

ARTICLE

Human nature in peace and war

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Abstract

This article discusses the concept of psychoneurosis and its causes, and argues that, as a word applied to conditions of nervousness in the US Army (in the 1940s and 1950s), it was a term used primarily for statistical purposes. It distinguishes between two types of nervous (or psychoneurotic) symptoms and, with reference to a case study, shows the beginning of a psychoneurosis. Originally written between 1943 and 1946, it is reproduced with permission from the Berne estate.

KEYWORDS

nervousness, private suffering, psychoneurosis, public suffering, US Army

1 | WHAT IS PSYCHONEUROSIS?

It has been estimated that with induction rejections and service discharges, there will be about two million men by the end of the war who have been officially labelled with the word 'psychoneurotic'. Many a man who can face machine-gun fire calmly can be made to quail or lose his head by means of a word. The reason for this is that men know what machine guns are and what they can do, but few men understand what words are, and what they can do. In discussing psychoneurosis, therefore, our first task is to find out what the word means and what it can do.

Psychoneurosis is the word chosen by the Army to label those men who cannot get along under the strain of army life. The strain may be purely emotional, such as living in a barracks, or an overseas alert, or separation from loved ones, or taking orders; or it may consist of a more realistic threat from actual bombs and gunfire. The problem of the man who breaks down under actual bombardment or gunfire, or the pilot who breaks down from combat fatigue, is a little different from the others. We shall leave this kind of breakdown for another time, and concentrate now on men who break down when they are not in actual physical danger.

These men, as most people know, are usually diagnosed with 'psychoneurosis' by the medical officer. 'Psychoneurosis' is simply the word the Army chose to designate these people. For statistical and other reasons, it is important for the Army to have a special word for each kind of illness or difficulty that soldiers may suffer. Many psychiatrists, however, practice for years without ever using the word 'psychoneurosis', since there are many other words which mean the same thing, such as neurosis, emotional maladjustment, and nervous breakdown. The

expression used by G.I.s (private soldiers) 'nervous in the service' is as good as any other in many cases, but it would hardly be dignified to use it on a medical report.

The medical officer, however, has to deal not with a word but with a man, and his problem is not 'What does the word psychoneurosis mean' but 'What kind of a man is this patient, what has happened to him, and why is he not able to carry on his duties?' The answer is different for every man. If the psychiatrist can answer these questions, he may be able to cure the man. If he, or the patient, worries about the word instead of about the man, the man will not be helped. So a man should not worry if he is labelled psychoneurotic. This is only another way of saying, 'He is unable to carry on, though his organs and limbs are not out of order'. The thing to worry about is 'Why?'

If a man is unable to carry on because of some behavioural problem which makes him an unreliable soldier, or because of some physical complaint which interferes with his efficiency, he is sent to the medical officer. The doctor may be able to show by means of laboratory tests, X-rays, or other methods of examination, that the man's insides have changed in some way. If the examinations show that his insides have not changed, the psychiatrist is asked to see him. The psychiatrist examines him from the psychiatric point of view (what i.e., we shall see later) and if he feels that the man's troubles come from emotional difficulties, he will call him 'psychoneurotic'.

Some men can keep their desks tidy and some men cannot. In the same way, some men can keep their emotions tidy and some men cannot. Those who cannot are called 'psychoneurotic'. The job of the psychiatrist is to show such men how untidy their emotions are, and what they can do about it. A psychoneurosis is just a kind of deep-seated untidiness that cannot be beat out of a man with a baseball bat. The baseball bat just makes him feel more untidy.

2 | WHAT CAUSES PSYCHONEUROSIS?

As we learned in the last section, psychoneurosis is the word chosen by the Army to be applied to conditions of 'nervousness', anxiousness, excitability, or inability to get along as well as other people in the face of danger, discipline and lack of privacy. This means that 'nervousness' is a psychoneurosis as much as anything else is. Since so many people are 'nervous', psychoneurosis cannot be such an awful thing after all. Some people are more nervous than others, so psychiatrists say that there are mild psychoneuroses, moderate psychoneuroses, and severe psychoneuroses. Probably a large percentage of people in and out of the Army are mildly psychoneurotic (or nervous) in some way or another. Why, we shall soon find out. Most people, however, are able to get along with the little nervousness that they have, and nervousness (or psychoneurosis) only becomes significant if it interferes with the individual's efficiency. The trouble begins not because people are nervous, but because they let their nervousness get control of them instead of controlling their nervousness, or working and keeping an even temper in spite of it.

Many soldiers believe that psychoneurosis is inherited, and that therefore nothing can be done about it. They say, 'My mother is nervous (so I am nervous)'; or 'My father is nervous (so I am nervous)'; or 'My sisters and brothers are nervous (so I am nervous)'. Because some member of their family is nervous, they say, 'It is inherited, so I might as well give up'. There is no reason to give up. Even a Boy Scout knows that you never give up.

The question so often raised, as to whether nervousness is due to heredity or environment, has no practical meaning. It is like asking which is more important in strawberries and cream, the strawberries or the cream? Does the cream surround the strawberries, or do the strawberries float in the cream? The important thing is that psychoneurosis can be cured, and in those cases where it cannot be cured, the person can live with it and carry on in spite of it.

Psychoneurosis is not inherited as far as curing it is concerned. It is learned from the parents at a very early age, probably between the ages of two and four years. If a man has nervous parents, he will not be born nervous. He will learn to act in a nervous way between the ages of two and four by watching his parents. He loves them, and so he imitates them. At that age, he has no one else to imitate, so if they act in a nervous way, the child—by imitating them—starts to act in a nervous way also. As he grows up he continues to act in the same way; then when he forgets what happened to him and how he felt when he was two years old, he says: 'I was born nervous'. He was not.

This does not mean that a man can blame his parents if he is nervous (or psychoneurotic). They are nervous because they learned it from their parents; the grandparents are nervous because they learned it from their parents, and so on. If he wants to blame anybody, he will have to end up by blaming Adam and Eve. Since the average man has more than one child, and since if he is nervous his children are liable to be nervous too, we can now understand why there are so many nervous people in the world, and why there will be more and more in each generation, if we do not stop it somewhere along the line. Psychiatrists now believe that this is the time to stop it. With each man that is cured of psychoneurosis, we prevent more psychoneurosis in the next generation.

Not all psychoneuroses begin between the ages of two and four, but these are the ones that we are most concerned with. It is the people who have been nervous from infancy who are most liable to be discouraged and give up, since they think their condition is 'inherited' and therefore hopeless. The ones who become nervous later in life are more apt to believe that they can be cured, and they are not so easily discouraged about themselves.

3 | WHAT ARE 'NERVOUS SYMPTOMS'?

In the previous sections we tried to show that there are as many different 'psychoneuroses' as there are human beings, and that the word 'psychoneurosis' is used in the Army merely for statistical purposes to group together those human beings who find the Army so difficult that it makes them nervous, or at least more nervous. Last week we tried to say that nervousness (or 'psychoneurosis') comes from mixed-up emotions, starting usually between the ages of two and four. The child at that age learns how to use his feelings, or emotions, by watching his parents. If one of both parents are missing, or if they have not had time to tidy up their emotions, then the child never learns how to tidy up his emotions. He comes into the Army in this state, and finds it so hard to get along with his duties, hardships, officers, non-commissioned officers, and buddies, that he finally busts himself. Psychoneurosis is when a man busts himself for emotional inefficiency.

There are two types of nervous (or psychoneurotic) symptoms; those that only the man knows about (private suffering) and those that come to the attention of the medical officer (public suffering). Until a man gets to the stage of public suffering, he may be able to carry on very well. He may be able to carry on in one job where he can suffer privately, and break down in another where he cannot keep his suffering to himself because it interferes with his work. The commonest kinds of symptoms which occur in soldiers are bodily aches and pains: headaches, backaches, stomach aches; and symptoms of uneasiness, such as shakiness, pounding heart, and cold sweats.

Some men think that when their symptoms are called 'psychoneurotic', it means that the doctor thinks that they are imaginary. No such thing. If you ever saw a 300 pound woman faint at the sight of blood and had to lift her up, you would know her fainting was not imaginary. She fainted, all right. If you ever saw a child get excited and throw up, and you had to do a spot of cleaning up, you would know that it was not imaginary. If you ever had a headache from worrying, you would know that it was not imaginary. A headache is a headache. Yet the woman does not have anything wrong with her heart, the child with his stomach, or the man with his head. The symptoms come from emotions; fear, excitement, or worry in each case. There are a lot of other emotions, such as love, hate, disgust, anger and apprehension; and all of them can cause symptoms. Psychoneurotic symptoms are often only exaggerations of normal feelings. Anybody's heart can pound from love, hate, fear or anger.

Every organ in your body has two nerves. One nerve makes your heart beat more quickly, the other makes it beat more slowly; one makes your stomach relax, the other tightens it up, and so on. You can show this in an animal by putting an electric battery against one or other of these nerves. If you put it against one nerve, the heart beats faster and the stomach tightens up; if you put it against the other nerve, the heart slows down and the stomach relaxes.

A man's heart can beat fast and his stomach can feel painful even if the heart and stomach themselves are normal, provided a strong current passes down the proper nerve. These nerves are put there to take care of the emotional needs of the man. If a man gets angry, he wants his heart to beat faster and more strongly so that he can

fight better; if he is afraid, he wants his heart to pump at full speed, so he can run faster and longer. In other words, it is the emotions that send currents down these two nerves that go to every organ in the body, and the organs do what the current makes them do. However, the man does not feel the current and often not even the emotion; he just feels what happens to his heart or his stomach after the current takes effect. He comes to the doctor complaining of his heart or his stomach, which may be perfectly normal; what is really getting out of hand are the emotions which affect these organs. Sometimes these emotions can last for years without the person even being aware that he has them.

4 | HOW DOES PSYCHONEUROSIS BEGIN?

Previously, we established that 'psychoneurotic' is just a word used to label people who cannot adjust in situations, such as Army life, where most people seem to get along all right. Next, we examined how this emotional untidiness is not inherited, but is learned from the parents during childhood. Then we tried to show how emotions can cause bodily complaints, and pains in various organs, while the organs themselves seem to be healthy. Now we shall try to show the beginning of a psychoneurosis.

I once had a friend named Joe, kind of a mental and physical lightweight he was, so we called him 'Little Joe'. Little Joe lived with a woman whom he loved very dearly, and she returned his love. Little Joe did not work, he just stayed at home all day with this woman. He and the woman traipsed around the house or sat out in the sun in the front yard, and had a wonderful time until 5:37 PM (1737) every evening.

At 17.37 every evening, Little Joe would hear thunder on the front porch, and into the house would walk this big fellow, nine feet tall and wearing size 27 shoes. The giant would stop in the middle of the living room, and the woman would leave Little Joe and reach up and kiss the big fellow. From that time on the big fellow would run things. In a little while they would all sit down to supper. About 1900 they would start sending Joe to bed. Joe did not like it but he had to go. Sometimes he would fall asleep right away, and sometimes he would lie awake and listen to the giant talking to the woman he loved. After a while, the giant and the woman would go to bed too, together.

All this upset Joe, but there was nothing he could do about it. The giant liked him, and he could not help liking the giant. The same thing was going on in practically every house in town, and nobody ever did anything about it. In this particular town, everybody thought that was all right and that was the way it should be anyhow. It was no use calling the cops as they would have just laughed, and there was nothing Little Joe could do by himself. So he began to kick up. When the giant came home, he would sulk. They kidded him. He would not eat his supper. They fed it to him. He hollered when they told him to go to bed. They put him in bed. This made things worse. He tried lying on the floor and screaming. What else could he do? He could not walk out and leave the woman he loved. He tried wetting his bed. He vomited. He got a headache. When he went to bed, he would not fall asleep, but lay tossing and turning. His heart would pound when the giant came home. He began to have nightmares. He got irritable and began to beat up the neighbours. Wetting the bed was the most fun because he got back at the woman, since she had to wash the sheets. When she begged him to stop, that made him happy and he went right on doing it. Poor Little Joe! The giant may have looked nine feet tall, but he was really only five foot seven, and his shoes looked awful big to Joe, but they were only size eight. Little Joe was only three years old, and the woman was his mother.

What happened when Little Joe grew older? Did he stop wetting the bed and getting headaches when he was mad? Did his heart pound when he got excited? Did he sulk and vomit when he did not get what he wanted? Did he suffer from insomnia and nightmares? Sure. The sergeant bellowed just like his father used to. The captain's shoes were not size 27, but they were pretty big—size 12. When he got talking to this girl at the bar (sure she had a ring on the trouble finger, but she was a good looker) and the lieutenant came over and introduced her to Joe as his wife, Joe got the same old headache.

Joe had his adventures with the giant and the woman fifteen or twenty years ago, but he never got over it in all that time. Will he ever get over it? He might, if he thinks about it, or if a psychiatrist helps him figure it out. Why not?

Well, there is more to it than that, but that gives you an idea of how it can begin in some cases. Naturally, Joe forgets what happened to him and how he felt when he was three years old, so he thinks he was born nervous. He was not.

5 | EVERYBODY IS AGAINST ME

We are now ready for some more advanced ideas. Let us take a look at a type of person whom one frequently meets, both in the Army and in civilian life. This Joe is typified by the expressions 'Everybody is against me'; 'They will have to come and get me'; 'All I want is to be left alone'; 'I can do no wrong'. There is at least one in every outfit. Finally, he says 'I need another drink', and he is off.

Some people have more ambition than ability. They want to get to the top without climbing the ladder. In the Army, they would like to be sergeants, and they are mad because they're not; they think they're beautiful, intelligent and virtuous, and besides they would like to kick somebody around, so they should be sergeants. However, a sergeant is not chosen because he is beautiful, intelligent, or virtuous, nor because he likes to kick people around. A sergeant is chosen because he is reliable, and because he knows how to handle men. Some of these Joes occasionally realise that it is a good idea to be reliable, so they try being reliable for three days and if they are not given a medal for it, they get mad and say everybody is against them. Reliability means that you are reliable not for three days, but forever. Some of them even realise that an executive should know how to handle men, so they smart up towards the fellows for an hour and a half and then wait for the angel to bring the stripes. When they do not come, he says, 'Look, I am not only beautiful, intelligent, and virtuous, but I even go out of my way to be reliable and show leadership for a couple of hours, and what do I get for it? Nothing. I need another drink'.

There are lots of ways that a fellow can coddle himself when he feels like that about things. The commonest is to hit the bottle. So let us follow one of these rumpots through his glorious career of proving that he would be a big shot if the world was not against him. He starts off by trying hard to make something of himself. He puts himself out a little bit, and it seems like a helluva lot to him. His mistake is that instead of giving the world what it takes to get ahead, he gives what he thinks it should ask. When it does not work, he says: 'Look at me, such a beautiful character, and does the world come and kiss me for it? No'. He buys himself a bottle, and two hours later he is so limber he can reach around with both hands and pat himself on the back.

Every time he mucks up, he hits the bottle. After a while he misses so much time from work or from duty that it begins to show on his record. Finally, somebody says something to him about it. After they are gone, he bangs the table and hollers, 'See, them slobs, they are all down on me. The whole world is against me'.

Things go from bad to worse, and he mucks up worse than ever. Every time anybody says anything to him, he is happy. He is proving his point. The whole world is against him. He knew it all the time. When little Buster toddles up and asks, 'Hey, Daddy, why are you not a general? Why are you not president of the company?' Joe says, 'Buster, your Daddy is a wonderful character, beautiful, virtuous, intelligent, reliable and a great leader, but the odds are too much. The whole world is against him'. Finally, after he has hit bottom, one fine day somebody gives him a break. But Daddy knows he is not going to make the grade. He cannot stick the competition. What can he do? He cannot quit. He says, 'Mister, you are a smart one for my money. Anybody that can see what a wonderful guy I am and give me a break has a real brain in his conk'. He tries it out for three days and sees he is not going to make it, so he goes out and gets drunk. When he comes back with rotgut running out of his eyeballs, he is fired. Are his feelings hurt? No. He feels swell. He has once more proved his point. 'I knew it, you faker', he says to the guy that gave him a break. 'You too. The whole world is against me. No wonder I take to drink'. So he goes out and gets drunk all over

again. Nobody can make him stop now. 'They will have to come and get me', he says. 'All I want is to be left alone. I can do no wrong. Everybody is against me. I need another drink'.

6 | I AM AS GOOD AS HE IS

Many people, soldiers and civilians alike, spend their lives trying to prove something which is of no importance to anyone but themselves. We have been introduced to the gentleman whose life work consisted of trying to prove that everybody was against him. Now we shall meet the man whose life work consists of showing himself that he is as good as the next man, or as these people keep telling themselves: 'I am as good as he is'. The world does not care whether either of these people prove their points or not. The world has its own troubles to worry about, and the only people the world is interested in are those who forget their own troubles and spend their time trying to do the world's work instead of their own.

The man who is trying to prove 'I am as good as he is' has a miserable time. He fidgets in company, does not know what to do with his hands, is afraid to ask a girl to dance, and makes up for it by getting belligerent at the wrong time. If he is a studious type, he wanders around libraries and bookstores looking for the answers. One day he comes across a book with some title like *Be Glad You're A Dope*, or *How To Make Influential Friends*, and he is off. He is wasting his time. Suppose he goes to a dance. Instead of sitting in a corner, like he used to, he elbows his way across the floor to the prettiest girl in the room. On the way he smacks into a navy chief weighing 213 pounds and knocks his girl over. Instead of apologising, he remembers page 49 in the book, and sticks his chin out and says to the sailor: 'I'm as good as you are'. When he comes to, the surgeon is bending over him, saying 'What crockery shop do these fellows buy their jaws in, anyhow?' The book did not tell Joe that when you holler 'I am as good as you are' at a navy chief, you pull your chin in, not stick it out.

Suppose on the other hand he gets to the girl. He sticks his chin out again and says in a loud voice: 'Will you have this dance with me?' 'Say, you soitinly do not have to shout at me, I am not deaf', says the goil. I mean girl.

No, the world is not interested in whether Joe is as good as they are. Maybe the other fellow or the girl is worried too, about how good they are. The man who wants to prove that he is as good as anybody is liable to make a fool of himself. He will talk too loud. His clothes may be too loud, he may be loud with his money if he has it, and he will get no respect from people.

What is Joe going to do, then, to be a success? The answer is in another sentence: 'He is as good as I am'. When he says, 'I am as good as he is', he is saying in effect: 'I am a low down, inefficient, ugly bum, but I am as good as he is'. Well, if he is really a low down ugly bum, he is not as good as the next fellow and there is no use hollering to prove that he is. He will not get any respect that way. But if he says to himself: 'I am an honest fellow, my parents were fairly decent, I never committed murder, arson, or grand larceny, and he or she is as good as I am', people will respect him. The girl who is sitting in the corner waiting to be asked may be feeling low too, and when a man comes up to her and says softly, 'Will not you dance this one with me (remember she is as good as I am)', she thinks, 'Fine, I thought I was no good, but this nice fellow thinks I am as good as anybody else, as his manner plainly shows', so she says: 'Surely, I'd be delighted'.

Do not try to show the rest of the world that you are as good as they are. If you are an honest well-meaning fellow, show the world that, and then show them that you think they are as good as you are, and they will love it; they will respect you and you will respect them and everybody will be happier. If you try to show them the other thing, they will not give a damn anyway, and you will only make yourself more miserable.

AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY



Eric Berne was a Canadian/American doctor and psychiatrist, and founder of transactional analysis. In 1943, he joined the United States Army Medical Corps in which he served in psychiatric posts in various army hospitals, and rose to the rank of Major. It was in the army at an Army Separation Centre, in which he interviewed soldiers prior to discharge, that he developed his hypotheses about intuition which were originally published in various psychiatric and psychoanalytic journals and which were later collected posthumously in the book *Intuition and Ego States* (TA Press, 1977).

How to cite this article: Berne E. Human nature in peace and war. *Psychother Politics Int.* 2020;18:e1565.
<https://doi.org/10.1002/ppi.1565>