

## Are you weighed down by your wealth, troubled by your trillions, guilt-ridden about your golden lifestyle? You could be suffering from affluenza. **Matthew Lynn** seeks help for this crippling condition

*"Doctor, my brother thinks he's a chicken."*

*"How long has this been going on?"*

*"Three years. We would have come sooner but we needed the eggs."*

**Woody Allen, Annie Hall**

**T**HERE is no couch in Dr. Ronit Lami's office, just computers, files, some classy pictures on the walls and a pair of comfy armchairs, good for sinking back into and getting some things off your mind. A neatly-dressed, smart, occasionally hesitant woman, Lami is in the process of setting up Britain's most unusual psychological therapy practice. Where other doctors treat neurotics or psychopaths, or the terminally shy or dysfunctional, Lami specialises in treating rich people suffering shame, guilt, anger or fear.

She works not in a clinic but from the plush Mayfair offices of a firm of private bankers and financial advisers called Allenbridge. Between selling hedge funds and sorting out their inheritance taxes, wealthy clients can shuffle off to Lami to get their brains sorted out as well. Lots of bankers verge on the eccentric. Many of their clients may also border on the insane. No other firm has gone to the extreme lengths of installing a shrink in a corner of the office. "We're combining psychological with financial experience," explains Anthony Yadoaroff, chief executive of Allenbridge Group. "Having served private clients for 15 years, we have a sense of how and why these problems are caused. And now we have the expertise to help people solve them."

If you feel burdened by your wealth and want to get fixed, Lami is your woman. The guiding principle of her sub-branch of psychology? That the rich have problems too - not just how many butlers to hire, or which Mercedes to drive, but real issues of obsessive behaviour, dysfunctional families and unhappy marriages. The condition trades under the snappy name of affluenza, the affliction of an unbalanced relationship with money or wealth.

"The kind of people who create wealth don't usually know they have a problem," explains Lami.

"They are often in denial. But that doesn't mean the problems are not there."

In America, not surprisingly, affluenza is a much bigger deal than it has been so far in Europe. Jessie O'Neill, grand-daughter of a onetime president of General Motors, has set herself up as a leading authority on the subject through books such as *The Golden Ghetto*. "Simply defined," she observes, "affluenza is a dysfunctional relationship with money and wealth or the pursuit of it. Anyone, regardless of their net worth, who believes that they must be rich, that more is always better, is a selfcondemned prisoner of the golden ghetto."

Even though the economic statistics may now make more worrying reading for the wealth creators, Lami's trade should still be booming. Many people have salted money away during recent years of plenty; in any part of the world, affluenza is likely to be a growing issue. The strong global economy, free trade and relatively peaceful world have meant the very rich have been one of the fastest growing tribes in the world. In a recent report by Merrill Lynch and Cap Gemini Ernst & Young, 180,000 people worldwide had joined its ranks of high net worth individuals (otherwise known as stinkingly rich people), whom the report defines as those people with investable assets excluding property of above \$1 m, during the past year. But Allenbridge points out that in a recent survey of Forbes, top 400 richest people, 37 per cent of the sample said they were unhappy.

There are now 7.2 million dollar-millionaires around the world, controlling assets of \$27 trillion. In Switzerland, one in every 40 people is now a millionaire, which means that any bar or café in Zurich you wander into is likely to be playing host to at least a couple.

Lami's casebook is a study in afflictions of wealth, breathing testimony to the old saw that whatever else it might be that money can buy you - seemingly, depression, addiction and guilt - happiness itself is never in stock. Lami's day is filled with families arguing over money, wives who

are bored by their husbands' money or children who are suffocating under the monetary weight of their parents' affection.

There are two branches of her trade: wealth psychology, and affluenza itself. What's the difference? Well, the former deals with the impact that sudden wealth - an inheritance, perhaps a windfall lottery win - often has upon people. The affluenza treatment is aimed at victims who are unhealthily obsessed with money and have fallen prey to the notion that nothing has any value unless it has a price tag attached (the latter have been around for a long time, of course - hence Oscar Wilde's famous quip about 'the man who knows the price of everything and the value of nothing').

The cynic might suggest that affluenza victims simply hand their money over to the first deserving charity of their choice and live happily ever after in a Bedouin tent. Lami prefers to delve into the deeper reasons behind their depression. Families and their conflicts are most fertile ground - not least because when clients start planning inheritance tax issues, it often becomes clear that it is therapists they need, not accountants. Take this story from her casebook. An American couple, both of them wealthy, had three children. Their eldest son was married and distant from the parents. Their daughter was living with a boyfriend of whom her parents disapproved, and never spoke to her parents. The third son was still in school but was having problems with his work, was depressed and was close to drug addiction. The father had developed cancer that had been diagnosed as fatal, provoking a crisis within the family - not least of which was the need to resolve a will.

"Often, you find these very rich families are just living with all these problems," says Lami. "Because they are entrepreneurs, they are usually what psychologists call 'Type A personalities'. They are driven and controlling and usually very insensitive to other people's feelings."

The first reaction of the American couple was that their children must have a problem. "Often, successful families don't like what the children are doing," she says. "Only when we started to discuss these issues did the parents begin to realise they had

a problem. After that, the family slowly started to communicate what they wanted from each other."

A more mainstream case of affluenza is illustrated by another sad tale from the case book. It revolves around a young man who had suddenly inherited a lot of money from his grandfather. "People often don't understand the psychology of inheritance but it can be very complex," says Lami. "It can create a great feeling of dependency. It creates a lot of confusion. 'Who are my friends, and do they like me for who I am, or because of my money?' If you have a lot of money it can change the way you think."

This latter case of affluenza was particularly acute for two reasons. One was that the grandfather had lost all contact with his daughter, who was the young man's mother: that was another sign that the family was completely dysfunctional. The boy never knew his grandfather and had grown up in a normal middle-class family expecting to have to work for a living. The second problem was the terms of the will. The grandfather, a mistrustful and bitter old man, tied up the cash in a maze of sub-clauses, conditions and trusts. The boy received a large income but had no control over the money. He was not allowed to make any decisions about where he would live or what kind of car he drove - all those were taken by the trustees.

The old man could not have devised a better system for fooling with his grandson's brain if he had taken advice from Sigmund Freud himself. "[The grandson] had decided that he wanted to take the trustees to court to change the terms of the will," says Lami. She was unwilling to see this happen: "We are always very reluctant to see people start fighting each other in court." Eventually, with the rest of his family also receiving handouts from the will, he managed to persuade them to put a joint proposal to the trustees and so resolve the conflict. But the most important task was to get him to come to terms with his inheritance.

Most large inheritances create problems for the person who receives the money, Lami believes - hence the popular myth of the poor little rich girl sitting alone in her mansion while poor kids have fun playing outside. Alcohol and cocaine are often

one answer, as a weekend among Notting Hill's trustafarians will confirm.

The children of the rich, Lami argues, must be taught how to handle money. They need to have responsibilities and role models lest they turn into spoiled brats. That their parents, or at least their fathers, are often domineering bullies who want their children to become exact replicas of themselves seldom helps.

The wives of rich men are another source of patients. Back to the case-studies. One woman came to see Lami because she was worried that her son was not doing well enough at school.

It quickly became obvious it was the mother who had the problems, not the boy. "She was a shopaholic," says Lami. "Shopping is a common addiction, much like drinking or alcohol. All she did all day was spend money, but she was still always complaining about everything."

Despite the lavish lifestyle her husband was providing, she was constantly unhappy and moaned that he didn't make enough money. She started out insisting that for all the money that had been lavished on it, her son had a problem with his schooling. Over several months of therapy, Lami started to convince her that the problem lay with her, not with the rest of her family. "She had grown up with very little money," explains Lami, "and now she had become very wealthy. Often that transition is very hard. They are constantly insecure and nervous about money because of their background."

Can't see yourself going down with affluenza? Think again. As the GM heiress points out, you don't have to be mega-rich to suffer from affluenza. It can be a mass-market affliction. Lami defines it in terms of a rampant, mindless materialism. "It can be any kind of dysfunctional relationship with money," she says. "It becomes obvious when people start to judge everything in terms of money. It can become like any other kind of obsessive compulsive behaviour, and that is always unhealthy." She likes to quote the American industrialist Andrew Carnegie who, in response to the question, how much is enough?, was fond of saving, "A little bit more." Then again, Carnegie was also fond of the saying, "To die rich is to die disgraced" and donated most of his fortune to

building public libraries across America. His relationship to money was clearly very odd.

Lami would have put him straight on the couch: "A lot of my patients have an inner sense of void," she says. "They think if they don't work anymore, they won't have anything left." Plenty of her patients are entrepreneurs who have sold their companies and collected a small fortune but have subsequently been left bewildered and lost in a world where they don't have any decisions to make or people to boss around. "They get this big cheque for their business and then they are saying to themselves, 'Well, what next?'"

Good question. One of Lami's solution: get them to spend more time with their families and children, and start them working for charities. Also, get them to walk barefoot through the park. Why barefoot? "Because it allows them to reconnect with the earth," she says. "I think that's good for people."

It's the first overt sign of California-style psychobabble from this very unusual therapist. On one level, treating the rich for the trauma of excessive wealth may seem a trivial occupation. They may have problems, one is tempted to think, but they aren't real problems like the sort suffered by single mothers on sink housing estates or disturbed teenagers sleeping rough on the streets. Affluenza, surely, can easily be dismissed as the self-indulgent condition of having too much time, too much money and not enough real stuff to worry about.

Lami is conscious of that charge but doesn't buy it. "The truth is, this is an internal experience," she says. "People seem to think that if you have money you are not an ordinary human being, that you don't suffer. That isn't so. They suffer as much as anyone else."

She has some sympathy herself with her patients, if only from a reverse psychology point of view. Lami comes from a family that made money in the textiles trade; she grew up expecting that she would never have to work for a living. When the family fortune started to shrivel, she realised she would not be as wealthy as she had imagined and had to start standing on her own two feet.

In the end, the trouble with curing affluenza might be, as Woody Allen observed in *Annie Hall*,

that you need the eggs. It is precisely the kind of driven, paranoid characters who end up making big money and then wind up in the office of someone like Lami. Rightly or wrongly, free-market capitalism saves its big prizes for obsessives. A global economy in which all the entrepreneurs and wealth creators underwent chill-out therapy would not necessarily be any more prosperous. It might well be a lot poorer. And then none of us would be happy.

*For more information or a brochure, contact Dr. Ronit Lami on 020 7318 6343 or Hugo Cox on 020 73186340, or go to [www.affluenza-and-wealth.com](http://www.affluenza-and-wealth.com)*

## ARE YOU SUFFERING FROM AFFLUENZA?

1. Do you think you would feel happier with more money?
2. Do you see the overnight office cleaner more than your kids?
3. Do you eschew GMTV for CNBC?
4. Do you shop till you drop, even on Sunday?
5. Is your wealth a result of a sudden windfall?
6. Do you take your laptop on holiday?
7. Do you constantly discuss how much your friends paid for their flats or houses?
8. And do you often worry that your `friends` are really gold-diggers?
9. Have your family relations deteriorated as your income has risen?
10. Do you skip articles like this and turn straight to the glossy ads?

If your answers were mostly yes, you need treatment.