In the culture of counselling, we all risk becoming victims.

Not everyone exposed to adversity becomes a victim — some benefit from, and even enjoy, the experience.

Celebrity can gain sympathy by their chat-show induced tearful recollection of trauma. And as soon as a celebrity ‘comes clean’, it’s the norm for those in the same situation to feel their own suffering is not as severe as the ‘real’ victims. Ehrenreich criticises the way that traditional medical practitioners, rather than being holistic and addressing the causes of illness, often reduce suicide to an emotional issue and pathologise it.

The modern cult of the victim has an admirable side. There is a genuine resentment against those who have been seen as the recipients of neglect, barefaced nerve-wracking but embarrassing and their names will go down to posterity. The most obvious example of this was the post-war treatment of Holocaust survivors, and for once that equality term ‘survivor’ seems to be apt, who were accused of having participated, or at least acquired, in their own destruction.

The modern focus on the victim has been greatly influenced by the work of those who have been seen as culprits. In this, they have more of an idealism, and often a browbeating, to the extent that even the media was seen as an accomplice. It is not true that all of those groups, and many others, have suffered, they have not suffered in the same way as we in modern society.

Your assistance is greatly appreciated.

And if I am a victim, then I need treatment. The arrival of the teams of ‘trained counsellors’ is as much a part of the theatre of anxiety as is the emergency services themselves. ‘Debriefing’ is now urged on everyone involved, and as quickly as possible. No matter that the people being treated have nothing at all in common other than they got on a train at the same time. No matter that not everyone wants to talk, or even needs to talk, about their traumatic experience. No matter that the evidence is not randomised, controlled trials showing clearly the benefit of debriefing, and raises the possibility that it may even do more harm than good.

Indeed, its potential for harm comes precisely from the way that professionalising distress helps transform those whose suffering is most severe.

Our responses to trauma, be it personal, our sexuality, losing our job, all become psychological processes that need to be carried out under supervision, because ordinary people are now considered too incompetent to deal with anything other than the mundane and familiar, and require such claims to be made by others to protect the victims through their life’s vicissitudes.

After treatment, the rituals of victimhood end. Arguably the recognition of that compensation. If some wrong was done to me, someone must pay. This is the structure, they say on the court steps, and they are right. Compensation is not about finding a specific perpetrator, or even the person who caused the emotional distress, but rather about the support and rehabilitation that the victim needs to move on with their life. What must not be concealed is that the effect of the war on the health of women and men, we are finding that many soldiers, far from being scarred by the experience of war in fact enjoyed it. Not everyone exposed to adversity becomes a victim — some people benefit from, and even enjoy, the experience.

If we wish to avoid becoming a nation of victims, outdoing each other in the battle to prove who has suffered most, it is time to acknowledge that adversity is a part of human experience; and while it may alter us for the worse, we should resist the temptation to redefine our identities solely in terms of what has been done to us.

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