



On the importance of context

Take a moment to observe your current physical environment. Most likely, as you are reading this article, you find yourself in an aeroplane seat, elbows jostling with those of your neighbour and your knees making acquaintance with the seat in front of you. You might even be listening to the soothing snore of a fellow passenger who is sleeping off the previous night's farewell party two rows ahead.

And most likely, you'll be totally okay with all of this.

Then ask yourself whether you would be okay with the same situation at work? Or in a shopping mall? Probably not. So, what makes the difference?

The brutal invasion of your personal space becomes acceptable within the context of being swooshed from one destination to the next at hundreds of kilometres per hour, miles above the ground, in an aluminium tube.

Context is of vital importance. Not only for accepting the conditions of your current commute, but for just about any behaviour, feeling or thought you might have. Especially within the milieu of mental health, presenting symptoms should always be considered within their specific context.

Each person seeking to consult with a mental health professional would typically not just be questioned about their current complaint, but about essentially everything else as well. The way we grew up, our relationships we had with key caregivers, traumatic experiences and significant events in our past all serve to establish an individual's unique context. It is within this context that we develop certain behavioural patterns, communication styles and our individual personality traits. All of these factors could contribute to the current problematic situation and cannot be disregarded. Simply considering the symptoms in isolation means that the context will lack significant contributing aspects, and thus the equation simply won't add up.

Furthermore, the presenting symptoms of any person should be seen within the context of a certain syndrome. Take depression for example. Depression affects about half of the population at some stage during their lifetime. Most people will have experienced, to a greater or lesser extent, the debilitating characteristics of this condition: being unable to get up in the morning, fighting to stay focused on tasks, struggling to generate the energy necessary to get through an average day. Predominant feelings such as sadness, emotional numbness and perhaps even anger manifestly make your being their home, albeit begrudgingly so. Whether it be restful sleep eluding you, an inability to experience joy or excitement or the hopelessness that accompanies feeling tired of life in general, the possible symptoms are manifold.

In our example it is crucial to understand the context of the depressive syndrome in that it could be just that, but it very well might be unfolding within the context of something entirely different such as a certain personality type, an anxiety disorder or one of multiple other major mental health conditions such as bipolar mood disorder or schizophrenia, among others. Even physical conditions such as an underactive thyroid gland or hormonal fluctuations could play a causal role in the syndrome.

Only when an individual's symptoms are understood within their unique context can a successful diagnosis be made and the treatment be planned and executed accordingly.

As a wise old man I know always states: "The whole is more than the sum of its parts." 🌀

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