



As an increasing number of reports emerge about how many microplastics we are consuming in our food, more mental health experts are sounding the alarm over a whole range of environmental toxins invading our bodies.

The so-called “chemical revolution” started centuries ago, but really kicked into high gear after World War II. That’s when the use of chemicals in agriculture, food processing, building materials, furniture, cosmetics, and a host of other goods and services, initiated a worldwide experiment in which we’re the hapless lab rats.

Today, we are swimming in a stew of toxins. They are quite literally everywhere; in our food, water, air, homes, workplaces and IT devices, among others. They invade us through our lungs, skin and digestive track. Today, many, if not most humans carry measurable blood levels of harmful chemicals, many of which have never been fully tested to assess their risks to our health. In the race between well-being and corporate profits, human health lags far behind.

Okay, most of us grasp how these noxious substances pose a threat to our physical health. After all, air pollutants alone kill an estimated 100,000 Americans annually. But what about mental well-being? Well, mind and body are inseparable aspects of a unified system, so what harms one also harms the other. Let’s consider a couple of examples.

Increasingly, research shows that generalized inflammation in the body is associated with depression and various anxiety disorders. There are multiple influences that create this inflammatory response, however, among them are a long list of environmental toxins that disrupt hormones in our bodies. And all those pesticides and herbicides in our food, on our lawns, and in our houses, are proven neurotoxins . . . that’s a fancy term for “brain poisons.”

Some research, while controversial, maintains that conditions such as ADHD and autism may be caused or exacerbated by environmental pollutants. We do know that prenatal exposure to many of these toxins can result in ADHD, learning disabilities and other cognitive deficits, so it's no socket-popping stretch to infer exposure outside the womb could have similar impacts.

Growing up, I was exposed to lead (was still in gasoline), mercury, asbestos (still used in some products), DDT and a host of other toxins. I can only speculate what impacts these had on my well-being. Today, the number and variety of toxic chemicals wafting around us and through us is much greater, and, with a few exceptions, regulations designed to safeguard us from these threats are toothless. For example, the Toxic Substances Control Act of 1976 grandfathered in over 62,000 chemicals already on the market, exempting them from safety testing, presuming they were non-toxic until proven otherwise (i.e., people getting sick from them).

Given the global rise in mental illnesses and cognitive impairments, we can only speculate how much toxic chemicals are to blame. But, when I see clients struggling with psychological disorders in the absence of a clear and identifiable cause, I find myself wondering if neurotoxins and hormone disrupting chemicals might be involved.

The famously failed "war on drugs" still warns people that illicit substances will fry their brains, while so-called industry regulations and government regulators ignore the much greater dangers posed by untested chemicals in our air, food and water.

How about a war on environmental toxins instead? Now, that would be a battle worth fighting.