

THE PSYCHOTHERAPEUTICS OF NEURASTHENIA.

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NEURASTHENIA, nervous exhaustion, or nervous prostration, as variously designated, is but too common a condition at the present time. True neurasthenia is always acquired, but in addition, we may have a hereditary and a symptomatic form. It is the true neurasthenia alone which we will consider here.

Neurasthenia occurs at all ages, some cases being found among children and others in old age, but the greatest number of cases develop in early adult life, from twenty-one to thirty-five years of age, when the strain and stress of life are greatest.

In the majority of cases there is a history of overwork—physical or mental—combined with worry and anxiety. In all cases there is probably this factor of overwork, though it may not appear in the history, as the individual's particular limit of endurance may be so low that only the average, or usual amount of work is too much for him. In addition we find emotional shocks, grief, excesses of all kinds, exposures and injuries have an influence in the development of neurasthenia.

The neurasthenic state may be produced by the introduction from without of substances toxic to the nerve centers, and may similarly arise from the entrance into the circulation of substances toxic to the nerve centers generated within the body. Thus we find neurasthenia associated with uric acid in the blood and with toxins from the gastrointestinal tract. A condition of anemia produces neurasthenia.

Pathologically neurasthenia is an exaggerated, an abnormal fatigue of the nerve cells. The studies of Hodge, Mann and others have shown that nerve cell fatigue is attended by a more or less degree of chromatolysis, in which condition their function is depressed or abolished. Under normal conditions these fatigued cells, after a certain period, some hours or so, of rest, resume their usual appearance and the arrangement of their constituents is such that normal function is again possible. If, on the other hand, these fatigued nerve cells are compelled to continue functioning without proper intervals of rest, we have a more intensified condition of chromatolysis and neurasthenia results. If emotional strain, either alone or joined with overwork, is brought to bear with sufficient intensity and duration on brain cells, the same uncompensated exhaustion manifests itself in the internal structure and appears outwardly in our especial case as neurasthenia. Toxic or autotoxic substances may produce this chromatolysis, either acute or chronic, and again we may have neurasthenia manifested.