

From debate to stalemate and hate: An epidemic of intellectual constipation

Groupthink is hazardous, especially when perfused with religious fervor. It can lead to adopting irrational thinking¹ and aversion to new ideas or facts. Tenaciously clinging to 1 ideology as “the absolute truth” precludes an open-minded, constructive debate with any other point of view.

Three historical examples come to mind:

- The discovery of chlorpromazine in 1952 was a scientifically and clinically seismic and transformational event for the treatment of psychosis, which for centuries had been dogmatically deemed irreversible. Jean Delay, MD, the French psychiatrist and co-discoverer of chlorpromazine, was the first physician to witness the magical and dazzling dissolution of delusions and hallucinations in chronically institutionalized patients with psychosis.² He published his landmark clinical observations and then traveled to the United States to share the great news and present his findings at a large psychiatric conference, hoping to enthrall American psychiatrists with the historic breakthrough in treating psychosis. This was an era in which psychoanalysis dominated American

psychiatry (despite its dearth of empirical evidence). Dr. Delay was shocked when the audience of psychoanalysts booed him for saying that psychosis can be treated with a medication instead of with psychoanalysis (which, in the most intense groupthink in the history of psychiatry, they all believed was the only therapy for psychosis). Deeply disheartened, Dr. Delay returned to France and never returned to the United States. This groupthink was a prime example of intellectual constipation. Since then, not surprisingly, psychopharmacology grew meteorically while psychoanalysis declined precipitously.

- The monoamine hypothesis of depression, first propagated 60 years ago, became a groupthink dogma among psychiatric researchers for the next several decades, stultifying broader antidepressant medication development by focusing only on monoamines (eg, serotonin, norepinephrine, and dopamine). More recently, researchers have become more open-minded, and the monoamine hypothesis has taken a backseat to innovative new models of antidepressant therapy based on advances in the pathophysiology of depression, such as glutamatergic, opioid, and sigma pathways as well as neuroplasticity models.³ The



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A potent cerebral enema comprised of insight, common sense, and compromise may be in order

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consequence of groupthink in antidepressant research was a half-century delay in the development of effective alternative treatments that could have helped millions of patients recover from a life-threatening brain disorder such as major depressive disorder.

• Peptic ulcer and its serious gastritis were long believed to be due to stress and increased stomach acidity. So the groupthink gastroenterologists mocked 2 Australian researchers, Barry Marshall and Robin Warren, when they proposed that peptic ulcer may be due to an infection with a bacterium called *Helicobacter pylori*, and published their data demonstrating it.⁴ Marshall and Warren had the last laugh when they were awarded the 2005 Nobel Prize in Medicine and Physiology. It is ironic that even gastroenterologists are not immune to the affliction of intellectual constipation!

Intellectual constipation's effects on youth

The principle of a civilized debate of contrarian ideas must be inculcated early, especially during college years. Youth should be mentored about not cowering into an ideological cocoon and shun listening to different or opposing points of view.⁵ Institutions of higher learning are incubators of future leaders. They must provide their young students with a wide diversity of ideas and philosophies and encourage them to critique those ideas, not “shelter” or isolate them from any ideas. Youth need to recognize that the complex societies in

which we all live and work are not placid or unidimensional but a hotbed of clashing ideas and perspectives. An open-minded approach to education will inoculate young minds from developing intellectual constipation in adulthood.

Avoiding or insulating oneself from the ideas of others—no matter how disagreeable—leads to cognitive cowardice and behavioral intolerance. Healthy and vibrant debate is necessary as an inoculation against extremism, hate, paranoia, and, ultimately, violence. Psychiatrists help patients to self-reflect, gain insight, and consider changing their view of themselves and the world to help them grow into mature and resilient individuals. But for the millions of people with intellectual constipation, a potent cerebral enema comprised of a salubrious concoction of insight, common sense, and compromise may be the prescription to forestall lethal intellectual ileus.



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