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Is modern life becoming a recipe for madness?

JIM COYLE

Any one of the images would have been startling enough. Coming within days, played out live on our city streets, reproduced on newscasts and front pages, they were as disturbing in their implications as they were appalling in their details.

Sunday dinner hour: A father drops his 5-year-old daughter from an overpass onto the express lanes of the busiest highway in Canada, leaving her critically injured, before jumping to his death.

Tuesday 7 a.m.: A knife-wielding man, 34, plays early-morning matador with police cars at a downtown intersection before eventually being pinned by a cruiser and subdued.

Wednesday noon: A disturbed father pinballs a rented van off police cars as the sideshow to a noon-hour Queen's Park demonstration before becoming the main event by dousing himself with gasoline and setting himself ablaze.

The highly public snapping of three men brought mental illness, emotional disturbance and the stress of modern life out from the places to which they are normally swept and into full, prime-time focus this week.

Night after night, viewers heard that phrase the TV anchors like to say more than any other: The following images may disturb some viewers.

And well they should.

The circumstances of modern life in the industrialized world seem to suggest that emotional disturbance, the fraying of nerves, the snapping of minds, the loss of control and lashing out will become more common, not less.

Mental health is the major public-health challenge of the new century and it is only lately, and grudgingly, being recognized and addressed.

The Global Business and Economic Roundtable on Addiction and Mental Health, for instance, says Canada already ranks high in adolescent suicide, depression by far the largest cause; that studies in the U.S. and Canada reveal large numbers of children — so-called "silent sufferers" — never properly diagnosed or treated for mental, behavioural or developmental disorders.

"If we accept that mental disorders are increasingly prevalent in youth, and when that is taken together with mental-health issues of middle age into old age, it presents a sobering portrait of the future mental well-being of Canada and the developed world."

Dealing as it does with the endlessly baffling machinations of the human mind, mental health remains — as the week's events in Toronto suggest — imperfectly understood even by medical professionals and inadequately addressed by overburdened health and justice systems.

It was a week that raised repeated questions about what is making people crazy, how it could be that three men so dramatically and publicly unspooled within days?

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There is biology. There is environment. But there is no single, easy answer.

The questions probe at a timeless and fundamental human need for wholeness — body, mind and soul. They involve the social upheavals of the last half-century. They involve the relentless assault of advertising, the consumer culture and images of perfection held out as attainable.

They involve the new and as yet unknown implications of life lived at the speed of the newest techno toy.

As William Dean Howells said, "People are born and married, and live and die, in the midst of an uproar so frantic that you would think they would go mad of it."

He said that in 1907. What he would make of the modern pace of things defies speculation. Though it could certainly be held up as a recipe for madness.

Last year, Carl Honoré published *In Praise of Slow*, a book cataloguing antidotes to a pace of life lived on the edge of exhaustion.

"These days the whole world is time-sick," he said. "We all belong to the same cult of speed."

It's also the pace of a winner-take-all economy that has seen relentless deterioration over the last 20 years of personal and social safety nets.

Also last year, David K. Shipler wrote *The Working Poor*, a chronicle of those who are taunted with the American Dream even as they're trapped on low-wage treadmills.

"Being poor in a rich country may be more difficult to endure than being poor in a poor country," he said.

Last year as well, Alain de Botton produced *Status Anxiety*, his study of the perennial, but acutely modern, obsession about what others think of us and whether we're judged successes or failures.

Over decades, there has been a decline in the influence of churches and religion, along with a rise in the expectation of earthly pleasures and instant gratification. Nowadays, every problem must be solved at once and everything good is fleeting. Opportunities. Affiliations. Relationships.

As Statistics Canada reported this week, marriages continue to break down at rates that would cause most enterprises to go out of business, the number of people trying again and failing a second time also growing. With marriage breakdown comes the twin combustibles of economic strain and child-custody disputes.

Modern mobility has brought people to new lands of opportunity. But mobility carries with it dislocation from the familiar.

There is, moreover, the isolating effect of technology, an epidemic of loneliness and longing camouflaged by virtual and vicarious living.

And there is a propensity — created by the culture of celebrity, or the excesses of reality TV, or the ethos of Oprah and Dr. Phil and Jerry Springer — for playing out breakdown on stage.

There is an unfortunate notion, when one struggles, that everyone else has it all figured out. That everyone else is handsome or beautiful, or affluent, or witty and charming, or socially adroit. That if we are not, there's something wrong with us.

And that voice inside the head starts talking, repeating that tape-loop of self-recrimination and resentment against a hostile world.

Until finally, it leads to a horrible place, where there seems nothing left to live for and nothing left to lose. And if, in the end, a powerless soul — ignored for too long, their world collapsing, equilibrium well and truly lost — can for

even a few minutes take charge and command the attention of all, well so much the better.

Jim Coyle usually appears Tuesday, Thursday and Saturday.

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