

## **‘Dr.’ Laura — Is There a Doctor in the House?**

by Helene Goldberg, Ph.D., a psychologist in private practice in Berkeley, CA

“Dr.” Laura has the largest and most lucrative psychotherapy practice in the world. Everyday 18 million people tune in to one of the 400 radio stations that carry her syndicated program. Some 50,000 of them call in for help. Most must make do with reading one of her three bestselling books. She has her own web site at [www.drLaura.com](http://www.drLaura.com) where the loyal can buy all the calendars, mugs, sweatshirts and tapes they might need or desire. If she is not more popular than God, she is at least as certain of her moral rectitude, and much better at self promotion.

Her listeners tune in avidly to hear her harangue troubled callers for being wimps and whiners. And Laura hates whiners (unless she’s doing the whining). To tell the truth, she doesn’t have much patience for most of her callers. She is unable to listen for more than a few seconds without making someone sound foolish, weak, or evil. While other pop therapists urge attention toward the “inner child”; Laura is more in tune with her own “inner harpy”. She can do without empathy too. She is a scold and her listeners seem to love it. In a field that often valorizes ambiguity and complexity, Laura speaks with the certainty of a seer or a demagogue. She is the antishrink. She has no patience for the current psychobabble of victims and survivors. What is the point of understanding a problem? Just GET OVER IT.

Some of her simplicity seems refreshing. Especially when applied to others. It is reassuring that no matter how intractable our own problems might seem, other people’s problems are just plain dumb. “Dr.” Laura’s approach: If you are a drug addict, stop. Don’t get pregnant if you are not married. Don’t even think of having an abortion. If you are poor, get a job. If you are a mother, however, quit your job and stay home with your kids. If you are a single mother: a) (see above) don’t be, or b) get a job that allows you to support you and your family and still allows you to stay home with your kids (being a radio shrink fills the bill), or c) give the children up for adoption to a good religious heterosexual family. It’s OK to be homosexual, but don’t try to raise kids (heterosexuals make better parents). Don’t let your kids have sex or take drugs. If they do, cut them off. If you had an abusive childhood, get over it. How much simpler than spending months or years exploring and understanding these issues in order to solve them. Laura does it all in few minutes: just long enough to assign blame.

Though the predicaments her listeners bring run the gamut of human problems, Laura’s advice rings but a single note: she offers a simplistic morality. Dr. Laura proclaims that the right ethical choice is easy. Again and again she condemns her listeners for putting their immediate expediency before their values; for blinding themselves to their own weaknesses; for whining about having chosen the wrong partner. She takes a tough stance toward others, but how about Doctor Laura herself. As a therapist — a doctor she’s not! A therapist is not ethically allowed to appropriate the authority of a doctorate from another field, but this appears to be what she’s done, since Laura’s only doctorate is in physiology.

If she were just one more neurotic, self-aggrandizing therapist, Laura would merely be a sitcom character. But there is a dangerous price paid for her astounding success. Laura draws her listeners to her by toying with their hunger to believe that for all their personal pain and confusion, and the suffering they see around them, their world is comprehensible, just, and moral. Laura’s self-righteous indignation plays on a universal hope for a moral universe, a hope

that becomes more desperate as society turns its back on its own moral obligation to help those in need. The truth is that the less humane our society gets, the more need we feel to justify its authority. Just as children of abusive parents find it less threatening to blame themselves than their parents, people who suffer the most are first to blame themselves for their pain. The victim, and victims almost universally believe they must deserve their suffering, complies with the injustice. People call Laura because they are in pain and need help, but they also believe that they don't deserve to be helped. Thus when Laura twists the knife a little deeper into a suffering caller, blaming the victim, she absolves the rest of us for a moment from our own guilt. She also confirms our belief that we don't really deserve help. She constantly reminds us that "God helps those who help themselves." But what about the helpless? The price of her absolution is that we too turn our backs on those in need, and, at the same time, deny our own inner cries for help. Every problem is an occasion for swift response — something to be eliminated not understood. Her antipsychological rapier slashes through our Gordian tangle of guilt but leaves us scarred in the process.

Her enormous popularity bolsters a widespread and disturbing movement in our country to trivialize psychological problems. Her powerful appeal mirrors two prevailing and dangerous deceptions. First is the mistaken belief that emotional problems are, on the whole, malingering or a result of moral laxity. Many of her callers may share Laura's scorn for complex psychological explanations, but they still suffer from failed relationships and yearn for love and community. They feel bad and they turn to Laura for help they are not sure they deserve. Laura's smug piety affirms the possibility of a better life if they'll only accept full personal blame for their problems. Their guilt over their own suffering leaves them exquisitely susceptible to Laura's attacks.

The second deception Laura's success feeds on is that long term psychotherapy is ineffective. It has become an oft-repeated and acceptable deceit that psychotherapy is mere quackery. Laura encourages her listeners to believe that her invectives and platitudes are the best help they can hope for, and that the expense of real psychotherapy is a self-indulgence — a waste of time and money.

Now it is true that not all therapists are equally good, but current wisdom has it that there has never been any proof that psychotherapy works and that its benefits are testimony only to the gullibility of its patients. This position is upheld not only by the uneducated, but is gaining acceptance in the cynical academic circles as reflected in the writings of Frederick Crews and Jeffrey Masson. However, the truth is that there is an enormous body of reputable research that confirms that psychotherapy and psychiatry are remarkably effective treatments for the entire gamut of emotional problems. In an extensive survey organized by Consumer Reports, over 90 percent of those who used the services of a psychotherapist for all sorts of psychological problems, from everyday unhappiness to severe mental illness, said that they were helped. Contradicting Laura's contempt for long-term psychotherapy, the survey confirmed that those who stayed in therapy the longest were helped the most. Further studies show that, on the whole, psychotherapy is often more effective than many other common medical interventions. Even the most serious mental illnesses respond to a combination of therapy and psychopharmacology: for many it may come as a surprise that these treatments are about 80 percent effective in treating manic depression, depressive disorders, and panic attacks; even the success rate for treating schizophrenia is 60 percent. Depressive disorders respond equally well, in the long run, to psychotherapy with or without medication. Compare that to the improvement rates of heart treatments such as angioplasty and atherectomy at 41 and 52 percent, respectively. How sad then

that many people's only experience with psychotherapy is the radio ravings of "Dr." Laura, and that they have to settle for her platitudes rather than get real assistance.

Not too surprisingly, undermining our faith in psychotherapy is even more popular with the health insurance industry than with disaffected intellectuals. The for-profit managed care business that is currently cannibalizing our communities must be overjoyed by Laura's popularity. Populist cynicism toward psychotherapy allows health insurance companies to redline psychological problems and provides them with a shortsighted windfall. Health insurance companies are delighted by anyone who can convince us that psychological problems are self-indulgent malingering. After all, psychotherapy can take a long time, and health insurance companies like to treat even major surgery on an outpatient office-visit budget. Laura's instant "treatment" bolsters their strategy to trivialize mental illness and deny coverage for long-term treatment. Insurance companies thrive on our belief that there is no real help for our pain. But we foot the bill since the quality of life for all of us has been savaged. For most, denial of psychotherapy results merely in unnecessary unhappiness and frustration, but, ultimately, for society as a whole, the costs are far greater: Families are shattered by untreated mental illness. Our schools have become combat zones. Our streets teem with those too disabled even to beg. Our jails and courts are choked.

These are some of the costs of conflating psychology and morality. Once psychological problems are depicted as moral failings, the issue becomes punishment not treatment. As we close our hearts and minds to the possibilities of rehabilitation and redemption, people with untreated psychological problems fall within the province of the criminal justice system. In fact, mental hospitals have been replaced by prisons; and right now LA County Jail is the largest mental health facility in California.

"Dr." Laura is second in popularity only to Rush Limbaugh on the air waves, and though she protests that she is apolitical, many listen to both for the same reasons. Like Limbaugh, her vitriol undermines our empathy for others and ourselves, and thus contributes to a general climate of political repression. Laura, however, is more than just a ranting radio pundit. By representing herself as both a doctor and moral arbiter, she misleads her listeners and violates the ethics of the profession she represents. As a healer, Ms. Schlessinger would do well to remember Hippocrates' cardinal tenet, "First, do no harm." Certainly, blurring the distinction between psychological problems and moral transgression hurts the victims it vilifies and violates the more complex and humane values that form the basis of any real psychotherapy. While Laura has succeeded in passing herself off as a doctor to treat a growing societal malaise, she is, in fact, a symptom of the illness itself.