

Is Madness a Prerequisite for Creativity

Abstract

Lot of investigations have been made since the last two decades to find a relationship between creativity and madness. Albert Rothenberg, Kay Jamison and Nancy Andreasen are some of the researchers who have contributed in this field. It has been found that extremely creative people like writers and artists are more prone to depression which leads them to commit suicide. These people are highly ambitious and in order to achieve their goals, they get involved in several activities simultaneously which takes toll of their health. The stereotype of psychological illness being linked to artistic inspiration is a strongly established one. It was Aristotle, who suggested that it was in the nature of the most distinguished, creative, even witty men to suffer from melancholy. Almost everybody can name an artist, from almost any field, who has suffered from some form of psychosis; from the lives of the poet Sylvia Plath to musicians such as Kurt Cobain, or visual artist like Van Gogh. This in turn strongly suggests that people with extraordinary artistic creativity could be many times more likely to develop disorders such as bipolar disorder, schizophrenia, depression in general.

Keywords: Psychological, Creativity, Hallucinations, Plagued, Bipolar Disorder, Schizophrenia, Depression.

Introduction

Creativity is defined as the production of something that is both new and valued and madness is defined as a self-destructive deviation in behaviour. Creativity sometimes requires a person to go deep into the recesses of their mind and search for parallel truths, alternate realities and intangible ideas. Unfortunately like the deepest part of the ocean, the depth of the human mind and what it holds can neither be fully explored nor fathomed. When you are searching in the darkness, you are bound to hit a few bumps here and there which can either just scratch you or scare you for life. These scratches can be used by people as fodder for their creative expression. These scars can often leave an individual with debilitating mental illness and they are said to display a capacity to see the world in a novel and original way; literally to see things that others cannot. As Lord Byron succinctly noted, "We of the craft are all crazy, some are affected by gaiety, others by melancholy, but all are more or less touched". When the associations flying through the brain self organize to form a new idea, the result is creativity, but if they either fail to organize or create an erroneous idea, the result is psychosis. Sometimes both occur in the same person which results in a creative genius who is also psychotic. According to Plato, Creativity is a "divine madness— a gift from the gods". Seneca recorded Aristotle as having said, "No great genius was without a mixture of insanity". One of Shakespeare's character 'Theseus' in "A Midsummer Night Dream" says, "The lunatic, the lover and the poet are of imagination all compact". Maueil Proust said, "Everything great in the world is created by neurotics". They have composed our masterpieces, but we don't consider what they have cost their creators in sleepless nights and fear of death.

Aims of the Study

The aim of this article is to describe what creativity and madness have in common and to discuss implications for creative thinking in the field of arts. The article begins with a brief historical overview of the topic, followed by some highlights of studies on creativity and mental illness. Explanations for the possible connection between creativity and madness are then addressed. This study doesn't fully resolve the long running questions about the connection between mood disorders and creativity, but it does reflect on some



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perspectives, such as expecting those struggling with a disorder to thrive creatively.

Discussion

The question of a link between creativity and mental illness is a matter that's still applicable and widely debated. Research studies on the subject have been sparse, but the vast majority have been decisive, as no link is readily apparent. When considering creativity and madness, we often find ourselves leaning on such anecdotes as compelling evidence; yet given that they're often refuted by psychiatric research, the question of whether or not there is a link remains a difficult one to answer.

Albert Rothenberg, clinical professor of psychiatry at Harvard, has served for the past 25 years as principal investigator of the studies in the creative process. According to him there is no such link between mental illness and the actual process of creating. He studied Nobel Laureates, Pulitzer Prize winners and other highly creative individuals and argues that mental illnesses such as anxiety, thought disorder and depression disrupt the cognitive and emotional processes necessary for successful creativity. Infact, in his book, "Creativity and Madness: New Findings and Old Stereotypes" Rothenberg proposes that highly creative people do better when they are treated for their mental illnesses.

Kay Redfield Jamison, clinical psychologist of John Hopkins University and the author of the book "Touched with Fire; Manic Depressive Illness and the Artistic Temperament", also supports the idea that there is a cognitive link between creativity and madness. She suggests that the periods of creative productivity are preceded by an elevated mood. She stated that depression may have an important cognitive influence in the creative process. Depression may slow the pace, put thoughts and feelings into perspective and eliminate excess of irrelevant ideas, increasing focus and allowing structuring of new ideas. The American psychologist combined current diagnostic criteria with biographical data, diaries, family trees and other historical information to closely examine the lives of a sample of major 18th century British poets born between the years 1705 and 1805. She found a rate of bipolar disorder 30 times greater in these poets than is present in the general population.

While researching the link between creativity and mental illness, Nancy Andreasen interviewed thirty faculty members at the University of Iowa writer's workshop and thirty control subjects, finding that 80% of the writer had an episode of either depression or manic depression supporting the idea that mood disorders are prevalent among artistic population. It has been alleged that during manic episodes, periods characterized by elation, people can become more productive.

Olivia Sagan explored the experiences of mentally ill, developing artists through longitudinal biographical interviews conducted with arts

students at two university sites. Narratives involved complex stories in which participants considered their illness to be part of themselves, albeit one that they need to manage.

With major depressive disorders eight to ten times more prevalent in writers and artists than in general population, mental health researchers and practitioners have long linked creativity with a higher risk of depression. Depression is associated with feelings of profound sadness, worthlessness, loss of interest in activities and difficulty in concentrating, which seems contrary to creativity, says study coauthor Jutta Joormann, Proff. of Psychology PhD at Stanford University. But depressed people are more likely to ruminate, making depression act as an intermediary variable, given that rumination can also lead individuals to generate a large number of ideas and, in turn, artistic endeavours. Rumination means that you are reflecting on negative feelings and events to the point where it is affecting your life. Ruminations form the cornerstone of major depressive disorders. Correlation studies show that both those in the creative arts and those with depressive disorders spend an inordinate amount of time contemplating their own distress. In the literary world, ruminations serve as fodder for writers. Leo Tolstoy, a Tsar of Russian Literature, is known for his novels, 'War and Peace' and 'Anna Karenina'. Lesser known but certainly more telling was his novel, 'A Confession', in which he explored his own depression and general discontent toward his world. Tolstoy relied heavily on his ruminations which accounted for his evolving ideas on philosophy, life and art.

When Swedish researchers combed through population registries looking for a link between creativity and mental illness, they found that writers have a slightly increased risk for depression and suicide. These results published in "The Journal of Psychiatric Research", suggest that something about the life of an author tends toward depression. The writing life is of necessity isolated, stressful and full of rumination over the mystery of human behavior as Mark Twain, F. Scott Fitzgerald, Sylvia Plath, Tennessee Williams, Anne Sexton, Virginia Woolf and other famous writers life stories illustrate.

Research describes how the moments of heightened and euphoric mood in writers make them have better access to vocabulary, memory and other cognitive resources. These writers experiencing mania can often be more clever and imaginative, often show inflated emotional responses which may facilitate their talent in literature and often have unusual stamina and remarkable capacity for concentration.

Virginia Woolf, who was severely impaired by depression and hypomania made sense of her chaotic experience through writing and it is with 'A Sketch of the Past' that she vividly recalls the ambivalence she felt throughout her life.

In a more recent retrospective study of 1,629 writers researcher James C. Kaufman found that poets and in particular female poets were more

likely than fiction writers, non fiction writers and playwrights to have signs of mental illness such as suicide attempts or psychiatric hospitalisations. In a second analysis of 520 eminent American women, he again found that poets were more likely to have mental illnesses and experiences 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. According to psychologist Perpetua Neo, the question is not about relating creativity and madness but to find the things that takes place during this process. It is evident from the studies that people who remains awake at night and sleeps late are more likely to be creative as compared to early birds because it's at that time they get bursts of imaginative ideas. "Everything becomes beautiful at night. It can be beautiful in a melancholic way, and creatives tend to draw this melancholy and reflectiveness as a source of inspiration. Mary Shelley famously got her inspiration for Frankenstein from a dream. Dmitri Mendeleev also saw how the periodic table should be arranged while he was asleep, then woke up and draw what he had envisioned. Staying up instead of getting rest in this important timeperiod can easily throw these creatives out of sync, which can wreak havoc on their mind and body.

Another possible link between creativity and mental health was discovered in a paper from 2014 by neuroscientist Andreas Fink and his team at the University of Graz in Austria. They took the study of schizotypy which is a less severe form of schizophrenia a step further. Fink and collaborators recruited study participants who were low or high in schizotypy measures. While inside a brain scanner the participants completed an idea-generation task that asks people to come up with original uses for everyday objects, a common assessment of creativity. Fink and others found some key similarities in the brain patterns of the people who scored well on originality and those who measured high in schizotypy. These groups both showed reduced deactivation in the right precuneus, an area of the brain that helps us gather information. In the September issue of Cognitive, Affective and Behavioral Neuroscience, Fink and the others conclude that perhaps creative and schizotypal people share an inability to filter out extraneous or irrelevant material. "The finding that creativity and schizotypy show similar effects at the level of the brain would thus support the idea that similar cognitive processes may be implicated in creativity as well as in psychosis proneness."

Conclusion

It is still a matter of debate and conflict whether there is a link between creativity and

madness but there is one thing for sure and has been proved that mental instability or illness has urged these creative people to explore their creative skills and inspired them to a great extent

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