

**'Nervousness' and education : the role of the teacher / by Tom A. Williams.**

**Contributors**

Williams, Tom A. 1870-  
Royal College of Surgeons of England

**Publication/Creation**

[Cincinnati] : [publisher not identified], 1910.

**Persistent URL**

<https://wellcomecollection.org/works/bkk4dbmt>

**Provider**

Royal College of Surgeons

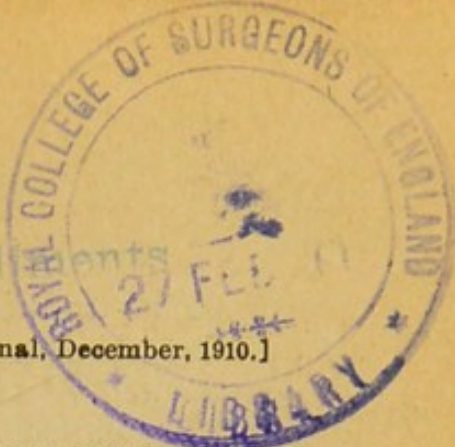
**License and attribution**

This material has been provided by This material has been provided by The Royal College of Surgeons of England. The original may be consulted at The Royal College of Surgeons of England. where the originals may be consulted. Conditions of use: it is possible this item is protected by copyright and/or related rights. You are free to use this item in any way that is permitted by the copyright and related rights legislation that applies to your use. For other uses you need to obtain permission from the rights-holder(s).



Wellcome Collection  
183 Euston Road  
London NW1 2BE UK  
T +44 (0)20 7611 8722  
E [library@wellcomecollection.org](mailto:library@wellcomecollection.org)  
<https://wellcomecollection.org>

With the author's compliments  
[Reprint from The Woman's Medical Journal, December, 1910.]



## "NERVOUSNESS" AND EDUCATION. THE ROLE OF THE TEACHER.\*

25

BY TOM A. WILLIAMS, M.B., C.M.,  
WASHINGTON, D. C.

Foreign Correspondent, Member Paris Neurological and Psychological  
Societies, etc.

### VARIETIES OF NERVOUS PROSTRATION.

There are two kinds of nervousness—that coming from disease of the body, and that coming from a mental disposition.

I. The first kind may be due to heredity, fault in the nervous system, in the circulation of the blood, in the digestive apparatus, in the excretory organs. It may be due to faulty hygiene, as insufficient food, over-eating and drinking, bad air; and it may be due to acquired diseases, such as the infection of typhoid fever, influenza, consumption; or it may be due to poisoning of the nerve centers by alcohol, tobacco, coffee, or other drugs. But I am not going to speak of any of these, for they are purely medical problems.

II. Very different is that nervousness responsible for break-downs which is not a consequence of bodily derangement, but which proceeds from a faulty adjustment of the mind to the situation in which a person finds himself. We speak of this as *psycho-genetic*.

### ETIOLOGY.

The causes lie in the mental and moral habits which a person has acquired in his childhood and youth.

Now these mental and moral habits are very different from what we call the *instincts*, which are properties of the nervous system, practically independent of environment, varying with the species, and hardly modifiable by training. They

Read at meeting of the Public Health Education Committee.



cannot be influenced by the will. Physiologists describe them as compound reflexes, though "*unconditioned*." But every one knows that the ways of acting called *habits* are very easy to form, and that once formed they are very difficult to modify.

"Nervousness" is often mere habit. It is one way of reacting to an unpleasant stimulus. The naughty child who lies on the floor, contorts his muscles, and howls when he is crossed in some desire, is the prototype of the kind of mal-adaptation which in older people often takes the form of nervousness. What are often called hysterical fits are merely of this type.

But everyone does not react toward unpleasantness in quite this kind of way. A person who might be ashamed to throw himself on the floor in a fit may become sullen and obstinate when crossed, and might eventually withdraw entirely from work and social activity to brood and work himself into a state often called nervous prostration.

#### WRONG MENTAL ATTITUDE—EFFECTS UPON THE BODY.

Of course, this line of conduct suppresses the bodily activities. The unpleasant thought interferes with the flow of the digestive juices, and the patient becomes thin, sallow, and really sick in body, as well as in mind. But these are effects of faulty mental attitude which could have been prevented by a proper outlook on life, and this could have been given by instruction in truthful social relations. One of Dr. John K. Mitchell's patients, who spoke from the experience of twenty years' invalidism, declared to him she believed that more than three-fourths of the cases of nervous prostration would not occur if women were more truthful. By *untruthfulness*, she meant an incorrect insight into one's real status; so that when the veil is drawn from the hypocritical attitude toward life which is adopted,



the awakening is so disturbing that one cannot adjust oneself to the painful situation to be faced, and so runs away from obligations into the refuge of a nervous breakdown.

#### EFFECTS UPON HAPPINESS OF MIND.

But even if the breakdown does not occur, many a life is carried on poisoned by constant fret of ideas and feelings which the person suppresses because he cannot adjust them to the circumstances of the life which he leads, but becomes obsessed by ideas which he sometimes believes to be vicious or or at least inexplicable. These are most painful to him since he does not know that if he faced the music and assimilated such feelings and ideas to the rest of his life, that the fret would cease, and the anguish disappear. This principle is largely adopted in modern psycho-therapy, especially in the cure of what we call the *psycho-neuroses*.

#### PREVENTION.

Now these morbid trends can all be prevented, and the principle to be used is a very simple one. It consists of *associating useful activities with feelings of an agreeable kind, and disassociating agreeable feelings from useless or injurious acts*. If an anti-social act is always made into a painful one, the mere thought of it will eventually be painful, and it will cease to be performed. If a child always expects pleasure when he performs a useful or moral act, these soon become habits. For instance, when the petty child ceases his crying upon seeing his father, it is because he reflexly has associated a greater discomfort with the persistency of his tears than with their cessation. The *affect*,\* fear, aroused by association banishes that of fretfulness.

\* The affectivity is a term borrowed from the German to denote that part of the psychic life which pertains to the feelings as distinct from the sensations, will, and intellect. The French use the word "sentiments" to denote it.



#### THE GUIDING OF INTEREST.

I need not, to teachers, enlarge upon the centering of *interest*, which is even more important in moral training than in intellectual training. But here another principle must be mentioned, for a first presentation may excite little interest until repetition familiarizes. Again, that which we wish to inculcate may be not only indifferent, but unpleasant; and the child may defend himself from it by indifference and abstraction—that is, inattention. But if inattention is made unpleasant, the child will have to attend in self-defense, and interest may often come, just as it does in the study of what is at first often felt to be a dry subject.

#### THE LABORATORY FOR GAINING SELF-CONTROL.

These measures, however, are only the initial ones, the eventual object being *self-control*. This cannot be inculcated; it must be practiced in acts. These, of course, should be supervised, but not too much so, or else constant looking for approval interferes with the act itself, and over-conscientiousness may be the cause of unfitness.

To build a *self-reliant character*, it is very important not to interrupt trains of thought and activity—this merely promotes the amenability of a child to suggestions from without. A boy who was a model under tutelage may be a helpless individual alone. One of Dr. Janet's cases of nervous breakdown was caused by the removal of a young woman, after her marriage, from her mother's protection. She had been so injudiciously protected from responsibility that in a home of her own she was quite helpless.

Now if self-control is practiced in a difficult situation, it is easy to obtain it in an ordinary situation. A most difficult situation for a child occurs when he is worked up and excited during his play, and it is then that assistance is not only



most required, but it is really the most easy to apply because of the interest-sentiment aroused by play.

The faculty of *taking one's punishment* is very easy to acquire in a very young child, whose little pains are soon forgotten; it becomes more difficult in a grown up person, whose whole edifice of armor may sometimes be utterly destroyed by an experience which would have been shed from a normal child with the greatest ease.

It is in *play* that such situations inevitably arise. Not to cry when hurt, not to sulk when displeased, not to strike back when hurt by mistake, to meet roughness with determination and without resentment, but with no more than legitimate anger, and not to give in to a person, are all natural concomitants of an active game.

But conduct, the reverse of each of these, is almost inevitable if the child's actions are not guided. The guiding is not difficult, but it requires active participation by the teacher. The best teacher is perhaps an older boy or girl taking part in the game, or perhaps umpiring. But the right kind of a master or mistress can learn to unbend without losing authority or influence so as to up-lift the standards in the children's games.

Another advantage gained in play is power of voluntary suspension of personal initiative and even liberty; this is the basis of *organization*. The participants in a group game may not understand the rationale of each play at the moment, but they are willing to suspend their judgment for the authority of a leader chosen for the time being, knowing that he understands.

#### ORDERLINESS.

The difficulties of life are much added to by *slovenliness* and inaccuracy. Now, as a matter of fact, it is almost an instinct for a child to be orderly. He sees a certain routine around him,



and the least infraction of this is at once noticed and remarked upon. If such remarks are discouraged or laughed at, the child soon ceases to believe that his thought has any value, and that order has any meaning. If the discrepancy is rectified when he points it out, he not only learns to believe in order, but his self-respect is encouraged; and self-respect is a powerful antidote to slovenliness as well as to dishonesty.

Another almost instinctive tendency of a child is to *accomplish* something. He quickly imitates the acts of his elders. This tendency can be utilized to foster the habit of thoughtfulness, and still further add to his self-respect, as well as to diminish the sense of dependence, the exaggeration of which led another to Dr. Janet's patients to burst into tears and wish to go home to *his* mother after only two months of married life.

The utilization of this principle makes very easy the acquisition of the *clean hand* habit, for a child quite young will take great pride in, and will spend a half hour in washing himself. If this is encouraged instead of being contemptuously dismissed, and forbidden as "making a mess," it is very easy to convert it into a routine. My own boy, aged three and a half years, for instance, will seldom forget, and will often refuse to go in to dinner or to touch certain objects after coming in from the garden until he has washed himself.

It is quite frequent for a neurologist to encounter patients whose whole nervous trouble is due to distress of mind caused by their *incapacity to manage* their household affairs; an incapacity not due to intellectual deficiency, but entirely caused by want of system, and slovenliness of habits acquired in childhood. Instead of the acts of the day falling into place almost automatically, each separate act requires severe effort of thought,



and the feeling of want of capacity added to this is a strain which causes a breakdown, and the nervousness of which the patient complains.

#### PREVENTION OF PHOBIA.

*Morbid fears* are a great distress to many people. They have nearly always arisen in early childhood, and have been inculcated by injudicious nurses, tales of goblins and fairies being most prolific in this respect. The ineradicability of fears when inculcated in early childhood is clearly illustrated by a Southern lady who, even in advanced age, dared not go alone into the dark, although she had long ceased to believe in the stories which first made her afraid to do so. She realized this so forcibly that she would not permit her three daughters to be told any of the alarming stories which most Southern children learn. Her *psychoprophylaxis* resulted in the girls never having known what it meant to be afraid in the dark. Indeed, it was the habit of their school-fellows to send them off into dark and eerie places to show off their powers. The tenacity of *early effects* is again illustrated by the immovable depressions produced by the playing of gospel hymns on a reed organ in the case of a lady in whose childhood the Calvinical Sunday had almost caused fear. The *psychoprophylaxis* is obvious. In another case the hearing of a brass band invariably produced weeping and terror. This was due to the fact that such playing occurred during the horrors of the civil war.

#### SENTIMENTAL ROBUSTNESS AND SELF-RELIANCE.

In some children care is needed to avoid the *craving for sympathy*. This may be induced by excessive petting and loving while a child is tired or after injury. It is better to send the child to bed when tired, and to divert his attention when injured. But *denial of sympathy* is equally bad, and is the cause of the intense love-hunger seen



in many young people whose surroundings have suppressed their natural affection.

Similar in principle are the means to be employed against the *self-distrust* and diffidence of the "psychasthenic" form of insufficiency. The natural desire of a child to play with its fellow will soon disappear if it is too slow-witted to comprehend the game or too clumsy to take its due part, or is constantly humiliated by its failures or by the mockery of its fellows. Want of capacity in some study arising from the defects of some motor, sensorial or associational process may produce a self-deprecatory or anxious attitude, very unfavorable to healthy psychic development and most provocative of the scrupulosity of psychasthenia; for the psychoneurosis known as psychasthenia is largely made up of a *feeling of mental insufficiency*, and this breeds a feeling of real inadequacy to any situation one has to face. The result is the timid form of nervousness, scruples forming very easily.

#### RELIGIOUS TEACHING AND THE STATE OF MORBID DOUBT.

Many ultra-religious people are of this type; and it is a crime against childhood to furnish them with the kind of religious conception of which some of the Puritan ancestors were so fond; these only induce intellectual *doubt* and *moral uncertainty*. This state, when carried to the extreme, is very different from the *scientific doubt* and *suspension of judgment*, which, of course, should be cultivated, and will not produce psychasthenia. Indeed, it will tend rather to give poise in the face of difficult situations (which the person without scientific training cannot have), unless one happens to be of the impulsive, easily influenced type, of which we must now speak.

#### THE HYSTERICAL TYPE.

This type of person is the opposite of the



doubter. He is the individual who easily *receives suggestions*, whose mainspring is imitation. He always follows the fashion; he does what every one is doing; he is the first to stampede at the fire; the first to cheer when carried away at a political meeting; the first to give way to the animal impulse of hitting the boy who is down. He is the bluffer and *boaster* when successful, and the sycophant when not so.

This is the type from which are drawn the cases of suggestion psychoneurosis which are called hysteria. It has occurred in this way: Every student of psychology knows that the perception of any act tends to reproduce itself in the recipient in a similar act, and this would always happen if what we call *inhibition* were not used. The reproduction of the act is a natural reflex; its inhibition is a cultivated or conditioned reflex. Now hysterical people tend to follow the impulses derived from imitation or induced by the speech or acts of others in the form of suggestion.

#### PREVENTION.

The best means of preventing this tendency is again *games*. The temptation of the automatic act is there at its height, but so is the interest-sentiment. By utilizing this the teacher can bring out all the powers of inhibition which the boy possesses. He can be taught not to strike, not to follow, not to jeer, not to give in, even though others do. He can learn to make a pride in being his own man, and not a puppet in the hands of others.

#### EXAMPLES.

A railway shock is called traumatic-neurosis, and is one of the ways in which such people may react. They are then *obeying the idea* that they *ought to be incapacitated*, and even neurasthenic, as a consequence of what they conceive to be a catastrophe capable of causing paralysis, loss of



feeling, or some other grave disorder; and they forthwith fabricate an imitation of what they conceive such disorder to be. This is not done of conscious intention, but because of their fancied acquiescence in what they believe must happen. Were they to believe correctly, of course, there would be no "railway spines." But even an incorrect belief would not cause the condition in a person whose suggestibility had not been permitted to develop by *uncritical methods of thinking*. The accurate and critically-minded do not accept as sensations or experiences suggestions thrown by others.

This habit of mind is a source of the *whims* which cause so much unhappiness, and are often put down to nervousness. A whim is merely the result of suggestions from another, or from one's self. Every one has whims, but every one does not give way to them. I think the remedy is obvious enough; but it is very difficult to apply in the adult, though very easy in the child. Prevention then is very much more economical than the cure; and this type of nervousness will diminish in proportion to intelligent prophylaxis by mothers and teachers; and we shall see less of hysteria in the true sense of the word.

#### SOMATIC BASES OF SOME PSYCHIC STATES.

In conclusion I wish to emphasize that it is essential, as a *preliminary* before using psychic means as a preventive of the mental habits which make for nervousness, to make sure that no *physical condition* is at the bottom of a child's perverseness, indolence, restlessness, or inattention. Professor Swift has said that "half an hour's observation of pupils at their school work will convince one skilled in interpreting nerve signs that nervous disorders have become so common as to menace our national health, and the signifi-



cance of this for education has been too generally ignored."

Thus the co-operation of pedagogue and physician becomes imperative. Only in this way can the signs of disease be detected in their incipency, before they have given rise to mental and moral habits which may afterwards be impossible to eradicate. Of course, the physician must be one who is skilled in the detection of nerve diseases, and must be appreciative of the psychological element in so many of these. Besides this, he must be thoroughly acquainted with the kind of tendencies and morbid types which I have tried to sketch in this paper. However, I have only touched the fringe of a vast subject, but I hope my sketch may offer a means of at least suspecting a condition, the removal of which will prevent maladjustment and unhappiness, if not unproductive life.

See author's "How Inebriety may be Prevented by Early Education," Pedagogical Seminary, 1909, June; also U. S. Senate Document 48, 1909; and "Psycho-prophylaxis in Childhood," in Psycho-therapeutics (The Gorham Press, Boston and Toronto); and in Jour. Abnormal Psychology, 1909, June; also Genesis of Hysterical States in Childhood, Medical Record, October 2, 1910.



1. The first part of the book is devoted to a general  
description of the country and its inhabitants.  
The author describes the various tribes and  
their customs, and gives a detailed account of  
the climate and the soil. He also mentions the  
principal cities and towns, and the principal  
rivers and lakes. The second part of the book  
is devoted to a description of the various  
plants and animals which are found in the  
country. The author gives a detailed account of  
the various species, and describes their habits  
and characteristics. The third part of the book  
is devoted to a description of the various  
minerals and metals which are found in the  
country. The author gives a detailed account of  
the various species, and describes their uses  
and properties. The fourth part of the book  
is devoted to a description of the various  
arts and crafts which are practiced in the  
country. The author gives a detailed account of  
the various species, and describes their uses  
and properties. The fifth part of the book  
is devoted to a description of the various  
religions and philosophies which are practiced  
in the country. The author gives a detailed  
account of the various species, and describes  
their uses and properties. The sixth part of  
the book is devoted to a description of the  
various wars and battles which have taken  
place in the country. The author gives a  
detailed account of the various species, and  
describes their uses and properties. The  
seventh part of the book is devoted to a  
description of the various laws and customs  
which are practiced in the country. The  
author gives a detailed account of the various  
species, and describes their uses and  
properties. The eighth part of the book is  
devoted to a description of the various  
languages and dialects which are spoken in  
the country. The author gives a detailed  
account of the various species, and describes  
their uses and properties. The ninth part of  
the book is devoted to a description of the  
various sciences and arts which are practiced  
in the country. The author gives a detailed  
account of the various species, and describes  
their uses and properties. The tenth part of  
the book is devoted to a description of the  
various religions and philosophies which are  
practiced in the country. The author gives a  
detailed account of the various species, and  
describes their uses and properties.