

Creative Cognition: The Thin Line Between Genius and Madness

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There is anecdotal evidence for a relationship between creativity and psychosis, particularly schizophrenia. James Joyce had a daughter with schizophrenia and had many schizotypal traits. Albert Einstein had a son with schizophrenia and was also somewhat schizotypal and eccentric. Bertrand Russell had many family members with schizophrenia or psychosis: his aunt, uncle, son and grand-daughter. Psychotic individuals are said to display a capacity to see the world in a novel and original way, literally, to see things that others cannot.

History

The association between bipolar disorder and creativity first appeared in literature in the 1970s, but the idea of a link between "madness" and "genius" is much older, dating back at least to the time of Aristotle. The Ancient Greeks believed that creativity came from the gods, and in particular the Muses: the nine daughters of Zeus, the god of arts and sciences. The idea of a complete work of art emerging without conscious thought or effort was reinforced by the views of the Romantic era. It has been proposed that there's a particular link in the case of bipolar disorder, whereas major depressive disorder appears to be significantly more common among playwrights, novelists, biographers, and artists.

Positive mood, mental illness and creativity

Mood-creativity research reveals that people are most creative when they're in a positive mood and that mental illnesses such as depression or schizophrenia actually decrease creativity. People who have worked in the field of arts throughout the history have had problems with poverty, persecution, social alienation, psychological trauma, substance abuse, high stress and other such environmental factors which are associated with developing and perhaps causing mental illnesses. It is thus likely that when creativity itself is associated with positive moods, happiness, and mental health, pursuing a career in the arts may bring problems with stressful environment and income. Other factors such as the centuries-old stereotype of the suffering of a mad artist help to fuel the link by putting expectations on how an artist should act. It also helps the field to be more attractive to those with mental disorders.

Creativity and bipolar disorder

Bipolar disorder

There is a range of types of bipolar disorder. Individuals with Bipolar I Disorder experience severe episodes of mania and depression with periods of wellness between episodes. The severity of the manic episodes can mean that the person is seriously disabled and unable to express the heightened perceptions and flight of thoughts and ideas in a practical way. Individuals with Bipolar

II Disorder experience milder periods of hypomania during which the flight of ideas, faster thought processes and ability to take in more information can be converted to art, poetry or design.

Creativity and psychopathology

Many famous historical figures gifted with creative talents may have been affected by bipolar disorder. Ludwig van Beethoven, Virginia Woolf, Isaac Newton, and Robert Schumann are some people whose lives have been researched to discover signs of mood disorder. In many instances, creativity and psychopathology share some common traits, such as a tendency for "thinking outside the box," flights of ideas, speeding up of thoughts and heightened perception of visual, auditory and somatic stimuli.

Creativity and the emotions of bipolar disorder

Many people with bipolar disorder may feel powerful emotions during both depressive and manic phases, potentially aiding in creativity. Because (hypo)mania decreases social inhibition, performers are often daring and bold. As a consequence, creators commonly exhibit characteristics often associated with mental illness. The frequency and intensity of these symptoms appear to vary according to the magnitude and domain of creative achievement. At the same time, these symptoms are not equivalent to the full-blown psychopathology of a clinical manic episode which, by definition, entails significant impairment.

Posthumous diagnosis

Some creative people have been posthumously diagnosed as suffering from bipolar or unipolar disorder based on biographies, letters, correspondence, contemporaneous accounts, or other anecdotal material, most notably in Kay Redfield Jamison's book *Touched with Fire: Manic-Depressive Illness and the Artistic Temperament*. *Touched With Fire* presents the argument that bipolar disorder, and affective disorders more generally, may be found in a disproportionate number of people in creative professions such as actors, artists, comedians, musicians, authors, performers and poets.

Positive correlation

Several recent clinical studies have also suggested that there is a positive correlation between creativity and bipolar disorder, although the relationship between the two is unclear. Temperament may be an intervening variable.

The 2005 Stanford study

A 2005 study at the Stanford University School of Medicine measured creativity by showing children figures of varying complexity and symmetry and asking whether they like or dislike them. The study showed for the first time that a sample of children who either have or are at high risk for bipolar disorder tend to dislike simple or symmetric symbols more. Children with bipolar parents who were not bipolar themselves also scored higher dislike scores.

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