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Why is Britain's mental health so incredibly poor? It's because our society is spiralling backwards

Opinion by George Monbiot

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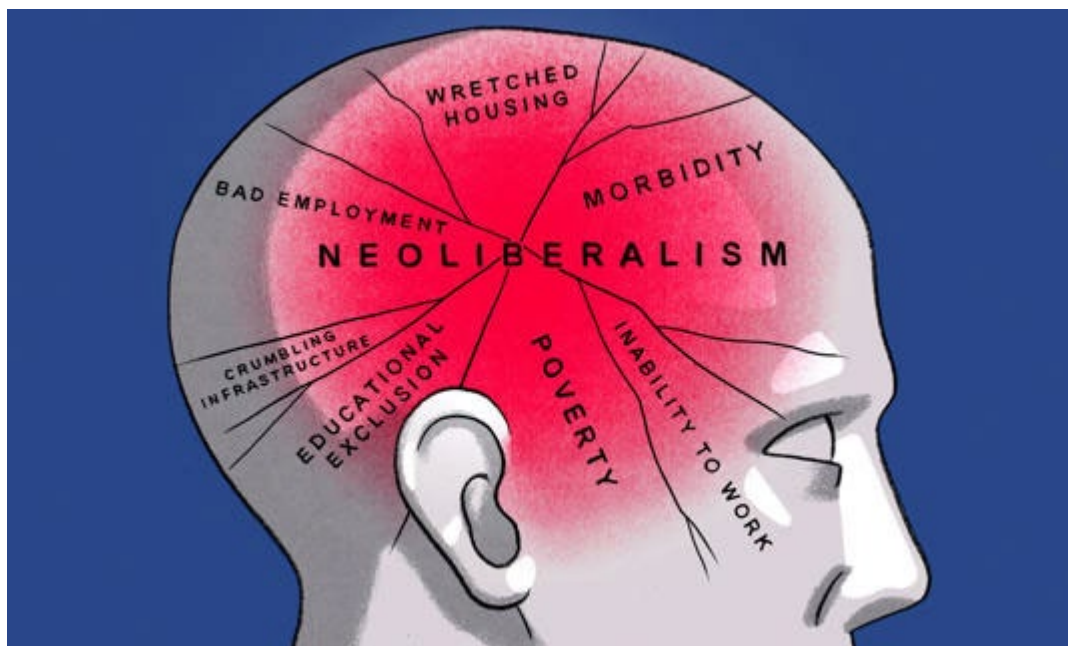


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The news should have stopped us in our tracks. Astonishingly, however, it was scarcely reported here. The latest [map of mental wellbeing](#) published by the Global Mind Project reveals that, out of the 71 countries it assessed, the United Kingdom, alongside South Africa, has the highest proportion of people in mental distress – and the second worst overall measure of mental health (we beat only Uzbekistan). Mental wellbeing has plummeted in the UK further than in any comparable nation. How was this not headline news?

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More importantly, why has it happened? The Global Mind Project blames smartphones and ultra-processed food. They doubtless play a role, but they're hardly peculiar to the UK. I think part of the reason is the sense that life here is, visibly and obviously, spiralling backwards.

There was a time when almost everyone in the UK believed the following promises. That a rising economic tide would lift all boats. That everybody would have a good home. That drudge work would diminish and jobs would become more interesting. That we would enjoy greater economic security and more leisure time. That educational attainment would keep rising across all social classes. That our healthcare and health would inexorably improve. That the UK would become ever cleaner and greener. That governance and democratic engagement would get better by the year.

We could easily have had all of these things. A vast amount of money has flushed through this country. Science has advanced by leaps and bounds; health and labour-saving technologies have greatly improved; we know exactly how to build good homes, treat sewage and improve democracy.

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Neoliberalism is an ideology that sees competition as our defining feature. It insists that our wellbeing is best realised not through political choice but through economic choice. What it calls “the market” will, if left to its own devices, determine who deserves to succeed and who does not. Everything that impedes the creation of this “natural order” of winners and losers – tax and the redistribution of wealth, welfare and public housing, publicly run and funded services, regulation, trade unions, protest, the power of politics itself – should, albeit often subtly and gradually, be shoved aside. It has dominated life in this country, to a degree unparalleled in similar nations, for 45 years.

Yet it is seldom discussed in public, or even properly identified. When people on the left try to explain our predicament, they often use terms such as Thatcherism, austerity, laissez-faire economics, supply-side economics, neoclassical economics or libertarianism. All these terms are either inadequate, misleading or plain wrong. Neoliberalism is a distinct ideology, named by its [leading thinkers](#) in 1938. [Its development](#) was funded, from the 1940s onwards, by some of the richest people on Earth. They built its infrastructure of persuasion until, in the late 1970s, when Keynesianism ran into trouble, it could occupy the ideological vacuum.

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Neoliberalism is the means by which capital seeks to solve its biggest problem – a problem called democracy. Unlike laissez-faire economics or classical liberalism, which prevailed before most adults had the vote, neoliberalism uses the state in coherent and repeatable ways to impose its unpopular policies. The state is the force behind market forces, the whip enforcing “economic freedom”.

Neoliberalism’s greatest triumph is to persuade us that, in Margaret Thatcher’s words, “there is no alternative”. In reality, the doctrine is an alternative to the much better lives we might have led. In the new book I’ve written with the film-maker Peter Hutchison, [The Invisible Doctrine](#), we seek to drag this ideology and its disastrous impacts into the light and show how it can be overthrown to fulfil the promise of a better world.

The doctrine reached its apogee in Liz Truss’s 49-day meltdown, when she tried to apply neoliberalism [to the ideological letter](#). But this was just the most extreme manifestation of what we have suffered since 1979. Labour softened some aspects but accepted privatised public services, brutally [curtailed protest](#), deregulated commerce even further and allowed the financial sector to pursue reckless get-rich-quick schemes. It added a disastrous twist of its

own, extending the [private finance initiative](#) to vast tracts of government provision – one reason for the crises suffered by hospitals, schools, prisons and other services today.

Amazingly, neoliberalism, despite all the breakdowns it has caused, continues to dominate. Labour, as the shadow chancellor, Rachel Reeves, demonstrates through her [irrational commitment to austerity](#) and her stated intention to [deregulate capital](#) even further, seems determined to ensure there is no alternative. Many in government believe it hasn't gone far enough. This is what Truss and Mark Littlewood, [chief engineer of her disaster](#), think (if thinking is the right word) and promote through their "[Popular Conservatism](#)" group, whose name will forever remain in quotes.

Related: [Neoliberalism: the idea that swallowed the world](#)

How have successive governments got away with it? Through the endless promise of jam tomorrow. If we keep working harder, one day we'll pay for the public services we need; one day we'll earn the economic security we crave; one day we'll have more leisure time. Will this magic day ever arrive? Of course not. Strong public services and economic security were never part of the plan. But to have us working ever-longer hours on behalf of capital? That is very much part of the plan.

Interestingly, when environmentalists say we need to make sacrifices today to secure our future prosperity, the same government ministers insist that voters will never tolerate delayed gratification. In these and other ways, governance in the UK feels like one long trick played on the public.

So they keep us hanging on. And the endless promises and the endless breaking of those promises grind us down. It would perhaps be more surprising if we found ourselves anywhere else on the mental health rankings.

- George Monbiot is a Guardian columnist. His latest book, [The Invisible Doctrine: The Secret History of Neoliberalism \(& How It Came to Control Your Life\)](#), is out on 16 May