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## Hunting and Mental Health By James A. Swan, Ph.D.

**Despite what some antis claim, there is no research to assert that hunters are prone to mental illness. On the contrary, for many people surrendering to the spirit of the hunt may promote mental health.**

The Washington Times reports that Earle D. Hightower, chairman of the 27-member Institute for Public Safety - a group concerned with issues such as traffic and air pollution in Rockville, Md. - recently sent out 600 cards to property owners in Garrett County stating that 40 percent of hunters are drug addicts, drunks or mentally unstable.

Mr. Hightower, 82, who says he is a former hunter and World War II veteran, was quoted as saying, "My personal opinion is that anybody who goes out and shoots helpless animals has a psychiatric problem."

These are the days of fact-checking. As a psychologist, I'd like to report back on my fact-checking.

Because I am an adjunct faculty member at a professional graduate school of psychology, I was able to conduct a search of the ProQuest Psychology search engine that indexes more than 400 journals in the fields of anthropology, psychology and psychiatry.

It found 258 articles that use the word "hunting." I checked them all. None report on any studies of hunting and mental illness.

I've spoken with the Research Department of the American Psychological Association. They agree that they are not aware of any studies to support Mr. Hightower's claim that hunters are prone to mental illness. In fact, the opposite seems true.

Many of the best-respected behavioral scientists of our times, including Sigmund Freud, William James, Carl Jung, Erich Fromm, Marie-Louise von Franz and Karl Menninger, have written that hunting is a natural, healthy part of human nature.

Hunting is a very basic instinct programmed into the master computer of our species for survival purposes that has been elevated by ethics to become a "sport," which enables us to express our basic biological identity, "The Id," guided social ethics, religious teachings and laws.

Erich Fromm, one of the most widely-respected behavioral scientists of the 20th century, summed up these opinions in his widely-acclaimed study of the causes and prevention of violence, "The Anatomy of Human Destructiveness":

In the act of hunting, a man becomes, however briefly, part of nature again. He returns to the natural state, becomes one with the animal, and is freed from the

burden of his existential split: to be part of nature and to transcend it by virtue of his consciousness. In stalking the animal he and the animal become equals, even though man eventually shows his superiority by use of his weapons.

Fromm goes on to point out that the motivation of the modern ethical sport hunter is pleasure fused with compassion. He also states that this contrasts sharply with the motivation of the sadist, who might torture and kill pets or other small animals, which is revenge.

In short, hunting and pet torture, are as unlike as sexual intercourse in a loving relationship and rape.

"Predatory aggression," as Fromm calls hunting, is a positive form of aggression, like sport and play, the expression of which is good for mind, body and spirit.

Melvin Konner in his award-winning book "The Tangled Wing," based on a seven-year study of the biological origins of human behavior supported by the National Institute of Mental Health, the Emory University professor of psychiatry and anthropology states, "... There is little or no evidence, physiological or behavioral, to suggest that predatory aggression has much in common with intraspecies aggression."

This may help explain why hunters are among the most ardent conservationists. Non-hunting environmentalist groups often survive on crises, real or fabricated, which fuel fund-raising. Hunting groups put their money into habitat, resulting often in more results, not more hot air.

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