

# Is America experiencing mass psychosis?

Psychologists say that America is going through what Carl Jung warned us would happen eventually

By **NICOLE KARLIS** PUBLISHED DECEMBER 14, 2021 3:00PM (EST)



Protesters hold placards during the demonstration. Anti-vaxxers and anti-maskers gathered at Indiana University's Sample Gates to protest against mandatory Covid vaccinations IU is requiring for students, staff and faculty during the upcoming fall semester. (Jeremy Hogan/SOPA Images/LightRocket via Getty Images)

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In 2020, 34 percent of Republicans and independents who lean to the right [surveyed by Pew Research Center](#) agreed that it was "probably" or "definitely true" that powerful people intentionally planned the COVID-19 outbreak. Eighteen percent of Democrats and left-

leaners agreed, too. That same year, [results from a new NPR/PBS NewsHour/Marist survey](#) found that approximately three-quarters of Republicans did not trust the 2020 presidential election results.

It should go without saying that these kinds of beliefs are fantasy, not rooted in any rational fact or evidence. Hence, someone observing from afar the rise in conspiratorial beliefs and pseudoscience might characterize a vast swath of the American public as delusional. From the [COVID-truther](#) movement to people believing the 2020 presidential election was [rigged](#), it appears that the body politic is — to put it mildly — no longer on the same page.

Given the perturbed psychological state of so many Americans, it is worth asking if something is happening — psychologically speaking — that is causing many Americans to live in very different realities.

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Psychologists say yes; and, moreover, that what is happening was actually predicted long ago by Swiss psychiatrist Carl Jung. Indeed, Jung once wrote that the demise of society wouldn't be a physical threat, but instead mass delusion — a collective psychosis of sorts.

"Carl Jung noted that 'the wolf inside' man was far more a threat to human existence than external forces," Dr. Carla Marie Manly, a clinical psychologist and author of ["Joy From Fear,"](#) told Salon. "When mental forces become so toxic as to harm our overall well-being on an individual and collective level a 'psychic epidemic' can result."

Indeed, Jung himself warned that modern society was prone to collapse due to a pandemic of "delusional ideas."

"Greater than all physical dangers are the tremendous effects of delusional ideas, which are yet denied all reality by our world-blinded consciousness," Jung wrote. "Our much vaunted reason and our boundlessly overestimated will are sometimes utterly powerless in the face of 'unreal' thoughts."

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Notably, Jung believed that the United States was particularly prone to society-breaking delusions.

"Anything new should always be questioned and tested with caution, for it may very easily turn out to be only a new disease; that is why true progress is impossible without mature judgment," Jung wrote. "The man who is unconscious of the historical context and lets slip his link with the past is in constant danger of succumbing to the crazes and delusions engendered by all novelties."

Some psychologists believe that this is what the country is experiencing right now — more or less.

"Something's definitely happening, and I think COVID amplified it to a painful point, you could say," Katharine Bainbridge, a Jungian analyst, tells Salon.

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But there are caveats. "It's complicated," Bainbridge said. "From the left's point of view, people that aren't being vaccinated or think the election was rigged are psychotic, right? If you're on the right, you think the left is psychotic and has lost its mind in identity politics. Both sides look at each other and say, 'you've lost your mind.'"

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Perhaps unsurprisingly, the concept of a "mass psychosis" has been seized upon by conspiracy theorists as a rationale for their conspiracies. For instance, anti-vaccination influencers like **Joseph Mercola** employ the term to suggest that those who are getting vaccinated are the real "delusional" ones.

Bainbridge said in order to contextualize what's actually happening in America through a Jungian lens, one must consider the role of a central guiding myth.

"Jung said man cannot live without religion — so you make it up," Bainbridge said. "You can't not have a central myth to live by. He would say maybe in this time that we've lost that — we don't have a collective unifying principle."

Cultural theorists often describe the history of human civilization as one of a transition between different central guiding myths. In the Western world, Christianity undergirded everyday existence and society for over a thousand years. After the Renaissance, the central guiding myth became a belief in rationalism; then, in modernity, a belief that technology might improve the lot of all humans.

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Though the phrase is often reviled, the postmodern era — which, roughly, began in the 1960s or 1970s depending on who you ask — merely means the cultural transition into an epoch into which there were no longer any fundamental guiding myths that unified human societies and drove progress. Such an era is, by its nature, more fractured socially; two humans plucked at random from a postmodern epoch might find themselves believing wildly different things about human society, progress and morality, with little in common.

Jung believed, Bainbridge explained, that people needed myths to live by — hence the importance of religion. Yet interestingly, there has been an ever-increasing number of Americans leaving organized religion. In return, many people — perhaps those who were never religious in the first place — have turned to New Age spiritual beliefs, which in some circles have curiously syncretized with the tenets of the far-right conspiracy theory QAnon.

Bainbridge noted the contrast between New Age circles and QAnon in Jungian terms.

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"One is super dark and apocalyptic and the other is utopian," Bainbridge said. "The problem with New Age thinking that is it leaves out the shadow — and then QAnon is obsessed with the shadow."

"Unfortunately, many people were gravitating toward conspiracy theories prior to the pandemic," Manly observed, "yet this trend has intensified during the pandemic due to surges in online time, anxiety, and feelings of helplessness."

Manly connected this to Jung's "wolf within" idea. "Individuals and groups who perpetuate conspiracy theories are often intentionally 'feeding the wolf inside' masses of people — often with substantial negative mental health effects."

But why is this happening now? As Bainbridge noted, the coronavirus pandemic appears to have amplified existing rifts. Joe Kelly, a cult intervention specialist, also told Salon that humans are often drawn to extremism when they are suffering.

"If an individual is hurting — financially, on any level, losing a job, having trouble with their mortgage, having trouble feeding themselves — then they're more likely to listen to extremist ideologies and talk about a conspiracy around them that is beyond their control," Kelly said.

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Social psychologists like Jung often see the government as a stand-in for authority figures like parents. Indeed, Bainbridge said, one might analogize the draw to conspiracy theories and New Age religions as children acting out when their "parents" (meaning, the state) are not taking care of them properly.

"If the parent isn't taking care of a child, then the child acts out, right? The child is angry because it's not getting its needs met," Bainbridge said. "And there are lots of people, like left-progressives, who asked: 'How did Trump get elected?' But once you really look into it, you're like, that was obvious because there's a huge part of America that's in between New York and LA, and those people are fed up and they feel forgotten."

Bainbridge says the way out of this conundrum, from a Jungian perspective, is to embrace humanism and empathy.

"We have to find our humanity, and [ask], 'what does it mean to be a human being?'" Bainbridge said. "It means that you have to integrate your own darkness, wrestle with your own paradoxes and stop projecting out onto other people the opposite inside of you."

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Bainbridge added: "There are no simple answers. But we have to hold on to our own humanity, instead of projecting out and demonizing other people. That's how we survive."

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