

The Sylvia Plath Effect: Creativity and the Tortured Mind

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Questions swirl around a supposed link between creativity and mental illness.

By DEBORAH SMITH BAILEY

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Popular culture has long stereotyped poets as depressed and creative scientists as mad. In fact, the idea of a link between creativity and mental illness goes back to the time of Aristotle, when he wrote that eminent philosophers, politicians, poets and artists all have tendencies toward "melancholia."

Indeed, there are numerous examples of famous creators-writers like Virginia Woolf, painters like Vincent Van Gogh, composers like Robert Schumann-who have been highly successful but had or are suspected to have had a mental illness.

Some studies have backed up this notion, suggesting that writers, artists and others are more likely to have a mental illness and that people with certain mental illnesses, such as depression and mood disorders, appear somewhat more likely to be creative. While some researchers have found that creative people are slightly more at-risk, others have found more grave connections, such as that they are 30 percent more likely to have bipolar disorder.

However, such research is often fraught with methodological problems, including selection bias, controls that are not blinded, reliance on biographies that might play up mental illness, retrospective designs and unclear definitions of creativity. And considering that not all studies have found a link between creativity and mental illness, the jury is still out on the specific nature of the relationship, says psychologist and creativity researcher James Kaufman, PhD, of California State University, San Bernardino.

Still, the findings raise interesting questions about the relationship between mental illness and creativity, including:

Does creativity cause mental illness? There isn't a link between mental illness and the actual process of creating, says psychiatrist Albert Rothenberg, MD, of Harvard Medical School, who has studied Nobel laureates, Pulitzer Prize winners and other highly creative individuals. Rather, he argues that mental illnesses such as anxiety, thought disorder and depression disrupt the cognitive and emotional processes necessary for successful creativity.

In fact, in his book, *Creativity and Madness: New Findings and Old Stereotypes*" (Johns Hopkins University Press, 1990), Rothenberg proposes that highly creative people do better when they are treated for their mental illnesses.

"That doesn't mean people who create haven't often had mental illnesses," he adds, but that their subject matter and the field they are in perhaps have more bearing on their mental health than creativity itself.

Does the type of creativity matter? Creative people in the artistic professions are more likely to have a mental illness than those in less artistic professions, such as science and business, according to research by Arnold M. Ludwig, MD, in his book, "The Price of Greatness" (Guilford, 1995).

Moreover, in a more recent retrospective study of 1,629 writers, Kaufman found that poets-and in particular female poets -were more likely than fiction writers, nonfiction writers and playwrights to have signs of mental illness, such as suicide attempts or psychiatric hospitalizations.

In a second analysis of 520 eminent American women, he again found that poets were more likely to have mental illnesses and to experience personal tragedy than eminent journalists, visual artists, politicians and actresses-a finding Kaufman has dubbed "the Sylvia Plath effect" after the noted poet who had depression and eventually committed suicide. The findings appear in *The Journal of Creative Behavior* (Vol. 35, No. 1).

Are creative people's motivations a factor? Kaufman and psychologist John Baer, PhD, of Rider University, theorize in the *Review of General Psychology* (Vol. 6, No. 3) that creative people-specifically, eminent female poets-may be more prone to mental illness if they are more vulnerable to extrinsic motivational constraints, such as interpersonal relationships.

Valuing such external factors may harm poets' mental health, they speculate, because high levels of creativity require people to "defy the crowd" and ignore what other people think. That means eminent writing could produce more stress-leading to a higher incidence of mental illness.

Could the stigma of mental illness be a factor? "In the fields of art and literature and music, there is much more toleration of mental illness than there is in the rest of society," explains Rothenberg. That might allow people with mental illnesses to climb the ranks of poetry in a way they couldn't have in business.

How does creative writing interact with mental illness? In several studies, University of Texas at Austin psychologist James Pennebaker, PhD, has found positive health and mental health benefits from writing-but only when the writer crafts a narrative or makes connections between thought and feelings. Kaufman theorizes that poets may not garner the same benefits from writing that other writers do because poems seldom form a narrative.

However, Pennebaker cautions that there is no data yet that proves that poetry writing isn't beneficial. "It's very possible that writing poetry may have kept Sylvia Plath alive longer than she would have," he says. "One of the counterarguments is that being in poetry is a real tough way to

make a living. There are very few jobs that have a higher rejection rate."

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