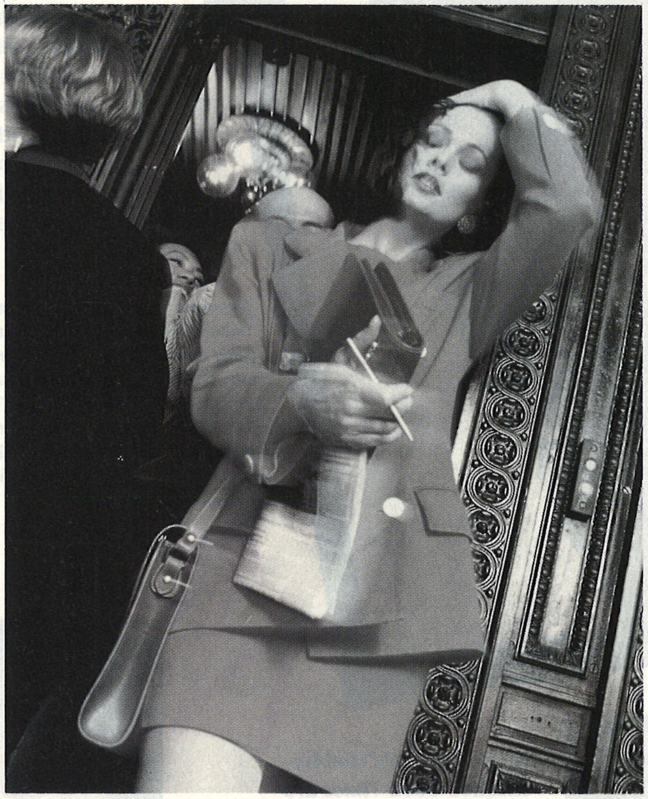
psychology by Melinda Blau

Staying Sane In a Crazy World


DANA TYNAN

Depressed, lonely? Many psychologists now claim that the state of the world rather than personal problems may harm our mental health. But you *can* act to secure emotional wellness.

MOLLY SCRAMBLED her way to the top of the career ladder, and now she wonders why she's there. At work, the 45-year-old lawyer is surrounded by the artifacts of success: the tastefully appointed corner office, a gaggle of junior associates vying for her attention. A partner in a prestigious firm, Molly works dreadfully long hours.

She tries to fit in *pro bono* work whenever she can, but the days and nights simply aren't long enough, especially with two children at home who need her and a husband who complains that she has no time for him. Recently, her 6-year-old son was upset with her for nearly missing his performance at a school celebration. And her seventh-grade daughter is angry with her because she is too busy to come to most of her basketball games.

Molly feels fraudulent at work and inadequate as a mother. She is often tired, unable to concentrate. Every day another chunk of her foundation is whittled away by self-doubt and anxiety. Most of all, she dreads the daily 25-minute ride between home and office. In a city besieged by crime, filth, and overcrowding, the trip to the subway is a mine field of lost souls: here an old woman begging ("Lady, can you spare a dollar for a cup of coffee?"), there a mother and child with outstretched arms. A startling counterpoint to the abundance in Molly's life, such scenes of urban wretchedness sicken her soul.

Unfortunately, Molly's plight is all too familiar to women in the 1990s, many of whom suffer feelings of inadequacy, despair, guilt, and anger—the maladies of our time. These women have families and friends, yet they feel disconnected. Though they have all the trappings of women who've "made it," they feel anguished, disjointed, even detached. They lead what psychologist Joanna Macy, Ph.D., has called a "double life": on one level, it's business as usual; but deep inside there's an excruciating awareness that something is very wrong about the life they are living.

When Molly consulted a psychologist recently, he contemplated her "symptoms"—anxiety, insomnia, lack of appetite, no interest in sex—and promptly pronounced her "depressed." Like many other traditional psychotherapists, he viewed her problems solely in the context of personal history: role conflict and a dysfunctional childhood were the most likely culprits in her malaise.

However, a vanguard of scholars is challenging this kind of interpretation, saying that Molly's symptoms may be a natural reaction to a toxic culture. In a society that values rational thinking over emotions, technological progress and competition over compassion and sharing of resources, such feelings as despair and anxiety are to be expected.

The roots of her "problems," they say, are deeply embedded in the cultural threads of our dog-eat-dog environment. She lives in a polluted, war-torn world and in a city in which poverty, unemployment, and homelessness flourish—and she's expected not to notice and not to be affected. She is emotionally imprisoned by the national ethos that exalts the accrual of money and power and denies range from 21.7 percent to 37 percent; "battering by an intimate partner" happens to anywhere from 25 to 50 percent of all women; 12 to 14 percent of all women experience marital and acquaintance rape; and as many as 71 percent of all working women encounter sexual harassment at work.

On the subject of sexual abuse, Jordan adds, "Women for decades have not been believed; it's only in the last ten years that clinicians have fully appreciated how extensive this problem is in our society." Jordan says that professionals used to consider reports of sexual abuse "a fantasy," making women feel that if they were not "crazy," then they were somehow to blame for the abuse.

If a woman can be battered or raped by her own husband, marriage may not provide the same kind of refuge and nourishment for women as it does for men—despite the supposed economic advantages. According to Strickland, studies have also shown that, based on self-reporting, "married men are the happiest, single women next, then single men, and married women are the least happy."

Faye Crosby, Ph.D., a psychologist at Smith College who wrote *Juggling*, a thoughtful analysis of women who combine work outside the home and family responsibilities, determined that it is not multiple roles that make women's lives stressful or cause them to feel inadequate and exhausted so much of the time. The real problem is society's less-than-supportive view of all women, including women who mix work and motherhood.

Crosby also sheds light on several important reasons why married women, especially those with children, might give themselves such low ratings on a happiness scale. Life is an uphill battle. At work, they put in longer hours, strive harder than men—and get paid less. At home, they must put in a "second shift."

In a culture where men are entitled and women are expected to serve, skirmishes on the home front are inevitable. Take a typical mealtime scene: Mom and Dad are having dinner with the kids. While she's eating, Mom simultaneously feeds the baby, shoos the cat off the table, and reprimands Junior for picking on his younger sister. Meanwhile, Dad seems oblivious to the chaos. Mom eventually blows up and Dad becomes defensive. Typically he backs off even further in the face of her anger—at which point she feels abandoned and unsupported.

Marital conflict nowadays is to some extent a symptom of a culture in transition. As Watkins explains, men and women have very different histories of socialization: a man is raised to be distant, a woman to be a caretaker. The husband's defensiveness is partly because he's being asked to do something that makes him feel inadequate. She has been brought up to believe it is her job to give to the family, even beyond her own reserves.

The distress of women who are trying to juggle work and family demands may be compounded if they isolate themselves. Crosby points out that married women rarely disclose their marital disagreements for fear that fighting with a spouse is yet another sign of personal inadequacy. As a result, normal marital problems seem atypical, and women get depressed thinking that theirs is the only relationship with problems.

The healthy need for connectedness in women is often seen as an expression of "overdependence."

New mothers may be the most alienated group of women: "when it comes to recognizing the pains and worries of parenting, the country seems to be caught in the grip of a great conspiracy of silence," remarks Crosby. So the bedraggled mother thinks her exhaustion is somehow a reflection of her own shortcomings. She has been conditioned to believe she should be able to handle mothering on her own.

Research indicates that for many women the best protection against the damaging effects of the culture may be to stay single. Compared with bachelors over 40, single women are far more skilled at being in intimate relationships and at midlife emotional adjustment. According to a 1991 study conducted by Charles Waehler, Ph.D., a psychologist at the University of Akron, older single men are reluctant to get involved, make demands, or assert their needs in relationships. Waehler also found these men to be "rigid." He warns, "They often make very good companions, but if women ask for more than what they are capable of giving, these bachelors will frequently push them away or end the relationship."

In a comparable study of single women done by Janice Witzel, Ph.D., a psychologist on the faculty of the Family Institute in Chicago, single women have far richer emotional lives than their male counterparts. These findings contradict the myth of a sad, deprived spinsterhood—another cultural construct that devalues women and their choices.

Not that the single women in Witzel's study were immune to societal pressures. Many yearned to be wives and mothers, but, Witzel observed, they made other kinds of satisfying attachments—by getting involved in altruistic causes and nurturing same-sex friendships instead. Interestingly, their experiences reflect two important prescriptions for healing both ourselves and our world: support and service to the common good.

How to Live in a Toxic World

Because we are so accustomed to thinking of ourselves solely as individuals and not as players in a larger scheme, many of us need help to see past the walls of our own lives. To that end, Sarah Conn, Ph.D., a psychologist who teaches ecopsychology at the Center for Psychology and Social Change at Harvard Medical School, runs a number of psychotherapy groups, formed to "connect personal struggles to the larger context."

Conn explains, "When you're bombarded by the scope of a personal problem, like incest [resulting from a 'power over' mentality, specifically power over children], or the scope of a global problem, like environmental pollution [power over nature], without some support for entertaining a different world view and a different view of the self in the world, one can feel overwhelmed. We feel small and helpless and alone, maybe even 'hysterical' or 'crazy,' if we get too emotional about it." In the absence of support, says Conn, "your only other recourse may be to become numb, withdraw, and to get depressed."

Julia, age 40 and the mother of two daughters, 8 and 3, is a member of one of Conn's groups. She feels stuck in her career. She writes articles on mothering for national magazines, but she still has trouble considering herself a "real" writer. Julia also resents that her mother is not more supportive: she never asks Julia about her writing, and whenever Julia brings it up, her mother changes the subcollective responsibility. Worst of all, she is unable to articulate her anguish, except as a vague sense that "something is wrong . . . and it's probably *me*."

Fortunately, psychologists are beginning to help women see that "they are part of a system that is creating pain for them," explains psychologist Judith Jordan, Ph.D., director of women's studies at McLean Hospital in Boston and coauthor of *Women's Growth in Connection*. Jordan cites some ways in which the system fails women: The healthy need for connectedness in women is often seen as an expression of "overdependence." An interest in helping others may be viewed as masochistic. A style of thinking, reasoning, and problem solving that also has a lot of room for feelings may be deemed "hysterical." Because their "ways of being in the world" get pathologized, Jordan says, "[women] wind up feeling defective."

And it is not just women who suffer at the hands of our money- and power-based culture, says Richard Schwartz, Ph.D., a family therapist at the Institute for Juvenile Research in the University of Illinois College of Medicine's department of psychiatry. *Both* men and women are given the pervasive mandate: dominate your environment. As Mary Watkins, Ph.D., a clinical psychologist in Littleton, Massachusetts, notes, "There is little time left for [coping with] illness or death, for periods of failure or uncertainty. Time spent with children and friends and older people and nature is not counted or valued, for there is no achievement to be shown for it."

The Big Picture

Thus, rather than seeing problems in your life as symptoms of personal shortcomings, it helps to reframe your situation in terms of the larger cultural and socioeconomic picture. Depression, for example—which, according to a 1990 report issued by the American Psychological Association's (A.P.A.) National Task Force on Women and Depression, affects women twice as frequently as men—often has a cultural underpinning.

Bonnie R. Strickland, Ph.D., a psychologist at the University of Massachusetts and former president of the A.P.A., who commissioned the depression task force, says she is amazed that more women aren't depressed, "given their economics and general second-class-citizen status." Women—like the poor and members of minority groups—are, by definition, the outsiders in a patriarchal system and therefore considered "less than" men.

Women become aware of this cultural devaluation quite early in life, according to feminist psychologist Carol Gilligan, Ph.D. Girls 11 or 12 years old who are good in math and science, excel in sports, and display other so-called masculine traits begin to see that their confidence and strength are not what society expects of them. To resolve this dissonance, they learn to hide what they know, underplay their competencies, and censor their thoughts.

As women wear these invisible restraints into adulthood, every arena of life reinforces the notion that they're of less value than men. They tend to make lower wages for comparable work, which not only supports the cultural message but also plunges many women into poverty, putting them into one high-risk-for-depression group. That they are often single mothers as well puts them into another.

Women are also frequent victims of violence—physical and sexual abuse—a significant predictor of depression. The A.P.A. report says that rates of "childhood sexual assault"

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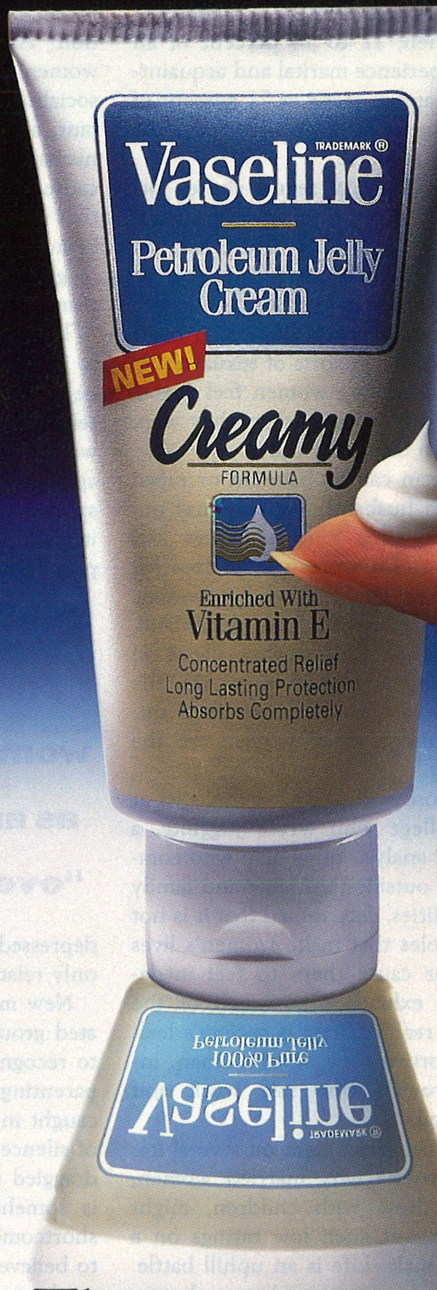

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ject and asks about the kids. With the group's help—and empathy, for they all have "mother issues," too—Julia began to reframe her mother's resistance to her career in terms of the grander historical scheme and to appreciate how painful it must have been for her mother to feel devalued by society and to sacrifice herself for her children. She also sees that one reason she has difficulty validating herself as a writer is that (unless she makes a lot of money at it—which she doesn't) society won't value her work.

You may not need to join an "ecotherapy" group to get this kind of validation or feel a sense of community. Conn cites four key elements that contribute to a shift in consciousness: becoming aware of what's going on in the larger world; experiencing your feelings—fear, anger, sadness, and despair; understanding interdependency—how your pain is connected to everything else that's going on in the world; and, most important, taking action.

Julia's "action" translated into writing an article "about all of the things I hate about being a mother! I was very afraid to do it—it went against all the cultural rules—but all the other mothers thought it was great!" she says.

Conn points out that action could also be as simple as talking to a friend, telling that person how you feel about what you notice in the world. For example, what does it say about our society's values when a child comes home from school and insists you buy her a pair of designer jeans?

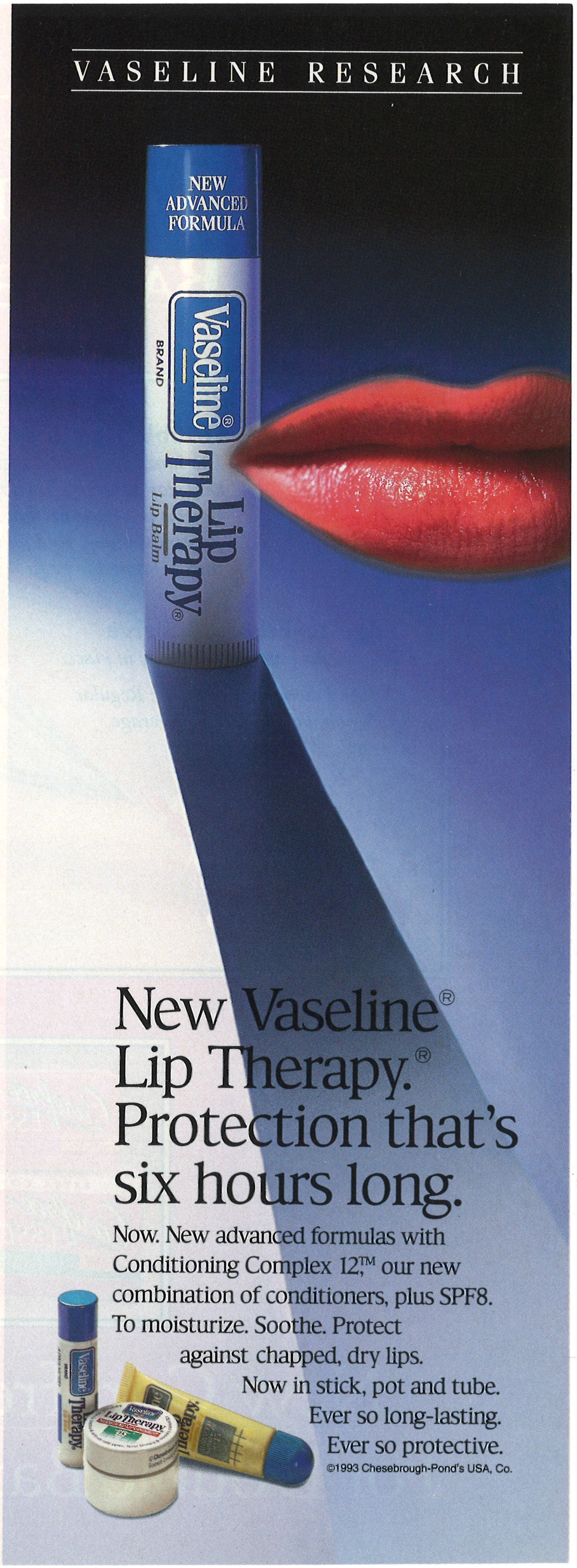
Action can also mean social and political action: someone who was obliged to cut short her maternity leave in order to keep her job might support a congressional candidate trying to pass a family leave bill; an incest survivor might work on a sexual abuse hot line. And if the values of a corporate culture are getting you down, action may include changing how or even where you work. A successful physician, disheartened by her male colleagues' insensitive handling of patients and their treatment of fellow doctors low on the hospital hierarchy, became an advocate for a more humane system for training interns and left a prominent big-city hospital to work at a student health center.

"I spend a lot of time with clients now, helping them to quit those big corporate firms," says Schwartz, who sees many lawyers' families. "It's almost impossible to have a healthy family and keep a job in one of these big law firms—they're poison for families!"

Schwartz works on clients' "parts"—different aspects of the self that impel us, at different times, to act in different ways. We all have a variety of parts to draw from, some of which are classically masculine, others more associated with feminine traits. He helps clients see that in the corporate culture the parts that dominate are cold-blooded, striving, calculating, strategic, and very invested in their egos. To balance yourself, Schwartz says, you have to help your more nurturing and compassionate parts—parts that derive pleasure from relationships and from less competitive kinds of activities—take center stage. A number of his clients "downscale," as Schwartz puts it, once they get in touch with the parts they have been forced to repress. They feel it's the only remedy for the angst in their family life.

Clearly, if the world is getting you down, as the saying goes, "something's gotta give." We have emerged from what many observers call the Decade of Greed. Whether the 1990s will be the Decade of Decency remains to be seen. But one thing is sure: it's not just a matter of blowing the whistle on the Emperor. We also need to pitch in together and make him a new set of clothes. And while we're at it, we might do well to put an Empress at his side. □

Melinda Blau is a contributing editor at New Woman *and author of* Families Apart: Ten Keys to Successful Co-Parenting.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