

Look Around, Look Within

May is mental health month worldwide. In the United States of America, the theme for this month is “Look Around, Look Within.” The goal is to challenge yourself to examine your world and how it can affect your overall health. Look around, look within – from your neighborhood, streets, parks, homes, and businesses, and notice how the environment affects your mental health. This theme is most appropriate for The Bahamas.

Far too many of our streets and neighborhoods are filthy. Can your physical environment impact your mental health? Yes, it can and does influence crime, mental and physical, and family relationships. It is not difficult to imagine how conditions in a neighborhood could affect health. For example, research indicates that poorer neighborhoods generally have more crime, dirty streets and home environments, and an abundance of fast-food outlets. It is my view that if everyone keeps his or her personal space clean and attractive, the nation’s mental health will be better, and crime will be greatly reduced.

In most countries, areas with the most street trash and dirty home environments are the poorer areas. This is not so in The Bahamas. Even middle-income areas can be dirty and filthy. Many would have their yards sparkling clean, but just across the street would be an abundance of debris and trash oftentimes placed there by the neighbors themselves.

In my article “Stop and Pick Up the Trash” I wrote: “There are messages I am getting from people who refuse to pick up trash in their surroundings. The messages are: “I am too good to bend down to pick up trash.” “That is not my job. That is the job of the cleaners or lower-class people.” “I did not put that there so why should I pick it up?” It is my view that people dressed in sophisticated clothing and who live in middle to upper-class communities but refuse to pick up trash at entrances of banks or on floors as they walk around in businesses, are just as bad as the people they look down upon in poor communities who leave mounds of trash in front of their properties. The only difference is the size of the mound. They are both nasty. In other words, we have cultivated nastiness and uncultivated nastiness. They are both nasty.”

It is my view that the dirty environment is impacting the mental health of our nation. It is impacting depression and facilitating a laissez-faire attitude academically, emotionally, and cognitively. In the article “Neighborhood Characteristics and Depression” writer Carolyn E. Cutrona states: “Neighborhoods with poor-quality housing, few resources, and unsafe conditions impose stress, which can lead to depression. The stress imposed by adverse neighborhoods increases depression above and beyond the effects of

the individual's own personal stressors, such as poverty and negative events within the family or workplace.” My only challenge with this research is that in The Bahamas, on the island of New Providence, areas with quality housing and well-paved streets, also have mounds of trash, running rats, and overgrown yards. How is this impacting mental health in those areas?

A good example of this is one of the world's most famous streets, Bay Street, from East Street going East. Next door is the House of Assembly, beautifully decorated Rawson Square, and stores with hundreds of millions of dollars inventory, but just East of that, on the same street, the buildings are deplorable and dirty. I often wonder how parliamentarians could for decades, sit in their meticulously clean chambers and ignore the filth just hundreds of feet away.

Wake up parliamentarians! “Look around. Look Within.” Your indolence is actually impacting the mental health of our nation. When a serious crime happens, the police are called. Flashing lights, loud sirens, and bullet-proof vest rush to the scene. But there are no sirens for dirty streets and dilapidated buildings. Even further, there are no sirens for depression, violent anger, emotional stress, and other mental illnesses perhaps pushed along by our uncleanliness. We need to stop and look around then look within. We need to sound the sirens of change.

Each week this month I will be writing on this theme—“Look Around, Look Within.” I will be writing about different aspects of our environment, lifestyle, and behavior, that can impact mental health. It is clear to me that far too many people are not aware of the link between one's environment and mental health. The environment can be the home, school, neighborhood, workplace, church, family, friends, or country.

I encourage everyone during the month of May to make sure to look around and look within. The health of our nation depends on it.

Barrington H. Brennen is a marriage and family therapist. Send your questions or comments to question@soencouragement.org or call 242-327-1980 or visit www.soencouragement.org