

The correlation between creativity and mental illnesses

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MENTAL ILLNESS AND CREATIVITY The stereotype of the artist is very familiar. They are tortured, addicted to drugs and alcohol, and likely to make wild pronouncements and behave inappropriately. The most famous image of an artist is perhaps Van Gogh's self-portrait where he wears a bandage over his ear, an ear he himself cut off. The truth is that creative artists often suffer from different types of mental illness. These illnesses can be terrible for the artists' personal lives but they can focus their powers on their creative enterprises in ways that create lasting art. The link between creativity and mental illness has been observed for millennia. There was a sense in the ancient world that creative people were inspired by the gods. All mental illnesses had their origins in some sort of possession. A person who had an epileptic fit was considered to be possessed by the devil. So the muses would also possess a poet or philosopher and help them to produce their best work. This way of thinking became more scientific in recent years as studies sought to find a definitive link between mental illness and creativity. A recent study from 2009 had some interesting findings: Creative minds in all kinds of areas, from science to poetry, and mathematics to humour, may have traits associated with psychosis. Such traits may allow the unusual and sometimes bizarre thought processes associated with mental illness to fuel creativity. The theory is based on the idea that there is no clear dividing line between the healthy and the mentally ill. Rather, there is a continuum, with some people having psychotic traits without having the debilitating symptoms (Dobson). This is an interesting idea. Another recent study found the incidence of serious mental illness was " 20 times higher among major British and Irish poets between 1600 and 1800" (Hudson).

These are extraordinary numbers. What makes them especially unfortunate is how little was known about mental health issues during this period. There would be little or no treatment available for many of these suffering individuals. Another curious and related issue involves drug use by artistic people. Musicians and artists are famous for their indulgence of alcohol and drugs. The poet Coleridge was said to compose work under the influence of opium and Van Gogh famously indulged in absinthe. Most rock stars today are known for their hard-partying ways. There are many ways to think about this. Some suggest that drugs heighten the creative process. But there is also the possibility that this drug use is a way of self-medicating from the effects of mental illness such as anxiety and depression. The ironic and sad fact, however, is that in attempting to self-medicate, artists may in fact be further exacerbating their mental problems through the use of drugs. By turning to alcohol and illegal substances, artists may be sacrificing themselves in order to create art for generations to come. To them it may be ennobling, but to their friends and family it can be terrifying and sad. The same problems may be found in the actual production of work. Research indicates that the actual composition of poetry does not have a therapeutic effect on those inclined to mental health. As Kaufman and Baer wrote in their research on the issue, “ The link between rumination and depression can run both ways. Not only are individuals who suffer from depression more likely to ruminate (and, perhaps, turn these ruminations into poetry), but such rumination can also have a deleterious effect on their depression” (274). For those who are already mentally ill, writing poetry may in fact have a deleterious effect on them. Thinking about the things they write about may

make them more ill and unstable. The poet Sylvia Plath is a good example of this. Indeed, her poetry was unable to save her and may have even contributed to her suicide. Her work is very dark. Publishing it and having it reflected back to her could not have been healthy. There is the possibility that artists who are mentally ill are more likely to capture our attention and become famous. Raving poets and writers who kill themselves tend to become famous as people are attracted to their self-destructive qualities. The poet Sylvia Plath, who killed herself, is an example (Axelrod, 4). Her fame far outweighs the quality of her poetry. Nevertheless it appears there is a real link between creativity and mental illness based on the scientific research. It is possible as well that mentally ill artists appear to us large than life and cause us to scrutinize everything they do. The biographical research on Vincent Van Gogh is much more substantial than on Camille Pissarro, for example, a painter who did not suffer from mental illness. We are attracted to these kinds of figures. We need artists to produce worthwhile cultural products. But the lengths and pains artists go to because of their creativity and their high incidence of mental illness are very unfortunate. We need to provide contemporary artists with more support to ensure they can do their job and also stay healthy. Work consulted Axelrod, Steven Gould. Sylvia Plath: The Wound and the Cure of Words. Johns Hopkins University, 1992. Dobson, Roger. "Creative minds: the links between mental illness and creativity." Independent. May 5, 2009. <http://www.independent.co.uk/life-style/health-and-families/features/creative-minds-the-links-between-mental-illness-and-creativity-1678929.html> Hudson, Alex. "Poetry, the creative process and mental illness." BBC News. February 7, 2011. <http://www.bbc>

co. uk/news/entertainment-arts-12368624 Kaufman, J. C. " I bask in dreams of suicide: Mental illness, poetry, and women." Review of General Psychology, 6(3), 2002.