within it.</p>