

Antiques
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IN LIVING INSIDE
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Many seen blotting out the fear of nuclear war

By Jean Dietz
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Why are Americans apparently so apathetic

about the potential horror of a nuclear holocaust?

That question was the center of a two-day

conference of psychologists and of psychiatrists and other physicians on "the Threat of Nuclear War," sponsored by Harvard Medical School

last week.

In psychological terms, some of the participants attribute the apathy of the average American to the nuclear arms race to denial or displacement of their underlying fears. Others talk about a process of "psychic numbing" in the face of a threat to health and survival too terrifying for the mind to grasp.

Denial and displacement are psychological mechanisms that people use to blot disturbing thoughts out of their consciousness in order to minimize their anxiety.

While Europeans are taking to the streets in mass protests to combat imminent danger, only a small number of Americans appear to be actively opposing nuclear war.

To Europeans, the danger is "very real and immediate since Europe is the focus for nuclear arms deployment," said Dr. John Mack of the Psychiatry Department of Cambridge Hospital. "The death and destruction of war on their own soil is part of the European experience. For most Americans, it remains remote."

Results of a questionnaire given to 1000 grammar and high school students in the Boston area show the psychological impact on youth living in a world where thermonuclear disaster is a constant threat, Mack said.

To a question on how nuclear advances influenced future plans, one student wrote:

"I don't choose to bring up children in a world of such horrors and dangers of deformation. The world might be gone in two seconds from now, but I still plan for the future, because I am going to live as long as I am going to live."

Other replies reflected a lack of confidence in the political process and alienation from adults who would subject them to a such a threat, he added.

Until recently, Mack said, adults have been acting "as though they were hypnotized, like a pack of lemmings headed to the sea," in regard to nuclear war. "The growth of apocalyptic religion, drinking and drugging or our society into a stupor, and failure to deal with all sorts of social problems as a result of extraordinary defense expense," Mack said, are among the consequences of unexpressed fears of nuclear power.

Not only the rise of political and religious fundamentalism but even the preoccupation with outer space reflects "psychic numbing," a diminished capacity to feel, to take into account what happens at the receiving end of nuclear weapons, said Dr. Robert Jay Lifton of Yale.

Lifton said a study of young adults in elementary school in the late 1950s, when air-raid drills were mandatory, showed many grew up to think of death in terms of "collective annihilation."

"Students were taught that there was a terribly dangerous weapon but that you could protect yourself from it if you put your head under the desk," the Yale psychiatrist recalled.

"Their perception of craziness of what they were being taught had much to do with a sense of absurdity in that generation. It can be healthy. The whole idea of combating the bomb seemed crazy; the authorities seemed crazy; the world seemed crazy, as indeed in many ways, it is."

At one of a series of small workshop sessions where therapists shared individual fears and anxieties about the threat of nuclear war, Dr. Lester Grinspoon of Massachusetts Mental Health Center talked about how people have managed to go about their daily lives for so long "in the shadow of horrendous possibilities."