

Mental health and well being for scientists

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Outline

- Mental health is a major issue for scientists
- Studies relating depression, anxiety, perfectionism, procrastination
- My story
- Practical pro-active prevention
- Strategies for healing

Disclaimer

- I am not a mental health professional.
- All views expressed are my own and not necessarily those of UQ.

Main points

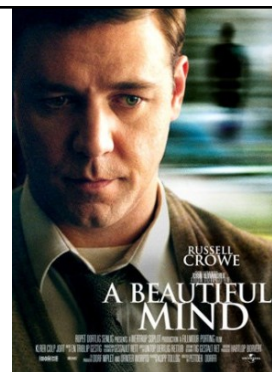
- You, your colleagues, and your children are particularly vulnerable
- A continuum from sanity to insanity
- A diversity of personalities, life histories, life stages, and circumstances
- A diversity of treatments and preventative strategies

Mental health issues among scientists

- Issues range from mood swings, low energy, low self esteem to clinical illness needing medication, therapy, and/or hospitalization.
- Anecdotal evidence
- Scientists tend to be highly gifted, driven, sensitive, and introspective.
- All these make us more susceptible to depression and other mental illness

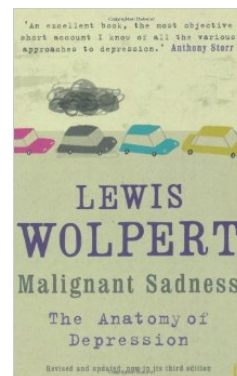
John Nash

- PhD in Math at Princeton laid foundations for game theory
- Succumbed to schizophrenia while a young faculty member at MIT
- Never returned to regular employment
- Awarded Nobel Prize in Economics in 1994



Lewis Wolpert FRS

- Emeritus Professor of Biology as Applied to Medicine at University College London
- Suffered through several severe bouts of depression.
- Hosted BBC documentary *A Living Hell*



Andrew Lange

- One of the world's leading observational cosmologists.
- Chair of the Division of Physics, Maths, and Astronomy at Caltech.
- Lead investigator on BICEP, forerunner of experiment that recently found evidence for cosmic inflation, following the Big Bang.
- Suffered from depression



Ludwig Boltzmann

- one of the greatest theoretical physicists of 19th century
- suffered from depression
- committed suicide



Michel Foucault

(1926-1984)



- Most cited intellectual in the Humanities (*Times Higher Education Guide*, 2007)
- Leading postmodern academic
- Suffered from severe depression as an undergraduate.
- Famous for *Madness and Civilization*

A promising career

- He excelled academically at a young age. After graduating from Harvard, he completed a PhD in Mathematics at the University of Michigan.
- At age 25, an Assistant Prof. at UC Berkeley.
- After two years, he resigned to pursue issues he was more passionate about. He wrote a pamphlet considered so important it was published in the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post*.
- Where is he now?

- Where is he now?

In a US Federal Prison, serving a life sentence without the possibility of parole.

- Who is he?

Ted Kaczynski, the Unabomber. Killed 3 and injured 23.

- What went wrong?

A court-appointed psychiatrist diagnosed him as suffering from paranoid schizophrenia.

My story

- Two episodes
- Fatigue
- Anxiety
- Learning to switch off my brain.
www.mindfulnesscds.com

In Academic Culture, Mental-Health Problems are
Hard to Recognize and Hard to Treat
Chronicle of Higher Education, Feb. 16, 2010

- “academic life today is a petri dish for madness”
- “Most colleges do not have programs designed to promote mental health among faculty members”
- “**Little research exists** on the mental and emotional stresses particular to higher education”
- Compared to other professions, employees in higher education are almost twice as likely to go on disability for mental and nervous disabilities [Standard Insurance Co. provides coverage to more than 1,000 colleges].

Dimensions of perfectionism

- **Excessive concern** about making mistakes
- High personal standards
- **Perception** of high parental expectations
- **Perception** of high parental criticism
- **Doubting** of the quality of ones actions
- Preference for order and organization

Frost et al., *Cognitive Theory and Research* 14, 449 (1990)
[cited 900+ times]

Research studies

- Depression, anxiety, perfectionism, and procrastination are linked.
- Dimensions of perfectionism are involved in vulnerability to depression over time. [Hewitt et al, *J. Abnormal Psychology* 105, 276 (1996)]
- “graduate students may procrastinate on academic tasks even more than undergraduates ... Perfectionism ... high among graduate students” [Onwuegbuzie, *J. Social Behavior & Personality*, 15, 103 (2001)]

How accurate are your perceptions of stress?

“In a study of 29 graduate students, self-ratings of stress correlated with low scores on self-esteem but were not related to an objective indicator of actual stress. Both self-rated stress and low self-esteem scores were related to scores on depression”

Kreger, *Psychological Reports* 76, 345 (1995).

A holistic perspective

- Humans are a complex unity of mind, body, and soul.
- Depression is a complex response of an individual, and not independent of their social interactions.
- We cannot be simply reduced to biochemistry, to brains connected to bodies, to isolated individuals.

Holistic treatment

- Treatments based **solely on just one** of medication, cognitive behavioral therapy, meditation, or socialization, may have limited success.
- "no symptom is more central to depression than the loss of hope."

D.G. Blazer, *The Age of Melancholy*

Basic pro-active prevention

- Eat
- Sleep
- Exercise
- Take a break
- Talk
- Just say NO! (set boundaries)

Deal with the issues now

- Life isn't going to get easier.
Grass isn't greener elsewhere.
- Anxiety
- Time management
- Avoid comparisons with peers
- Clarify your personal values
- Get a mentor

Some Resources

- “career advice” and “mental health”
at condensedconcepts.blogspot.com
- beyondblue.org
- Six free appointments with a
psychologist following referral from
your GP.

Conclusions

- Mental health is a major issue
- Depression, anxiety, perfectionism, & procrastination can be interrelated
- Practice pro-active prevention
- Strategies for healing. Don't wait.

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