

## NERVES AND THE WAR.

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When I was asked by the Editor to contribute something to this number of the JOURNAL it seemed to me that a few notes on the effect of the war on the nerves of those who have to stay at home—whether they like it or not—might be useful to nurses who are not at present dealing with the more direct results of the war in the shape of surgical injuries.

I will begin by comparing the body to an ordinary electric bell such as is found in most houses nowadays. That apparatus consists of the bell proper and the battery which supplies the energy by which the striker is actuated.

After the bell has been in use for some time it may be noticed that it rings but feebly; the note is of the same pitch, but it is not loud enough for practical purposes.

On examination it will be found that the striking apparatus is in *perfect order*; nothing is broken or damaged, but the battery has "run down," or lost its energy.

So it is with the human body. We have the machine itself, the mechanism of digestion, circulation, muscular movement, and so on, and the nervous energy which supplies the current which is constantly proceeding along the nerves backwards and forwards between the brain and all parts of the body.

So long as this supply of nervous energy is adequate everything works well. Most actions of the machine are automatic; that is to say, we do not have to think about them, or devote our will power to the task of ensuring that they are properly performed.

If, however, the supply is diminished, the body is still capable of doing its work after a fashion: the bell still rings, but everywhere there is tiredness and feebleness.

I lay stress on the "everywhere," for it is obvious that if the battery runs down, all parts of the machine which depend upon its current for their everyday actions must suffer.

Now, what are the agencies which cause the human battery to run down? It runs down either because it is not receiving a sufficient supply of food—out of which alone all bodily energy is primarily derived—or because the energy is being used up faster than it can be made from the food, even when the supply of the latter is adequate.

It is with the second reason that we have to deal just now. What, then, are the causes of too rapid using up of nervous energy?

Let us come back to our electric bell. The battery may fail either because it has not been

filled up for some time, or because it has been *upset*, and its contents spilled.

So it is with the human store of nerve force. It may be subjected to a constant and gradual drain, or there may be some sudden occurrence which plays havoc with the storehouse, so that all the energy it contains is suddenly dissipated. The nervous exhaustion that comes from constant worry and overwork is an example of the first, and the nerve-wrecking shock that results from a sudden bereavement, a severe fright, a bad bodily illness, or a grave surgical operation illustrates the latter.

So much for preliminaries. How does the war affect the nervous energy of the body? Well, I think it is clear enough. The worry, anxiety, either in those who fight or those who stay and work, the constant apprehension of bad news, whether it comes or not, even the very courage with which these are often so bravely borne, all these lay a heavy tax on the store of energy on which the brain depends for its task of guiding all parts of the body through their daily routine.

What are the symptoms of the gradual drain? Firstly, for the reason given above, they may affect all parts of the body, though not necessarily at the same time. Generally nervous exhaustion—or neurasthenia, as it is called—picks out at first the patient's weakest spot, but sooner or later all the systems of digestion, circulation, muscular work, and so on suffer. Consequently the complaints that are made by the patient are seldom confined for long to one particular organ. Pains, aches, morbid sensations, their name is legion, and their distribution worldwide.

But perhaps the most marked symptom is a mental one, and it is this. The *automatic ease* with which bodily functions are performed in health is replaced by *painful solicitude*. The will is brought to bear on actions for which it is not wanted. It is just as if the managing director of a large shop were to leave his office and run about from counter to counter selling pennyworths of goods because he cannot trust his subordinates to do it *without consulting him*. The brain is changed from a thinking director into a fussy drudge.

Examples of this are common enough. The neurasthenic will spend hours of anxious thought in trying to decide whether to have his luncheon at one o'clock or at one-thirty, and he will be convinced that grave reasons of state are concerned on either side of the argument.

The trouble of this is that the use of the brain for automatic or almost automatic actions is a further drain on the already exhausted nervous

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