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PSYCHIATRY

Ideas on Mental Illness

► THE IDEAS of the public concerning mental health and illness are more nearly correct than those they see on TV, or read about or hear on radio. But the public has more faith than the experts in books on "peace of mind" and concentrating on happy memories.

This finding from a sampling of opinion of typical individuals, of experts in both psychiatry and psychology, and selections from programs, including those of both the "documentary" type and fiction, is reported by Dr. Jum Nunnally of the Institute of Communications Research, University of Illinois, in *Behavioral Science* (July).

Here are the points about mental health which laymen and experts agree are true:

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1. Early training will not make a child's brain grow faster.

2. Most of the people in mental hospitals speak in words that can be understood.

3. Children usually do not forget about frightening experiences in a short time.

4. X-rays of the head will not tell whether a person is likely to develop insanity.

Both the experts and the laymen disagree with these statements:

1. Not much can be done for a person who develops a mental disorder.

2. Most people who "go crazy" try to kill themselves.

3. If a child is jealous of a younger brother, it is best not to let him show it.

4. Almost any disease that attacks the nervous system is likely to bring on insanity.

Here is where the average layman disagrees most with the average expert:

1. Books on "peace of mind" prevent many persons from developing nervous breakdowns. The experts repudiate this; the public agrees.

2. If a person concentrates on happy memories, he will not be bothered by unpleasant things in the present. Here again the experts repudiate, but the public accepts.

3. The main job of the psychiatrist is to explain to the patient the origin of his troubles. Experts say no, the public, yes.

4. A person cannot rid himself of unpleasant memories by trying hard to forget them. This is something experts say is true, but the public disagrees.

In general, TV, radio and press differ widely from what the experts say. In particular, they emphasize the bizarre symptoms of the mentally ill. Ideas about the cause of mental illness are often wrong.

Science News Letter, July 13, 1957

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