

Men And Hunger: A Psychological Manual For Relief Workers By Harold Steere Guetzkow (1946) – Excerpts

This work has been selected by scholars as being culturally important and is part of the knowledge base of civilization as we know it.

To the men who starved voluntarily in the hope that their privation might aid millions who starve involuntarily.

During the past year we have been privileged to participate in an intensive study of the behavior of men who voluntarily starved in the Laboratory of Physiological Hygiene, University of Minnesota. We have interviewed these men many times. We talked with them, attended parties with them, saw them work, and participated in group discussions with them. Our notes were gathered throughout the entire year during which we saw the men under normal, starved and re-habilitated conditions. We want to share our observations with you, because we believe this report on the profound behavioral and emotional changes which occurred when the men were semi-starved will help you prepare for work with starved people. We approached the experiment skeptically, never thinking that the proposed 25% weight loss could induce a profound set of changes. We had

thought that the striking changes which are described in starving peoples occurred only in extreme cases, or were largely caused by the tremendous insecurities and disruptions which accompanied war and famine. But we were mistaken—and perhaps our observations will help you decipher those behavioral patterns which are due to physiological starvation itself as compared with those aspects due to the many other distressing forces which act upon these unfortunate peoples. Let us explain a bit more about the experiment itself. Thirty-two normal men from twenty-one to thirty-three years of age were first observed under normal nutritional conditions for three months. Then they were systematically semi-starved for a period of six months, losing about 25% of their weight. Finally they were rehabilitated for three months. These men were conscientious objectors who had volunteered for the starvation experiment, so that they could be of aid in determining what rehabilitation diets would be most efficacious in feeding the world's starving peoples. They had complete security, in that they were under constant medical supervision and knew they would be taken out of the experiment if anything serious went wrong. They were not exposed to, nor did they contract, contagious diseases. They were not bombed. They had the safety and security of the average American civilian in the continental United States. They knew beyond a shadow of a doubt that more food would be given to them at the end of the

six months of starvation—their food rations were not dependent upon the vicissitudes of politics. In other words, this experiment presented an opportunity for observation of the changes in personal and group behavior of these thirty-two men during physiological semistarvation, without complication from the social and political forces that usually act upon peoples in war-torn areas. The physiological variable was systematically changed from sufficiency to starvation and finally to rehabilitation, while the other variables were held essentially constant. In other experiments we have seen men undergo severe physical stresses—exposure to intense heat for twelve days, five-day complete starvation during hard work, three days and nights of sleep deprivation—all of these without radical changes occurring in personality. At the end of months of observations on these starved men we were deeply impressed with the magnitude of the behavioral changes caused by the semistarvation itself.¹

1. HOW DOES IT FEEL TO BE STARVED?

Let us first get a bird's-eye view of how a starving person feels by quoting directly from the diaries of our experimental subjects, written while they were starving.

First Month "I am definitely weaker than I was once and though my energy level remains high, I have no reserve left."

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"When I feel lowest it seems as if all I'm doing is sitting like a little kid, waiting until school's out. Movements have slowed considerably this week; also less desire to move."

"The time between meals has now become a burden. This time is no longer thought of as an opportunity to get those things done which I have to do or want to do. Instead, it's time to be borne, killed until the next meal, which never comes fast enough."

Second Month

"I just don't have any desire to do the things I should do or the things I want to do. Instead of writing a letter, I read a newspaper. Instead of studying, I read a pamphlet. Instead of cleaning, I putter around making excuses such as, 'Well, I really won't have enough time to do the complete job. I'll do it later.'"²

...Third Month

"I purchased a tube of toothpaste yesterday. Finally got around to using it for the first time last night. Had a desire to eat the paste, but controlled it."

"Received a new insight and shock as to my physical condition today. Tried to play table tennis for the first time in four months and was amazed at the amount of effort it took to hit the ball. Also the lack of coordination and poor response of the arm. I had no idea coordination would be so poor."³

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Fifth Month

"I also found myself becoming senselessly irritable, particularly when I watched some of the bizarre eating habits of others. One mixture that came near flooring me was potatoes, jam, sugar, gingerbread—all thrown into a bowl of oatmeal and used as a sandwich spread. I hate to see guys picking around with this or that to make a superb sandwich, all the time letting their soup get cold."

2. ...BEHAVIOR CHANGES INDUCED BY STARVATION

Changes in Motivation In normal living there is an ebb and flow among the drives and impulses, first one dominating, then another. In starvation this pleasant balancing process is upset, and the hunger drive gradually dominates more and more of the person's activities and thoughts. Concomitant with this is a lessening of other drives, such as the diminution of sexual urges. Hunger differs radically from the delightful nuances of appetite. Seldom do normal people clearly separate the two; never have they experienced the depth and omnipresence of dull, gnawing hunger pains. This kind of hunger is induced by the body consuming itself, such as leg and arm tissues wasting away. When food is supplied, the individual is often caught between his desire to gulp it down ravenously, and to consume the prized possession slowly, covetously, so that the flavor and odor of each morsel are fully appreciated. Some of our thirty-two

grown men licked their plates to avoid waste. Toward the end of the semistarvation a number of the men would dawdle for two hours over a meal they had previously consumed in twenty minutes. No matter how the food was eaten, usually each man would leave the dining hall with his hunger undiminished. Many of the men toyed with their food, making weird and seemingly distasteful concoctions. Cold macaroni sandwiches were prepared by some men to tide them over the long midday stretch which extended from early morning until the evening meal. But the thought that there was a sandwich in one's pocket was excruciating, and often a man would break his best resolutions and jealously eat it, basking in the exquisite aroma which clung to the cold macaroni. Throughout the six months of starvation this group of American men, accustomed to the variety of food that America provides, appreciated and enjoyed a monotonous menu of potatoes, turnips, rutabagas, dark bread, and macaroni. Hunger! Hunger! Hunger! They wondered whether this horrible nightmare would ever end. Contrariwise, their sexual urge gradually decreased, and it was the rare individual who continued courtship at the end of the starvation. Budding romances collapsed, and some men wondered how they could have been so interested in that girl. One fellow's girl friend visited him from a distant city during the low days of starvation, and she found his ostensible affection disappointingly shallow. His reservoir of affectional responses

was drying up. It is difficult to delineate other types of basic motivations. The tendency for spontaneous activity which is universal in healthy adults was notably lacking. The men were tired and weak. The urge to get up and do something simply was not there; energy came niggardly. A man could not take two steps at a time going upstairs. He wondered if it were not foolish to make that side-excursion, because he did not have enough energy to do the things he wanted to do. Dancing was not fun — he would rather go to a movie. The men seldom fatigued in a healthy way; they felt old, stuporous.

Behavioral Consequences of the Physical Changes

The profound physical changes which were induced by the prolonged semistarvation had very noticeable effects upon behavior. An outstanding physical change was the 30% reduction in strength. Fellows who were used to sharing in all kinds of physical tasks were unable to do them anymore. This was very discouraging. A person knew undeniably that he was losing ground: he was becoming debilitated. His bony, drawn face was ugly; he saw that in the mirror. When he chanced upon a prestarvation photograph of himself, he would look at it, and then feel surprised that he had changed so much. His gawking ribs and bulging collar bone were uncomfortable. He could not sit on wooden furniture, for his "cushions" were gone and the bony buttocks offered slight comfort. The pallor which masked his face could not be removed, even when he tried to tan himself in the sun. He was a

sight unfit to be seen. At times he was ashamed of himself, in baggy clothes that never fit. He had to be careful in moving fast, if he arose too rapidly, he would sometimes "blackout" and faint. When he tried to go up stairs he needed to pause in the middle of them. Sometimes he failed to lift his leg high enough, and would fall flat on his face. Other times a sidewalk crack would trip him. Often he could not change his direction of movement fast enough, if he walked with an unstarved individual. He would weave while walking, and bump his companion; this was annoying. He did not like persons to touch his skin or caress him in any way. He wondered if the rapid loss of his hair was natural or had been accelerated by the starvation. He became cold quickly, for his body temperature had dropped about one degree. He seemed never to have enough blankets on the bed at night. His poor circulation meant that limbs would go to "sleep." Swollen legs made walking uncomfortable and running almost impossible. In the long run, it was better to stay near a radiator, whiling away the time in a soft rocker.³

Changes in Emotionality

In the preceding discussion of basic motivational changes, the general lack of drive toward spontaneous activity was highlighted. The most important emotional change coincides with this motivational apathy; namely, that there was a dulling of the emotional response of the individual with concomitant

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depression. Humor was gone. The men did not sing or whistle of their own accord. Music did not bring its former warmth. The dejection was exhibited in the lack of conversation at mealtimes. The men had not talked themselves out, but lacked the spark that fires curiosity. They were not interested in the ideas or activities of others, except as they were related to food-getting activities. Gloominess permeated many of their relationships. Smiles were not frequent, and the saddened faces grew longer each week as hunger gave way to more hunger. They saw the negative side of things now more than ever before. If there was a job to be done, the hurdles seemed so high and abundant—"Is it worth it?"—and discouragement and lack of confidence often followed in the wake of encounters with the real world. One man discovered during rehabilitation a change which had gone unnoticed in semistarvation; he had not blushed or become really frightened during starvation. Superficially, the increased irritability of the semistarving men contradicts the generalization that they were apathetic and introversive. The two characteristics, nevertheless, existed side by side. Occasionally the men were irritable; most often they tended to be dull and bored. Overpowering frustration existed in the very fabric of their personalities because of the constant food deprivation. This frustration seemed to dictate their behavior in other areas. Petty defeats became very important and were the source of much irritation. Standing in line at the diet kitchen before being served

was the source of explosive conduct. Indecisiveness on the part of the servers would give rise to ire, and to the suspicion that perhaps the cooks did not know what their ration should really be. The men "blew up" at each other on occasion. Mannerisms which formerly went unnoticed now became sources of friction. One man talked too loudly, another with too much affectation. Some persons spent too much time eating, or perhaps indulged in the disgusting habit of telling visitors how poorly they felt. During the worst times certain men refused to sit with each other at the dining room tables. They even felt impelled to leave the table if their "annoyers" happened to sit at the one at which they were eating. One man firmly ordered another to "get the h— out of here." Their expressions of irritation were directed not only to those of their own number; the technical and administrative personnel who conducted the experiment drew their share of fire. One man commented in a letter to a friend, "I'm so hungry I could eat anything, but I'd start on the fat staff first." The men were annoyed at seeing the staff eat their lunches, and were still more annoyed when the staff tried to conceal the fact that they were eating—"There he sat, fat, hiding his lunch, while the aroma from his orange still permeated the air." One fellow conducted a nursery school youngster to and from school each day, until her childish antics grew so irritating that he resigned the job with the realization that his patience was meager and his self-control very limited. This lack of control of irritability was one

expression of a general lack of evenness or steadiness in mood. Although most often the men were silent and sad, on occasion they would become elated or feel "high." These periods of elation would last a few hours, or more often a few days. Some men would explain how good they felt, that maybe there was some quickening going on inside them from the starvation and that finally they had adjusted to the reduced ration. But this feeling never persisted, and their discouragement upon having been let down accentuated the next low period. One of the men who was eliminated from the experiment because of his inability to maintain the dietary restrictions underwent a severe alternation between despondency and unfounded feelings of well-being. One night when he lost control over himself, he stopped at seventeen drugstores on a hike from the edge of town back to the laboratory, having an uproariously good time at each soda fountain. He kidded with the fountain girls, thought the lights more beautiful than ever, felt that the world was a very happy place. The world was with him. This degenerated into a period of extreme pessimism and remorse; he felt that he had nothing to live for, that he had failed miserably to keep his commitment of staying on reduced rations.⁴

Weather and Moods

Such cyclic tendencies were markedly influenced by the weather; warm, sunny days brightened the spirits immeasurably,

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while cold, damp, cloudy days lowered the men further in their abyss of dejection. Although these men had no more social reasons for insecurity during starvation than during the previous three months of standardization, a number of them experienced anxiety and insecurity reactions. For instance, one man wanted to have a little money in the bank; just having it there made him feel more at ease. In another individual this anxiety expressed itself in a restlessness, a feeling that he wanted to go somewhere, but he did not know where. In general, the emotional changes which took place may be thought of as a combination of shallowness of emotion—the depression component—and lack of control, with the resultant escape into emotional outbursts and anxiety.

Changes in Sociability

One of the more profound changes which took place was the decreased sociability of the men. There were important exceptions to this, but even the men who managed to continue their social contacts often felt animosity toward strangers, merely because they were strangers. The men built up a tremendous in-group feeling that tended to exclude both their nonstarving friends and the administrative and technical staff. They were apart from others—those who had been well fed. They were especially alienated by the individual who supposed he knew what it was like to be hungry because he had gone without food for a couple of days. It was hard to sit near one's comrade who had extra food. They became provoked at the

laboratory staff for giving "too much" food to some, and thought it criminal to restrict the rations of others, even though they clearly understood the experimental plan demanded such adjustments in rations.⁵

One of the men aptly characterized the difference between starvation and rehabilitation as the difference between old age and adolescence. During starvation the starving man understood old people. He knew why they were not active, why they enjoyed merely "sitting." During rehabilitation he relived adolescence, a period of great awakening. His increased strength was wonderful, and often he underestimated his ability. His motor movements seemed clumsy and uncoordinated. Life experiences had a new freshness about them. He appreciated things much more than ever before. He took great joy in being able to work, and in turning out a product of which he felt proud. Slowly his sex urges again made his association with girls enjoyable. Many of the symptoms of semistarvation clung tightly to the rehabilitating men. Old habits persisted for weeks; they continued licking their plates, for they wanted to get all they could. One individual continued collecting recipes, but found he was able to view them more objectively. Formerly all recipes were saved; during rehabilitation he was able to delete those that would be too expensive or impractical. It was easy to revert

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to one's starvation habit of "Well, take it easy. After all, you're starving." The psychological improvements were not induced any more speedily than the physical, and often the men had difficulty in distinguishing between their "normal" and their semistarvation reactions. They no longer could blame all their shortcomings in conduct on semistarvation, and they had forgotten that normal folks must grab hold of themselves.⁶

Physical Activity One of the greatest changes from normal life is the starving man's physical inertia and emotional apathy. Extra steps or extra movements are bothersome; the relief worker should plan errands and tasks for the undernourished so that no unnecessary energy is expended. Do not expect the starving man to make quick responses. He does not want to talk fast, and usually he prefers not to talk at all unless it is important or definitely interesting. Quiet and sincere conversation is appreciated, but the worker must not expect alert or hearty answers. Do not "make" conversation; silent companionship is greatly appreciated and much preferred. Let the undernourished person sit whenever possible. Do not force him to activity or try to hurry him. To impose your level of performance upon him results in his becoming further depressed and discouraged. Help him set goals which are within the range of his achievement. This is difficult, for he chooses goals on the basis

of his memory of the abilities he possessed when well nourished. He is, nevertheless, quite conscious of his physical weakness, and unnecessary exhibitions of strength and vitality on the part of others are a source of irritation. To see staff members take two stairs at one step was annoying to the men in our experiment.⁷

Group Solidarity We have constantly emphasized that the starving live in their own little world with little interest in the larger areas of life. At the same time self-control is at a low ebb and the strength of ideals and standards lessened. Then it becomes more necessary than ever to try to develop as much group spirit and solidarity as is possible under the conditions that exist. If you have a rather homogeneous group, this spirit may already exist. This was true in the case of our experiment: These men had a common conviction against war, a common concern about the starving of the world, plus the individual dedication to offer themselves to help alleviate this suffering. These ties were extremely strong, but they often lost their cohesiveness during the days of starvation. The fear of letting the group down or breaking faith with the others who were going through this ordeal was often reported as the strongest factor in withstanding the temptation to eat forbidden food.⁸

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5. PROBLEMS RELATING TO FEEDING

The world for a starving man revolves around his stomach. Those who have not experienced starvation never fully appreciate this fact, and must constantly remind themselves that it is of first importance. Everything else is secondary. Usually the amount of food available for relief feeding is quite limited and far below the required amount, and for this reason it is increasingly important to give consideration to psychological factors, since they become more difficult with continued substandard feeding. The way feeding operations are administered can materially help or damage the psychological well-being of the group.

Eating Places The dining hall is the "holy of holies." Try to make it as attractive as possible. You will not receive much spoken appreciation for your efforts, but it will nonetheless be felt. Unnecessary noise should be eliminated, and soft music will help to drown out the necessary noise and to provide a relaxed atmosphere in which to eat. Perhaps it would be wise to provide both long tables for those who want to eat quickly and small tables for those interested in conversing during their meals. It is important to have comfortable chairs which are reasonably soft. Above all, do not require people to stand in long lines for extended periods of time. If it cannot be arranged to feed people as soon as they arrive, then arrange a numbering system so that a person can take a number when he arrives and wait his turn, while resting in a chair.

Tastiness of Food

Hot foods should be served piping hot and cold foods ice cold, if possible. When hunger is not satisfied with a sufficient quantity of food, the temperature becomes more important. Most food should be reasonably well seasoned, but plenty of condiments on the table for individual use increases the satisfaction each individual can get from his food.

Schedule

The eating schedule should be rigidly adhered to, and changed only when necessary. For the recipients, life centers on the moment the dining-hall doors are opened at mealtimes. If they are opened early, there are always some who have reason to be unhappy about it; if the meal is late, everyone is unhappy.

Waste of Food

There must be no waste. Good administrators will see to this simply as good administrative practice, but special attention must be called to the extremely demoralizing effect on starving people of seeing one bit of food thrown out. Scraps must be religiously saved and used. No dogs or cats should be allowed in the neighborhood, because there will always be suspicions that they are consuming food that should be feeding humans. There should be no munching of food, inside or outside the dining room, by an already well-fed staff. There, of course, will be no problems of garbage—plates will be scraped or licked

clean. If you can avoid it, do not ask starving persons to work in the kitchen handling food unless you give them extra rations; when one is hungry, it is torture to smell and handle food that he is not allowed to eat. If there are other well-fed groups in the same area, such as army or labor battalions, try to see that they waste no food, or at least that the waste is not observed by the starving.

Groupings at Meals

With the tendency for the starving to feel resentful of the well-fed, the staff and other working groups should not eat with the starving group, at least, not regularly. The staff and visitors might occasionally do so for the value of the social visit, but they should be certain in that case that they eat every bit of food served them; that they eat exactly the same food and the same amount as served to all the others; that they eat it with relish; and that they make no unnecessary comment about the food, either in praise or in criticism. The staff must have a normal diet if they are to maintain personal mental health and efficiency and to do the amount of work required of them, but they must get their food at some other time or place.⁹

Control of Food Supplies: All stored foods should be kept out of sight at all times, and the preparation of food had better be shielded from the public view. Furthermore, stored supplies

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should always be kept under lock and key and behind strong doors. This is just good business procedure in a famine area, but it also serves the purpose of avoiding temptation for those who might have difficulty in restraining themselves if the food were not protected. It also gives a sense of security to the whole group to know that the supplies which will keep them alive are protected from the possibility of criminal acts. In the case of large warehouses a guard or night watchman is a minimum essential. There is the further danger of mismanagement and graft, and to protect against this there might be three or four locks on the storeroom, one key to each lock, and each key in the hands of a different person. In this way, the room could not be opened except when all these men with their keys were present. The persons to carry the keys need to be carefully selected and representative of different interested groups; it should probably include someone from the business staff or administrative office, from the kitchen, from local welfare groups, and from the recipients themselves. These men would be selected by staff and recipients for their trustworthiness. All food records should be made public—new shipments received, stockroom balance, menus (past, present and future), financial expenditures. You may be assured that any mistakes will be reported immediately by your self-appointed auditors. Never forget that anything relating to food should be handled with respect and reverence.¹⁰

Read online: <https://archive.org/details/MenAndHunger>