



Fact Sheet 3

The Chemical Imbalance Lie: Marketing Disorders to Sell Drugs

Psychiatrists claim without proof that a chemical imbalance in the brain causes mental illness. However, in 2005, faced with national media pressure, Dr. Steven Sharfstein, then president of the American Psychiatric Association, conceded, “There are no clean-cut lab tests” to prove the existence of a chemical imbalance in the brain. Dr. Mark Graff, another APA official, said that the theory was “probably drug industry derived.”

Claimed imbalance theory is a myth

- Jonathan Leo, associate professor of anatomy at Western University of Health Sciences, says, “If a psychiatrist says you have a shortage of a chemical, ask for a blood test and watch the psychiatrist’s reaction. The number of people who believe that scientists have proven that depressed people have low serotonin is a glorious testament to the power of marketing.”¹
- Dr. Ron Leifer, a New York psychiatrist, agrees: “There’s no biological imbalance. When people come to me and they say, ‘I have a biological imbalance,’ I say, ‘Show me your lab tests.’ There are no lab tests.”²
- Diabetes *is* a biochemical imbalance. However, “the definitive test and biochemical imbalance is a high blood sugar level. Treatment in severe cases is insulin injections, which restore sugar balance. The symptoms clear and retest shows the blood sugar is normal,” said Dr. Joseph Glenmullen of Harvard Medical School. “Nothing like a sodium imbalance or blood sugar imbalance exists for depression or any other psychiatric syndrome.”³
- Edward Drummond, MD, an Associate Medical Director of a mental health center in New Hampshire, stated: “First, no biological etiology [cause] *has* been proven for any psychiatric disorder...in spite of decades of research....So don’t accept the myth that we can make an ‘accurate diagnosis’...Neither should you believe that your problems are due solely to a ‘chemical imbalance.’”⁴

-
- Dr. Darshak Sanghavi, clinical fellow at Harvard Medical School, wrote: “despite pseudoscientific terms like ‘chemical imbalance,’ nobody really knows what causes mental illness. There’s no blood test or brain scan for major depression. No geneticist can diagnose schizophrenia.”⁵

Brain imaging cannot prove mental disorder, either

- Psychiatrist Dr. M. Douglas Mar said, “There is no scientific basis for these claims [of using brain scans for psychiatric diagnosis].”⁶
- Dr. Timothy Scott, Ph.D., lecturer and author of *America Fooled*, wrote that PET scans (brain scans) “seem so scientific that they are convincing. In truth, PET scans do not prove depression or schizophrenia or other mental disorders result from chemical imbalances or a defective brain.” Advertisements that claim otherwise “are paid for by drug companies that want you to believe that your brain chemistry may be messed up and that taking their \$150 [€118] per month pills will fix your problem.”⁷
- *The New York Times* summed up research spanning 30 years revealing that psychiatrists and researchers have never established brain imaging as a means for diagnosing any mental disorders or biological or physical cause for one.⁸

Mental disorders not genetic

- Psychiatry makes “*unproven* claims that depression, bipolar illness, anxiety disorders, alcoholism and a host of other disorders are in fact primarily biologic and probably genetic in origin,” says psychiatrist David Kaiser. (Emphasis added)⁹
- Dr. Bruce Levine, Ph.D., author of *Commonsense Rebellion*, concurs: “Remember that no biochemical, neurological, or genetic markers have been found for attention deficit disorder, oppositional defiant disorder, depression, schizophrenia, anxiety, compulsive alcohol and drug abuse, overeating, gambling, or any other so-called mental illness, disease, or disorder.”
- In his book *Blaming The Brain*, biopsychologist Elliot S. Valenstein says the “biochemical” theory is held onto only because it is “useful in promoting drug treatment.”¹⁰ Carl Elliot, a bioethicist at the University of Minnesota, sums it up: “The way to sell drugs is to sell psychiatric illness.”¹¹

1 Kelly Patricia O’Meara, *Psyched Out: How Psychiatry Sells Mental Illness and Pushes Pills That Kill* (AuthorHouse, 2006), pp. 47–48, citing Jonathan Leo paper, “The Biology of Mental Illness,” 2004.

2 Interview for documentary, *Psychiatry: An Industry of Death*, Citizens Commission on Human Rights (Los Angeles), 2006.

3 Joseph Glenmullen, MD, *Prozac Backlash*, (Simon & Schuster, New York, 2000), p. 195–196.

4 Edward Drummond, MD, *The Complete Guide to Psychiatric Drugs* (John Wiley & Sons, Inc., New York, 2000), pp. 15–16.

5 Dr. Darshak Sanghavi, “Health Care System Leaves Mentally Ill Children Behind,” *The Boston Globe*, 27 Apr. 2004.

6 Lisa M. Krieger, “Some Question Value of Brain Scan; Untested Tool Belongs in Lab Only, Experts Say,” *The Mercury News*, 4 May 2004.

7 Dr. Timothy Scott, *America Fooled: The Truth About Antidepressants, Antipsychotics and How We’ve Been Deceived*, (Argo Publishing, LLC, 2006), p. 62.

8 “Brain scans still unable to detect mental illness,” *The New York Times*, Oct. 2005.

9 David Kaiser, MD, “Commentary: Against Biologic Psychiatry,” *Psychiatric Times*, Vol. XIII, Issue 12, Dec. 1996.

10 Elliot S. Valenstein, Ph.D., *Blaming the Brain*, (The Free Press, New York, 1998), p. 4.

11 Shankar Vedantam, “Drug Ads Hyping Anxiety Make Some Uneasy,” *The Washington Post*, 16 July 2001.