Finding Solutions for Mental Illness

At 4 months old, Brandon snuggles in the arms of his mother. She smiles and coos with her son. Brandon's responses indicate that he experiences these interactions in a positive way. Researchers collaborating at Baylor College of Medicine and The Menninger Clinic have learned that these responses, in turn, indicate how Brandon perceives himself.

The positive elements that Brandon sees in his mother's gestures develop his ability to determine his own inner world by how he sees himself in others. The impact is monumental. Researchers believe that genetically prepared capacities develop in these interactions and lay the foundation for a balanced emotional life and for resilience against stress and trauma. Even with genetic vulnerabilities to a psychiatric disorder, Brandon is better prepared to meet the challenges of mental illness should symptoms develop later.

Researchers call this Brandon's capacity to mentalize.

“By mentalizing, we manage such feelings as frustration, anger, sadness, anxiety, shame and guilt without resorting to automatic fight-or-flight responses or ways of coping that are ultimately self-destructive. Mentalizing appears to be a key human capacity underlying the ability to sustain meaningful relationships and a strong sense of identity,” explained Effrain Bleiberg, M.D., Vice Chair in the Menninger Department of Psychiatry & Behavioral Sciences at Baylor, and a senior psychiatrist at The Menninger Clinic in Houston.

A child who lacks development of effective mentalizing may be more vulnerable to adversity in adolescence and adulthood. Effective interventions can change that. Researchers at the Menninger Department of Psychiatry & Behavioral Sciences at Baylor are leading studies to discover solutions that will enhance quality of life.

This effort is made possible by the affiliation of The Menninger Clinic, which moved from Kansas to Houston in 2003, with Baylor College of Medicine and The Methodist Hospital System in the Texas Medical Center. These internationally renowned institutions are committed to making a difference.

With a team of international experts, the Menninger Department of Psychiatry & Behavioral Sciences at Baylor is accelerating the translation of what researchers are learning in the laboratory to actual prevention and treatment of mental disorders. The Menninger Clinic’s expertise from a decade of mentalizing study is joined with Baylor’s leadership in neuroscience.

The strength of the researchers is world class. For example, Stuart Yudofsky, M.D., Chair of the Menninger Department of Psychiatry & Behavioral Sciences, is known worldwide for his expertise in neuropsychiatry and pharmacologic treatment of mental illness. Dr.
P. Read Montague, Jr., Ph.D., and Efrain Bleiberg, M.D.,

have a mission:

Leading a research team committed to discovering prevention
and cures for mental illness.

The Houston-based team at Baylor College of Medicine combines
cutting-edge technology at The Brown Foundation Human Neuroimaging
Laboratory with The Menninger Clinic’s expertise in behavioral research.

Their mission is ambitious. With generous support, it is achievable.

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