No, CTE Didn't Make a Man Steal an Airplane from Seattle's Airport

By Alex Berezow, PhD — August 13, 2018

We have a culture that completely denies personal responsibility. If we can't control ourselves, we insist that we have a disease. That way, nothing is ever really our fault.

Take our children, for instance. There was a time when we held our kids accountable for their behavior and grades in school. That's less common now. Instead of accepting the likely explanation that our society is full of lousy parents, we prefer to blame the teacher. If Little Johnny flunks math, it's because the teacher isn't any good. Or maybe Little Johnny has a disease, like attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD). It's not his fault. He needs drugs.

Society's attitude toward addiction has followed the same path. Even though some people may be genetically predisposed toward it, addiction should not be thought of primarily as a disease. Thinking of it as a disease completely absolves a person of any responsibility. However, a bottle of vodka doesn't drink itself. A purposeful act is required to consume alcohol, and a purposeful act is required to stop.

I will not go so far as to suggest that ADHD and addiction-as-a-disease are complete fabrications. They are not. But I strongly object to declaring various personal or societal problems to be a "disease" and therefore beyond anyone's willpower to change. That's toxic nonsense.

Yet, I predict that we will continue to stumble down the path of denying personal responsibility. The up-and-coming disease du jour will be chronic traumatic encephalopathy (CTE).

Don't Blame Me. It's CTE

This past weekend, a 29-year-old man stole an airplane from SeaTac International Airport in
Seattle, did a few stunt maneuvers in the air, and then crash-landed on an island, killing himself. He admitted to air traffic control [3] that he had “a few screws loose” and had no intention of landing the plane. In other words, he wanted to commit suicide and go out in a blaze of glory.

Not only is that sad and a bit disturbing, the incident reveals a gigantic, gaping hole in airport security. But local NBC affiliate King 5 News [4] had a different spin: The media outlet interviewed a childhood friend who claimed that the man wasn't suicidal -- despite the fact that he basically admitted to being suicidal -- but suffered from CTE.

And how does he know that his friend suffered from CTE? Well, he doesn't. But they did play football together. So, football made him do it.

CTE is now being blamed for all sorts of things, from suicide to violence to memory loss. But it's not even completely clear that CTE is real [5]. There are, as yet, no agreed upon criteria to diagnose the condition. Despite that, the media is hellbent on promoting the disease as a catch-all explanation for anytime an athlete engages in harmful behavior.

Don't blame me. It's CTE.

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