

## LITERATURE, THE ARTS AND MEDICINE

# Perspectives on Mental Health

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Highly stigmatized and poorly understood, mental illness is a difficult topic to discuss. Moreover, the risk of being politically incorrect often discourages people from engaging in conversation about it.

This year's section on "Literature, the Arts and Medicine" highlights the struggle of living both with any condition that affects the brain and with the associated stigma. We asked, "What does it mean to have a mental illness?", and patients and those who are close to them responded through creative expression. This was not a question for doctors who make the diagnosis; rather, we sought answers from the people who carry that diagnosis in all settings and interactions in their lives. People were eager to share, and we found that art and poetry are quite commonly used as a creative outlet, with therapeutic effect.

The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual (DSM) of Mental Disorders provides criteria for assigning a label to a constellation of symptoms. People with schizophrenia may have delusions, hallucinations, disorganized speech and avolition. A major depressive episode typically includes low mood, disturbed sleep and loss of interest in normal activities. Yet we hope to draw MUMJ readers' attention to a particular criterion cited frequently in the DSM: "the symptoms cause clinically significant distress or impairment in social, occupational, or other important areas of functioning."<sup>1</sup> Thus it is implicit in the diagnosis of mood and anxiety disorders, psychosis, and personality disorders, that patients have difficulty coping in many spheres. Their conditions are often highly stigmatized and have a profound impact on their relationships.

Simply listening to the patient helps us to identify the misconceptions that are ultimately isolating. Chloë Grande kept a diary while being diagnosed with anorexia nervosa, a condition characterized by extreme weight loss, distorted body image and an intense fear of gaining weight. She offers

a glimpse of her thoughts: "I feel like such a freak. I hate this kind of attention... Wouldn't it be nice not to care about what you eat?" Her earnest words challenge the notion central to the stigmatization of eating disorders: namely, that they are matters of choice and attention-seeking behaviour.

That people who live with mental illness are valuable contributors to this conversation is not a question, but rather a fact that deserves emphasis. For some patients with Major Depressive Disorder and active suicidal ideation, mired in a pattern of substance abuse and self-harm, each day can be a struggle to find motivation. One psychiatrist informed the editorial team that the prospect of preparing a creative piece for the Journal gave her patient a sense of purpose. For a patient to be reminded that their perspective is valued by their community is likely worth more than we realize. Evidently, patients' creative expressions stand alone as pieces of art worth discussing—independent of their disease, though the disease becomes the lens to their insight.

In referring to psychiatric patients as "they," we risk losing an appreciation for the diversity of mental illness, in both nature and severity. We learn in "October after Rain" that Margaret Bennett and her daughter share a diagnosis of bipolar disorder, yet there is an acknowledgement that the disease is experienced uniquely. What they may share is the struggle to express themselves, to be understood by others, and to endure deep-seated stigmatization of their mental illness. Even so, her poem is comforting, suggesting to the reader that the difficulties of the diagnosis can be endured, especially when shared.

A boy with epilepsy submitted a piece of artwork that depicts one of his seizures. While epilepsy is a neurologic rather than a psychiatric condition, Jean-Pierre Weziak's piece is included in this compilation because of the shared implications on social and academic functioning. How is a patient who has tonic-clonic movements or absence seizures

perceived by others? The child and his peers learn that seizures come from the brain, and that the child's behaviours are unpredictable and "different." Jean-Pierre writes, "My seizures happen anywhere: a ski slope, school bus, classroom, playing basketball... I recently had a seizure in the hallway at school. I do worry about what other people might think, especially girls, but so far other students have been kind and shown concern." The visual representation of his seizure is magical because it is inimitable, affording us a glimpse into the patient's personal experience of disease.

The individuality of the experience of living with a diagnosis is a recurrent theme. In a poem written for a friend with bipolar disorder who committed suicide, Lisa Jeffs describes a man's movement that resonates with her memory of him. Through her simple reference to his way of moving, his "view from the perimeter," we gain an appreciation of his agency and unique perspective. Patients with psychiatric illness are all too familiar with the sensation of being viewed by an intrigued public. Here, we highlight the value of the patient's viewpoint.

A colleague tells me the story of a patient who was asked by his doctor, "Do the pills help you cope with your schizophrenia?" The patient answered, "No. But I think they help the world cope with it." This exposé challenges public perceptions of diseases that affect the mind, and focuses on the experiences of patients and their loved ones as a source of insight. The authors find intrinsic value in the creative process, but they offer up their pieces here as subjects for dialogue on what it means to have mental illness, beyond the DSM criteria. It is our hope that this compilation will help reveal misconceptions, dissipate stigma, and ultimately facilitate conversation about a difficult topic. †

## REFERENCES

1. American Psychiatric Association. Diagnostic and statistical manual of mental disorders. 4th ed, text revision. Washington DC: American Psychiatric Association; 2000.

### Author Biographies

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