

# Why Jehovah's Witnesses Have Mental Problems

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## ABSTRACT

A scientific literature review found that the rate of mental illness among Jehovah's Witnesses is considerably above average. The specific level found in the research varies partly because the extant research was on different populations and time periods. The major factors identified as either helpful or harmful to Witness mental health were discussed. Although persons with emotional problems tended to join the Witnesses, the Watchtower teachings and its subculture clearly adversely affected the mental health of those involved. The official Watchtower attitude on mental illness was also examined as were the common beliefs about the problem among Witnesses.

## The History Of The Watchtower Reveals the Sources of Mental Problems

Jehovah's Witnesses were organized in the late 1800's by Charles Taze Russell, a second Adventist disappointed in the failed prophecies of his fellow religionists. He soon reinterpreted these prophecies and set his own new dates. He first taught the time of the end started in 1798 (latter changed to 1799), that Christ had returned invisibly in 1878 (latter changed to 1874), and that a new world wherein the righteous would dwell forever on a paradise Earth would begin in 1914.[1] With his father's fortune, Russell preached tirelessly, yet when he died only a small band of followers existed as a result of all his efforts.

The second president, a lawyer named Rutherford, used his law background to create one confrontation after another with the state and almost everyone else including business, medicine and even religion. Soon Jehovah's Witnesses became infamous throughout the world for their legal clashes which often involved violence.[2] A fighter with no small legal skills, Rutherford recruited several other attorneys and the Watchtower soon had themselves positioned as martyrs. The small band of devoted--some would say fanatical--followers, they achieved something that no amount of money could buy: name recognition, and, at least in the legal profession, an admiration for their legal success and tenacity.

The third president, N.H. Knorr, ruled from the 1950s to the 1970s. He toned down their behavior and worked tirelessly to modify their public image from fanatics to quiet, determined Christians fearlessly going about their work preaching the good news of the Watchtower's kingdom. Pushing numerical growth to the exclusion of almost everything else including the health of individual Witnesses, his policies paid off. Except for the 1975 fiasco, growth has usually been steady. 1975 was their third recent major prediction for Armageddon, the other two were 1914 and 1925 which caused upward of one million people to eventually leave the sect.[3] They have carefully cultivated a public image of a God fearing devoted people, determined to ferret out God's truth from the scriptures and live their lives fully according to them. Behind this facade lies a nightmare which resulted in a rash of mental illness and social problems considerably higher than that found in virtually every American religion. The reasons for the Watchtower tragedy are complex and can only briefly be explored in this short review.

### The Scientific Research

Especially since the 1975 date (which was predicted to usher in God's kingdom on earth) failed, the numerous problems in the Watchtower congregations have received much mass media and scholarly attention. Most intensively studied problems include disfellowshipping, doctrinal disputes, and their recurring prophetic speculation failures. [4] Witness mental health issues have also been examined by many investigators.[5]

The writer, as a former Witness for over twenty years, was extensively involved in various administrative levels of the organization. This gave him first hand access to information relating to most

social and bureaucratic aspects of the Watchtower. He has also used his decade of extensive clinical experience with Witnesses and an extensive literature review as a basis for his evaluation. Outsiders have limited access to inside information, and for this reason are forced to rely on official publications, all of which are viewed by Witnesses as quasi-inspired.[6] The literature reveals eight academic studies which explored the problem of Witness mental illness. These will be briefly reviewed by year, the oldest first.

## The Rylander Study

Swedish psychiatrist Dr. Rylander investigated a sample of conscientious objectors imprisoned in Sweden. Of the 135 randomly selected cases, fully 126 were Witnesses. Of these 126, Rylander diagnosed 51 as neurotic, 42 psychotic, 32 as mentally retarded, and 5 as brain-damaged (some overlap exists because some cases were in two or more categories).[7] Diagnosis was made solely on the basis of behavior that was clearly pathological, such as irrational paranoia or severe long term depression, and not behavior that resulted from following Watchtower doctrine as non-social involvement with the non-Witnesses. Rylander also concluded from the subjects' medical records and his interviews that their pathological state was not uncommonly evident before conversion, but that the Watchtower's influence was often detrimental to mental health, sometimes severely so.

About four percent of the eligible armed service Swedish population were judged psychologically "unfit" for military services. The corresponding figure for Witnesses was twenty-one percent, or a rate five times greater. This was very close to the same ratio found by Spencer [8] whose diagnosis of "psychotic" or "neurotic" was made on the basis of mental hospital admission screening. Few of the cases in Rylander's study were marginal Witnesses, and most were actively involved in the Watchtower. Rylander concluded that many of those he studied lacked an education, job skills, emotional stability, and quality social relations. Unsatisfactory employment records often existed because of psychological deficiencies, lack of ability or immaturity. Rylander found that Witnesses committed "...a relatively large number of small crimes and other misdemeanors which generally resulted only in a fine...three [Witnesses] have been imprisoned for stealing or harboring of stolen property, and 36 have been fined for various offenses (traffic violations, drunkenness, unlawful selling of alcohol, poaching, unlawful entering, etc.)" [9]

Neurotic symptoms commonly found in his sample included "feelings of discomfort, general anxiety, poor sleep habits, times of brooding over what they see as the meaninglessness of life, the wrongs they have suffered and the mistakes they have made." [10] Rylander noted that the Watchtower doctrine helped some adherents to explain "all of their problems in life, and has given them a satisfaction and calmness which has brought a measure of stability to their lives." [11]

He also concluded that individual Witnesses tended to be burdened with a variety of serious concerns and often joined the sect in an effort to solve their many problems. Although the results of this study are

not fully applicable to today's situation, many of his conclusions are still largely true. [12] A major difference between his sample and today is that the Witnesses are now more middle-class and less socially rejected. Many Witnesses, though, especially those living in developing nations, still experience many of the same problems that Rylander reported.

### **The First American Study**

Pescor, in the first study on American Witness mental health, diagnosed as psychotic over seven percent of his total sample (n=177) of young males imprisoned due to obeying the Watchtower's prohibition against complying with military regulations.[13] The sample was obtained by interviewing all selective service violators admitted to the Federal prison medical center during the study. The level of Witness psychosis in his sample was about seventeen times higher than that for the population as a whole. A whopping seven percent were diagnosed psychotic, four percent had other mental abnormalities and fully one quarter were rated socially maladjusted. Sixteen percent of Pescor's sample were on hospital status and forty-four percent of these were diagnosed psychotic.

The demographic characteristics of the Witnesses in the study were as follows: almost half were raised on farms and only thirty-nine percent grew-up in cities of 5,000 or more. About half had some high school education (the median grade achieved was 9.2), and the majority were engaged in agricultural work. The discrepancy between socioeconomic status and I.Q. (the median I.Q. was 101.5) was partly a result of the Watchtower's discouragement of occupational advancement coupled with their stress on the regular study of Watchtower publications, a practice which serves to develop verbal and reading skills.

Only two percent were judged to have poor work performance and over forty percent took advantage of educational opportunities, mostly correspondence courses offered by the institution. Spanish was the most popular class pursued, presumably so the Witness could serve as a Watchtower missionary when released.

### **The Janner Study**

Swiss psychiatrist Janner (1963), examined a random sample of 100 Swiss citizens who were imprisoned because of objection to military service, about eighty-five percent were Jehovah's Witnesses. [14] The study found a significant number of Witnesses showed one or more of the following symptoms: high level of fear anxiety, severe neuroticism, introversion and/or social isolation tendencies. Janner [15] concluded that the Witnesses were generally "somewhat removed from reality, although some demonstrated intense religious feeling." As found in other studies, the majority of the Witnesses in his sample were unskilled or semi-skilled workers.

His research revealed a whopping 10.4 percent of the Witnesses had previous criminal convictions, about half of which were for sexual offenses, mostly pedophilia and exhibitionism. The rest of the criminal connections were for minor property or person offenses. He did not compare the mental illness rate of Jehovah's Witnesses to the population as a whole, but concluded that the rate among Witnesses was far higher than the rate among non-Witnesses. The Watchtower influence was often not positive, and there was no evidence that it had in the long run helped those who had emotional problems when they joined. Evidence was found, though, that the Watchtower had an adverse effect on many regardless of their adjustment level when they became involved.

## Spencer's Research

Spencer, an Australian psychiatrist, examined the records of all admissions to Western Australia psychiatric hospitals from January, 1971 to December, 1973.[16] He located fifty cases that, according to the patients' own admission, were active Jehovah's Witnesses. Spencer concluded that the rate of serious mental illness among this group was three times higher than that of non-Witnesses, and the diagnosis of paranoid schizophrenia was fully four times higher. A reason that Spencer's statistics are probably low is that Witnesses are prone to avoid psychiatric treatment and, especially, institutionalization.[17] The Watchtower, like many cultic movements, is very critical of both the mental health profession and most non-medical professional therapy.[18] The official Witness teaching is that the decision to visit a psychiatrist is up to one's conscience, but the undertone in most of their literature is strongly opposed to all types of professional mental health help.[19] The typical Witness believes that it is either very foolish or blatantly wrong to rely on the advice of a secular mental health therapist.[20]

## Other Research Studies

Licensed therapist Montague monitored the admissions to state and private mental hospitals, and local mental health clinics in Ohio from 1972 to 1986.[21] From this data (n=102) he estimated that "The mental illness rate of JW's is approximately 10 to 16 times higher than the rate for the general, nonWitness population [and that]...about 10% of the publishers (full members) in the average congregation are in serious need of professional help...[although they are often] able to hide this fact quite well, especially from outsiders." [22] From his intensive interviews with Witness patients and others, Montague concluded that persons who had emotional problems were attracted to the Witnesses but Watchtower involvement also caused many of the emotional problems that they suffered. This is evident from the fact that many with problems reported they were far happier after they left.

Another study was completed by Potter [23] as part of his Ph.D. thesis on religion and mental health. He concluded that there exists "a strong positive correlation between Witness membership and clinical schizophrenia." In yet another Ph.D. dissertation, Sack evaluated the effect of religion on the mental

health of select clients.[24] Although the case study method was utilized, many of the same conclusions were reached as found in the above studies, and in many ways her research compliments the present study. The clients she utilized had an enormous amount of insight into the pathological processes of the Watchtower and similar sects, and her study is well worth reading.

In addition, a German study by Elmer Koppl [25] also came to similar conclusions as did a study by Norwegian psychologist, Kjell Totland [26] Using Oakland County court records from 1965 to 1973, Bergman concluded that not only is the mental illness rate above average, but the suicide and crime rates are also high, especially aggressive crimes against persons [27] This is the extent of published empirical studies about the mental health of Jehovah's Witnesses, an area in which a need exists for more research.

### **The Validity Of These Studies**

The above studies may have under reported the level of Witness mental illness because of sampling problems. A major flaw with the military research studies is that many seriously psychotic Witnesses would have a history of hospitalization, and thus would likely have had a medical deferment. In the States, only those who have passed the required physical would be imprisoned because of refusing to obey the selective service law. If these cases were included, the rate would be higher than that which both Pescor and Rylander found.

It is possible that some Witnesses feigned mental illness in order to be released from prison, thereby inflating the rate. Conversely, faking mental problems generally would not result in prison release, but in reassignment to hospital status within the institution. Although hospital assignment may be a more desirable placement within the prison, the negative feeling that our culture has about the mentally ill would encourage faking physical, not mental problems. On the other hand, some Witnesses may have violated Watchtower teachings and selected alternative service. Those who did may be better adjusted because of the tendency for the more maladjusted Witnesses to rigidly cling to the Watchtower and all of its teachings.[28]

The mental hospital studies also likely under-reported the level of Witness mental illness. Spencer had to rely on self-reporting, and it is possible that many Witness patients did not reveal their true religious affiliation. Those who are forced to seek psychiatric services are often reluctant to admit their Witness involvement.[29] Many have written on their hospital forms "Protestant" or even "none" instead of their true religious affiliation.[30]

Jehovah's Witnesses who have mental difficulties are typically ashamed of them because they often believe good Witnesses do not become mentally ill. Due to the fear that their illness may bring reproach upon the Watchtower, they not uncommonly are not open with a therapist or researcher about their problems. Often they will undergo intense suffering to protect the Watchtower reputation. [31] When a Witness becomes "mentally ill," regardless of the reason, much personal guilt results because of the



belief that faithfulness to the Watchtower will usually protect one from emotional problems. Witnesses often believe that mental problems are evidence of personal shortcomings that are usually religious in nature. Active Witnesses are instructed to believe that "if I am not happy, I must not be pleasing God or doing what God desires of me" as interpreted by the Watchtower [32]

The Watchtower often stress Scriptures such as Psalms 128:1-2 which state, "Happy is everyone fearing Jehovah...[and] walking in His ways...happy you will be and it will be well with you." [33] Verses such as this are used to conclude that their unhappiness is a result of displeasing God; therefore, the cause of mental problems must be their personal shortcomings. This belief only further intensifies their guilt and, ironically, in an effort to solve emotional unbalance, they increase their loyalty to what they believe is God's only true organization. They often reason that "the organization is right; therefore, I must be wrong." Thus, a Witness who has been active for many years commonly believes that Jehovah's Witnesses are as a whole a happy people and, "as I am not, I must not be a good Witness."

Many persons raised around the influence of the Witnesses (especially during their formative years) who leave as adults often remain largely Witness in belief.[34] And these persons are usually no longer included in the Witnesses mental illness statistics. Montague concluded that, although those persons who remain involved often have more emotional problems than those who depart, Witnesses who suffer from severe mental illness tend to be forced out.[35] Those who are obviously psychotic are commonly made to feel unwelcome due to the common conclusion by Witnesses that they are either "demonized," or not fully committed Jehovah's Witnesses.

## Common Witness Reactions to This Research

Witnesses commonly react to the research on their mental health by refusing to acknowledge its validity. [36] They may cite the Watchtower's teaching that "...the Christian Witnesses of Jehovah are the best oriented, happiest, and most content group of people on the face of the earth. They get along better with each other than do people of any other religion, tribe or social group. They have the least need for psychiatrists." [37] The Watchtower [38] adds: "Jehovah God has a New World Society operating earth-wide today, and that it is through it that true happiness can be found."

Many Witnesses accept this statement as true even though their own experience is often contrary to this frequently repeated misconception.[39] Interestingly, the Watchtower has not made the above claim lately, and they are now more aware of this problem, as is obvious from their discussions of this issue in their publications and at their meetings.[40] Yet they have done little concrete to respond to it in the last decade except to publish numerous articles in their official magazines on depression and similar topics, mostly with primarily pop psychology content. The Watchtower also has not responded to the areas identified as the most serious factors causing emotional problems, and they have actively resisted even minor changes emanating from both insiders and outsiders.

## **The Tendency to Protect the Society**

The attempt of individual Witnesses to protect the Watchtower is a major impediment to research. The author, from working with almost one hundred active Witnesses who were mentally ill, has repeatedly experienced their revealing significant doubts, troubles, and fears (an important part of which is the personality conflicts common within the congregation) and then a short time later, while attempting to proselytize their neighbors, state that "Jehovah's Witnesses are the happiest people on the face of the earth." [41]

Another response is the following rationalization: "True Christians will be persecuted for God's name sake--and God's name is Jehovah. Thus Jehovah's Witnesses are persecuted--and these statistics about the high mental illness rate are just another example of the persecution against us." [42] Although Witnesses are sensitive about the common antagonism against them and many persons regard them as somewhat "strange," most know little more about them other than the fact that they refuse to salute the flag and accept blood transfusions. Many pastors have commented to the author that it is difficult to stimulate church members to study Watchtower theology in order to effectively present orthodox Christianity to Witnesses who visit their homes.

## **Why People Join the Watchtower**

A case history will help the reader understand why people join the Watchtower. The case involves Melissa, a woman who from a young age had her life planned, as do many women; a husband, children and a career as a nurse. Shawn was her first true love; and they dated for almost two years before their church wedding. They met when she was waitressing in Connecticut after graduation from high school and attending college part time to become a nurse. The two soon became fast friends, then dated regularly. Shawn was good looking, kind and had no reservations about giving either attention or gifts to Melissa. Shawn was from a nice family, and Melissa felt close to especially his parents and three brothers.

After their first child, Shawn spent less and less time at home--and after their second child, the fights intensified. He then became physically violent, although almost always after drinking heavily. After the violence began, home was no longer the same, and Melissa saw Shawn in a drastically different light. They soon divorced and she was shattered. Alone in the city they moved to after they married, she had few friends, two young babies and no skills aside from waitressing. Melissa also felt trapped under the court order not to leave the city so her ex-husband could see the children.



Soon a young lady with a child in tow knocked on Melissa's door and offered her two magazines which would "help her to understand her Bible." Desperately seeking to fill her need for companionship, Melissa enjoyed the company of the lady, Thelma, and invited her back. Thelma seemed to have what she didn't: happiness and a devoted loving family. The Witness soon offered her a "Bible study," confirming Melissa's suspicion that her new friend was a Jehovah's Witness. Knowing little about the group except they did not celebrate the holiday's or accept blood transfusions, she felt it would not hurt to discuss the Bible with Thelma. After all, Thelma assured her they would only be studying the Bible, not a Watchtower book. Anyway, Thelma explained, whether Melissa celebrated birthdays was up to her. And besides, Thelma said, the Watchtower does not interfere with medical treatment--all decisions in this area are up to the individual. Many misconceptions about what Jehovah's Witnesses believed existed, she added, stressing that after they studied the Bible she could decide for herself.

Raised a nominal Lutheran, Melissa now felt a deep spiritual need. Thelma even speculated that the events in Melissa's life might be part of God's plan to cause her to make a commitment to God's organization. After all, if Melissa married a Witness, she would be happily married now. Witness husbands, Thelma explained (and those that Melissa met at the Kingdom Hall seemed to verify this) were good men who loved and cared for their wives in harmony with their scriptural obligations. If they behaved otherwise, they would be disfellowshipped. The more Melissa learned about this religion, the more it seemed the answer to her every need. Soon after Thelma showed up on her porch, the Witnesses helped her by babysitting, chauffeuring her to the store until she could afford a car, and one "brother" who owned a restaurant gave her a good job. She was soon able to rent a small apartment, and in less than a year she met a young Witness who was as enthusiastic for her new religion as she was. They married and both were able to arrange their affairs to spend full time in the Witness work, encouraging other people to accept the gospel accordingly to the Watchtower.

This story which started out so wonderful soon became a nightmare which eventually resulted in the suicide of the two sons which Melissa bore from her second marriage. It is also a scenario that is repeated millions of times every year throughout the world: over thirteen million people are now either active or studying to become Jehovah's Witnesses. The nightmare that these millions of people enter could have been avoided if they were aware of the deception and entrapping quagmire of this Watchtower.

## Why Mental Health Problems are so Great

Numerous reasons exist for the mental health problems among Witnesses, but research has determined the following often are among the most important:

**1. Change in policy.** The Watchtower is in a perpetual state of doctrinal change, often flip flopping as many as three or four times on a single issue. Nowhere has this been so tragic as in their anti-medical teachings. The Watchtower taught during the 1930's and 1940's that vaccinations were not only

ineffective, but were a "direct violation" of God's law.[43] Then in the early fifties vaccinations were up to one's conscience, but today the Watchtower publishes articles extolling the virtues of vaccinations and the many lives they have saved. In late 1961 organ transplants were specifically ruled acceptable, then in 1967 they were banned.[44] Even cornea and kidney transplants were taught to be in violation of God's law because they were ruled as being cannibalism. Then in 1980 most organ transplants were ruled a matter of conscience.[45] The only exception, bone marrow transplants, was wrong only because bone was a source of blood. In 1984, even bone marrow transplants were approved.

In 1909 the Watchtower specifically stated that the Jewish prohibition against eating blood was not considered law for Christians, but it was not until 1961 that receiving a blood transfusion was grounds for disfellowshipping.[46] The Watchtower now teaches that "if a court authorized transfusion seems likely...[a witness must] put forth strenuous efforts to avoid a violation of God's law on blood [and if] authorities...consider him a law-breaker or make him liable to prosecution...the Christian could view it as suffering for the sake of righteousness." [47]

The Watchtower teaching is clear: Witnesses are to forfeit their life rather than submit to a transfusion, and this includes allowing their children to die. If they do die due to lack of blood, they may sue the surgeon as they did Dr. Denton Cooley-- they lost this case; the jury ruled the blood objection made the operation more risky (*Houston Chronicle* Nov. 18 1995 p. 42A) Yet even in this area the Watchtower society has changed. Use of all blood products and blood fractions for any purpose was once condemned--even glues made from blood products were not to be purchased. Now Witnesses may accept albumin, globulins, factor VIII, factor IX and even circulating blood. The ban on blood fractions for hemophiliacs was lifted in 1978.[48] Blood serums are now approved because those for viral hepatitis rabies, tetanus, diphtheria and others contain only "a tiny amount" of blood.[49] Because the Watchtower also teaches Witnesses are to be faithful even "in little things," many view these many exceptions as hypocritical. Thousands of children have died of lack of blood, grandparents became blind because of refusing cornea transplants, and others died because of refusing a kidney transplant.[50] This is especially traumatic if the doctrine changes and what was once condemned becomes approved. This is shown in the following case.

According to Walker "Gary Busselman watched his wife, Delores, die of leukemia. As Jehovah's Witnesses, the couple did not believe in blood transfusions or a bone-marrow transplant.... Today, Busselman thinks the refusal of those medical procedures was wrong and he wants to help others who might have experienced similar tragedies." [51] He added that "she died in 1971 and in 1980 they changed their rule and members since then can get transplants." Guilt and anger commonly result from the belief that a loved one died (Busselman had an extremely good marriage) because of following a doctrine which was later admitted as being wrong by the church.

2. Another major reason that causes disillusionment among Witnesses is they are taught that their organization alone is specifically run by God. Those inside of the Watchtower organization are the only true servants of God, and all of those outside, especially the clergy, are evil persons soon to be destroyed at a holocaust called Armageddon. Yet many are aware of the numerous cases of Witnesses who have done horrible things. A recent example is the two "skinheads" who "used to get along with their parents..."

and [were nice boys]" but murdered their mother, Brenda 48, their father Dennis, 54 and their brother Eric, 11.[52] The boys, Brian, 17 and his brother, David, only 16 then both plead guilty to lesser charges and received life in prison. This horrendous crime which received international attention no doubt reminded many Witnesses of the other infamous Watchtower murder cases. Another Witness, William Carlson, who murdered both his Witness parents when he was only 16, received international publicity and is only one of hundreds of similar cases.[53]

**3. Prophecy failure.** Many Witnesses harbor a powerful deep seated fear which they often try to repress or rationalize that the Watchtower is a false religious organization. This idea is so frightening for many Witnesses that they refuse to explore their fears--preferring to suppress rather than acknowledge and deal with them. This response is not unlike a wife who is deeply suspicious that her husband is unfaithful. Each sign of his sin causes her emotional turmoil, yet she denies her fear to her friends and even herself.

The most recent drastic doctrinal change was the former Watchtower teaching that the countdown to Armageddon commenced in 1914, and that the first world war was a major sign that Christ would very soon establish his Millennial kingdom on earth. [54] They also taught the generation that saw 1914 would see Armageddon and the New World. Then a November 1995 *Watchtower*, according to Woodward, announced "all millennial bets are off...the sects leaders quietly acknowledged that Jesus was right in the first place, when he said that 'no one knows the day or the hour.'" [55] The Watchtower has been wrong on almost every single prediction it has ever made, and this is especially traumatic when persons take stock in what they sacrificed to become Jehovah's Witness.

The date failures effect in a major way other policies. In the forties and fifties, the Watchtower even discouraged having a family--teaching that Armageddon was too close to risk having children. Even marriage was once discouraged. In 1941 the Watchtower published a book entitled *Children* in which they argued that the only way people can "please God" is to acquire "the right kind of knowledge." [56] The book's purpose was primarily to convince the reader that only the Watchtower is God's organization, and it is only by following it religiously that everlasting life can be obtained.[57] Woven within this message was the story of John and Eunice who decided not to marry but instead to serve the Watchtower full time. They conclude that they will someday have children but not until after Armageddon when "under the Rule of the Theocracy...all the people will rejoice, and that righteous rule shall stand forever and be a monument to the supremacy and righteousness of Jehovah...[all] those who desire to live and who love righteousness will now give heed to the admonition of the Lord and flee to that kingdom." [58] The Watchtower then informs its readers in this publication by God's organization that

**"Armageddon is surely near, and during that time the Lord will clean off the earth all that is disagreeable. Then, by His grace we shall begin our life with a greater vision, and prolonged joy...From now on we shall have our heart devotion fixed on the THEOCRACY knowing that soon we shall journey forever together on the earth...We can well defer our marriage until lasting peace comes to the earth. Now we must add nothing to our burdens, but be free and equipped to serve the Lord... Eunice, my decision is made. I shall shun politics, religion, and commerce, and I shall**

**avoid the cities...Our present duty is plain. We must now be witnesses to the name of Jehovah." [59]**

Eunice and John would now be in their 70's, still waiting for Armageddon which in 1941 was prophesied to occur "very soon." Witnesses who chance upon these older publications are often both angry and hurt at being deceived and betrayed. This leads to guilt, depression, often bitterness and even open anger. Witnesses who lived during the time when these things were written are likewise often bitter because they sacrificed enormously for what turned out to be, not just a false hope, but an open lie.

Those who are not part of the Watchtower often do not understand the critical significance Watchtower failed prophecy and erroneous teachings have in the lives of Witnesses. Watchtower publications are not simply books written by humans to try and explain scripture, but they are viewed as quasi inspired, a new Bible chapter that arrives each week. Witnesses are taught that no one except the very top Watchtower leaders can discern God's will through Bible study alone. Only by being part of God's organization, the Watchtower (which they teach is the ark of salvation), can one be saved. As the flood came and killed all of those who were not in the ark, likewise too, Armageddon will destroy forever all of those who are not in the Watchtower ark.

The key is not being saved in the Christian sense or even being good, but being in the Watchtower organization--although they also teach that even this does not guarantee salvation. Witnesses as a whole firmly believe--at least they must verbalize they firmly believe--that the Watchtower is God's only organization and is directed by Him. For this reason, the many changed teachings--and hundreds of examples exist--are of no small importance. False prophecy vividly tells the Witness they devoted much of their life to a false religious organization. Dealing with this reality is enormously traumatic, can take years to adjust to and can bring on psychological as well as somatic symptoms. Those who have been in the organization only a short while are often not aware of the Watchtower's history, but nagging doubts soon become greater and greater, often precipitating a "crisis of conscience" which forces the person to eventually leave the Watchtower.

And leaving is also no easy matter. When people become Witnesses, they are slowly indoctrinated into a belief structure which requires them to give up their friends -- often even their family -- and adopt a new family, that of the Watchtower. After they have been Witnesses for a few years, most all have only Witness friends. For many, especially those who were born into the Watchtower, their entire family and many relatives were also all Witnesses. Leaving often results in being disfellowshipped, which means that they will be forced to cut off all meaningful association with virtually every one of their friends, and often their family, if Witnesses. Consequently, many find leaving extremely traumatic even after they are fully convinced the Watchtower is wrong. For this reason many elect to stay, trudging along to Watchtower meetings and hearing and saying things that they themselves disagree with. Eventually, the conflict may become too great, and they conclude they must resign, giving up family, friends and their whole previous life.

Common are stories of children who left the Watchtower and as a result ended all communication



between parents and the children. Many ex-Witnesses have told me they have never seen their grandchildren, and have not talked with their own children in decades, all because either the parents or the children have left the Watchtower. In one case, a kind man active in his church related that after he and his wife left the Watchtower 15 years ago neither one of their children have spoken to them since. They have even never once seen pictures of their four grandchildren. Their children have an unlisted number, and mail to them from their parents is marked "unwanted, return to sender." When they tried to visit their sons home he called the police and had them forcefully removed from the porch. Attempts to obtain a court order to see their grandchildren have so far failed. These stories are common, especially because worldwide there are probably as many ex-Witnesses as active Witnesses. Even persons who are not baptized, if they no longer choose to associate with the Watchtower and speak out against it, are labeled "undesirable association" and are often completely cut off as if they were disfellowshipped.

When Witnesses read the earlier Watchtower publications, most agree that much which was once taught is absolute foolishness. The Watchtower's "historical archives provide a seemingly inexhaustible pool of craziness, superficially written articles, and naive acceptance of formerly in vogue ideas." [60] Clearly, one of the Watchtower's problems is "their incredibly superficial research, and the fact that the attitude of 'God directs us' tends to cause laziness--why work hard if God directs the way. God will ensure that only what is true will be published..." [61]

### **The Watchtower's Control Over Witnesses**

In my twenty years as a Witness, I become acquainted with only a handful of Witnesses who were employed as mental therapists, and a couple even had their Ph.D.'s in psychology. As far as I know, most of them have left--although I am aware of three Witnesses in the United States who are licensed counselors. The reports that I have received about these individuals have been less than flattering. I recently received a copy of an agreement form which a Witness psychologist requires that all of his Witness patients sign before he will work with them. I understand he has a thriving practice doing therapy with Witnesses.

The Watchtower policy of requiring Witness professionals such as lawyers, doctors, or psychologists to report information to the elders relative to Watchtower defined wrong-doing has created much controversy. It is appalling that any licensed therapist would indulge in the highly unethical practice of using this agreement which requires them to "report" to the elders behavior in their patients the Watchtower considers wrong. Given the large number of offenses that the Watchtower disfellowships for, it is probably a rare psychiatric client that has not committed some of them. Having doubts about the Watchtower being God's organization, complaints about the brothers and sisters, or even guilt about past sexual or moral behavior, are all very common among this population. People who seek out a counselor have problems, and in endeavoring to deal with them not uncommonly involve themselves in behavior which they later regret--drinking, unkindness or immorality are only a few examples. Further, many individuals who have doubts about the Watchtower end up with emotional turmoil which they often take

to a therapist for help in dealing with.

This form almost guarantees that the client will not be free and open with a counselor--but rather will be extremely guarded, fearful that what they say will be used against them later. I cannot imagine a poorer situation to do counseling. A counselor is a person with which the client should feel fully free and open to reveal his or her most hidden thoughts, secrets, dreams, fears, and sins. The whole point of therapy is to lay bare one's soul so that the therapist can work with clients to help them build a better life. The fear and guilt that such an arrangement as this engenders would almost guarantee that this did not occur. Of course, the client could elect to reveal damning information and face the consequences--a situation which in most cases is hardly very conducive to helping the person deal with his or her problems which are the basis for whatever sin may have occurred. Even if the committee elects not to disfellowship, the fear that one could be thrown out of the congregation and be rejected by one's counselor during this difficult time can work against helping the client. The counselor is clearly saying with this statement that "you and your needs are not as important as strictly obeying the dictates of the Watchtower." And, "if in the elders' opinion you violate these dictates, I as your counselor, who once endeavored to unconditionally accept you and help you with your problems, will also toss you out, and will no longer help you."

To refer patients to the elders, virtually none of whom have formal training in psychology, therapy or human behavior, is often a drastic mistake. When the writer suggested to a male Bethelite who was going through severe depression to talk to the elders, his response was "Do you think a janitor and a brush salesman are going to help me with my emotional problems?" As has been well documented, elders tend to feel that the solution to every problem is to pray, study more, and trust in Jehovah. Besides, they feel the guilt over whatever emotional problems one is suffering from are likely due to some sin or shortcoming on the victim's part. In my experience, the elders often do more harm than good, which is what we would expect: putting people who have not only no training, but a false view of humanity and a distorted perception of reality in charge of an emotionally disturbed person could well be lethal--as it sometimes is.

**4.** The Watchtower prohibitions have reached into virtually every area of life and cover minutia to the extreme. They condemn all holidays and celebrations except one they call "the memorial," and for generations have condemned higher education, all avocations, and even career advancement. Missing one of their required five meetings per week (Watchtower activities could take between 20 and 30 hours per week if one is conscientious) and spending time with non Witnesses except to proselytize were also condemned. As a result, it is very difficult for a child raised a Witness to develop into a normal, socially aware, well adjusted adult. They are taught that all of those of the world are evil, and even though worldly people may appear to be kind, this is one of Satan's tactics to lure people out of God's organization.

Witnesses are often fearful to read anything critical of the Watchtower. The Watchtower teaches Witnesses must have "nothing to do with" critics, and they "will not be curious about what such people have to say."**[62]** When something critical is being shown on T.V. they often turn it off, no doubt with secret longings to hear what was said. Yet they routinely put themselves in the position of encountering



opposition when they go from door to door--and from this experience often develop paranoia which may explain the fact that paranoia schizophrenia is extremely high among them. A major problem among both leaders and followers is their true believerism causes them to accept conclusions based on ignorance. As a wise person once said, beware of a man who has read only one book!

Prohibited from involving themselves in normal social relations and most all school activities, they often grow up lonely children. Although deviance among them is not uncommon, it none-the-less brings guilt and ambivalence. Their stand on many topics--especially condemning sports, refusing to salute the flag or celebrate the holidays--often also brings derision from their peers which typically acerbates normal social development.[63]

5. A major reason why so many Witnesses have mental health problems is because the Watchtower has issued few *effective* major guidelines to help them live their lives. Their main goal is to serve the Watchtower, and consequently they feel compelled to attend five usually boring meetings each week and involve themselves in the often unrewarding door-to-door proselytizing work. Although many households are polite but not interested, some are very rude. A Witness can spend years in the field service without detecting a single person who has a genuine interest in their message. Discouraged from many normal means of self fulfillment, they slavishly devote their time and energy to serving an organization which in fact does not care about them as individuals. Given little practical and realistic advise on to how to deal with life problems, discouraged from finding rewarding employment that is enjoyable and financially adequate, many feel they are trapped in a way of life in which virtually every alternative is undesirable. Many thus plod along for years, hoping that Armageddon will come soon to rescue them from their plight. In the mean time, their depression and hopelessness colors everything they do, even though they ostensibly may appear to be "happy serving Jehovah."

The attractions which originally pulled many people to the Watchtower often do not last much beyond baptism. Their associates who were once very supportive and tolerant of their lack of doctrinal conformity soon insist that they rigidly teach and believe all Watchtower policy. They are now considered mature and must rigidly follow every whim of the Watchtower. No longer is celebrating birthdays "up to the individual," but now is a disfellowshipping offense. Once they are trapped, the easy going tolerance which lured them into the Watchtower is no longer manifested. They are thus successfully pressured into doing things they had first resisted, sometimes tremendously. The hope of a New World just around the corner becomes more and more in the future until many wonder if this often delayed promise will ever come. Discouragement is an often repeated theme, both in the Watchtower literature and in discussions among Witnesses. They are constantly admonished to keep their chin up and focus on serving the Watchtower only, assuming that slavishly spending as much as thirty hours or more per week in Watchtower interests will solve their every problem. When it doesn't, guilt often sets in, causing Witnesses to feel that they are evil and will not survive Armageddon. The depression and hopelessness not uncommonly leads to suicide, homicide or both.

## Why do People Stay so Long?

Many sincerely believe that the WT is God's organization -and that He is directing it. Even if things they do are wrong, such as their past erroneous teachings they are done for a purpose. No matter what good or bad they do, it is all part of God's purpose. Others even feel that the past tragic teachings such as condemning vaccinations, organ transplants, and blood transfusions do not matter since loss of life is now somewhat like having to go on a long vacation--a faithful person will be resurrected anyway, thus what does it matter? A common reason many stay is because they have given their life to this organization-- I did not marry, and am too old to begin a career, but have a reasonably good life (the Watchtower will take care of me if I am ill, sick, cannot work or whatever) thus I may as well stay involved in the Society. Many have a "crisis of conscience" and feel that they can no longer support an organization that they no longer believe in, but stay because of family. Many believe that "who knows whether the Watchtower is true or false--it's background and history indicates that they are as good as any other religion, so why not stick with them? Of, course, the Watchtower stresses the worst in all other churches and only the best of themselves. Some of the leaders believe that they are specially anointed of God, and that God uses them only. These have a "Christ-like" position in the earth--somewhat like the Apostles or better.

## The Way Out

Fortunately, some do find the way out. Many become agnostics or atheists, hating God and all attempts to understand and reach Him. Some are fortunate though, and through intensive Bible study come to realize that the Watchtower is based on a misunderstanding of the Bible and a misreading of many select "proof texts." These persons realize a firm faith does exist that is not based on the shifting sands of a man made organization directed by individuals who are scripturally illiterate and ill informed about historical Christianity or even modern Biblical research. These people are able to look back at their experience in the Watchtower as one that can be used to help others. Many of them become involved in the various cult ministries and use their Watchtower expertise to help others find salvation in Him who is the only way, truth and light.

And the number of these are growing daily: the ex-Jehovahs Witness for Jesus Conference held annually in Pennsylvania attracts hundreds. Ministries to ex-Jehovahs Witnesses world wide now number in the thousands, and the number of high quality tapes, books and journals produced to help persons deal with the Watchtower tragedy is growing yearly. Dr. Walter Martin, one of the early pioneers of this movement, produced excellent literature to help those who were ensnared in the Watchtower find their way out. His *Jehovah of the Watchtower*, originally published in 1953, is now a classic. Since then, over three hundred books have been published which thoroughly document the Watchtower's checkered history and the tragedy that it has brought to the lives of multi-millions of people.

## Summary

The extant research, although some of it is dated, clearly shows that the mental illness rate among Witnesses is many times higher than among the non-Witness population. The Witnesses see their primary task as spreading their message and are generally little concerned with whether or not the mental illness rate is higher among them than the non-Witness population. Yet if they believe that the level is low, they will try to use this (and anything else they believe is favorable) as a drawing card. Frantic activity devoted to spreading the Watchtower "Word" before God destroys "this system of things" is foremost in their minds. Most Witnesses conclude that questioning something they know a priori to be true is a waste of time and counter productive. Most feel that the mental health of members is far less important than obedience to the Watchtower.

Self-report information finds that most Witnesses who leave consistently report that involvement in the Watchtower, while usually positive at first, in time often causes much emotional turmoil which increases to the point that they develop a serious approach-avoidance conflict. The positive aspects are such that for most Witnesses leaving is not easy, and typically causes inner turmoil for months or even years. After one has adjusted to the outside world, most all ex-Witnesses do not regret leaving and many conclude that their involvement seriously adversely affected their mental health. Admittedly, this retrospective assessment is somewhat distorted by the resentment many ex-members usually feel. Nonetheless, an examination of the many available case histories reveals a clear pattern of progressive mental health deterioration caused by the teachings, practices, and the environment that the Watchtower produces.

The Watchtower often shows little concern for those under their care. They are now a huge bureaucratic organization--their USA income alone was over \$1,250,000,000. They have just completed a luxury complex in Patterson, New Jersey, own million dollar chandeliers and billions in real estate. A major concern now is their teachings that one should use whatever tactics are necessary to obtain finances to run their empire--a good example is the coercion of individuals to leave their money to the Watchtower Society under the guise that this will facilitate their achieving everlasting life (I am now aware of a dozen cases in this area).

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