

A Nation of Nuts

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By JIM WINDOLF

The experts won't be satisfied until every last person is suffering from some kind of disease or disorder or syndrome. If you add together all the numbers compiled by all the institutes, the councils, the foundations, the Ph.D.'s and authors, you come up with one sorry statistical portrait of a nation.

According to The New York Times, as many as 9.5 million adult Americans suffer from attention deficit disorder. According to the National Institute of Mental Health, "more than 10 million Americans" suffer from seasonal affective disorder, the syndrome that supposedly makes people depressed in fall and winter. According to the Chronic Fatigue Immunity Disorder Syndrome Association of America, up to 500,000 adults in the U.S. suffer from chronic fatigue syndrome.

That's around 20 million sufferers so far.

According to the National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism, there are 14 million American alcoholics.

According to the U.S. National Advisory Mental Health Council, five million adults in America have a "severe mental illness." According to the Mental Health Infosource web site, eight million Americans have some kind of eating disorder.

That's 47 million.

According to Peter Radetsky, author of "Allergic to the 20th Century," 2.5 million Americans have "multiple chemical sensitivity"—meaning that they cannot, say, touch a bottle of Windex without breaking out in a rash, etc. According to the National Academy of Sciences, 37 million Americans are experiencing "in-

creased allergic reaction to chemicals."

Let's consider the 2.5 million with "multiple chemical sensitivity" to be a subset of the 37 million with "increased allergic reaction to chemicals," and that puts us at 84 million miserable Americans, and counting.

But wait. There's more.

According to the Social Phobia/Social Anxiety Association, 15 million Americans suffer from social anxiety, meaning, for example, that they're afraid to count their change in front of a cashier for

fear of being watched. According to the National Institute of Mental Health, over 15 million adult Americans are depressed. According to that same august governmental body, three million Americans have panic disorder, meaning they experience heart palpitations, etc., for no apparent reason.

We're up to 117 million.

According to author Jerold J. Kreisman, M.D., 10 million Americans have "borderline personality disorder." This one allows you to have a shaky sense of identity, a tendency to split the world into heroes and villains and an intense fear of abandonment, all under the same banner. According to an outfit called the Restless Legs Syndrome Foundation, "as many as 12 million" Americans suffer from something called restless legs syndrome. The foundation proudly dubs this one "the most common disorder you've never heard of" and claims it's "a neurological disorder characterized by unusual sensations felt in the legs . . . [that] cause the patient to constantly move the feet and legs in an effort to relieve the unbearable sensations."

That's 139 million. The literature turned out by the institutes and foundations, by the way, almost always includes warnings that those suffering from a given condition have been seriously "undercounted"—and that each special ailment is probably genetic in origin.

According to the National Institute of Mental Health, 2% of the U.S. population has obsessive compulsive disorder. (That translates into 5.4 million Americans.) An additional two million are manic depressive. According to a study conducted by Patrick Cornes, Ph.D., 8% of the adult male population and 3% of the adult female population are sex addicts. (That translates into 7.6 million men and 3.1 million women.)

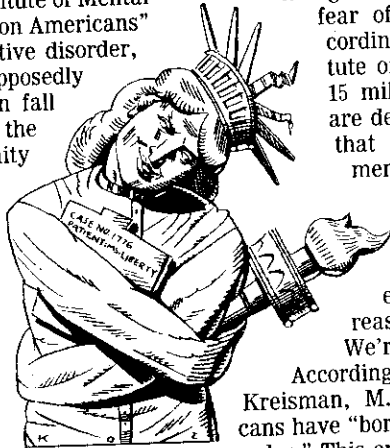
We're now at 157 million—but let's allow for some overlap and say that five million people have more than one disorder.

That puts the total number of sufferers at 152 million.

According to the U.S. Census Bureau, there were an estimated 267.8 million people in the country as of August 1997. Of these, about 198 million are over 18 years old. The numbers related to the above-mentioned diseases, syndromes and disorders apply mainly to adults. So if you believe the statistics, 77% of America's adult population is a mess. And we haven't even thrown in alien abductees, road ragers or Internet addicts.

But give the experts a little time. With another new quantifiable disorder or two, everybody in the country will be officially nuts.

Mr. Windolf is executive editor of The New York Observer, where this first appeared.



MARTIN KOZLOWSKI

Notable & Quotable

From a short story by Garrison Keillor in the October Atlantic Monthly:

John hated talk radio. Especially public-radio talk shows. He loathed them. Drowsy voices dithering and blithering, obsessive academics whittling their fine points, aging bohemians with their Bambi world view, earnest schoolmarms, murmuring liberals, ditzzy New Agers, plodding Luddites, sad-eyed ladies of the lowland, all of them good and decent and progressive and well-read and Deeply Concerned . . . the result being audio oatmeal, and two hours of them wasn't worth one Chopin prelude.