Normalization and Popularization of Mental Illness and Its Impact: Personal Experience and a Look at Research Findings

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My interest in the effects of mental illness normalization and popularization began in talks with my very close friend, Sam, who had been diagnosed with clinical depression and put on medication during high school. He told me that during the period when his depression was at its worst, he felt that what he was experiencing was not the same as the "depression" he was hearing about and seeing among his peers. He noticed that the word was used loosely to describe feelings that did not reflect what he was experiencing. His perception was that many of his peers casually described normal negative emotions as depression. This caused him to feel his struggles with depression were being delegitimized, and this made him want to separate himself from those he felt were misappropriating mental illness. In hindsight, he admits that his way of judging other's claims to depression was somewhat unfair, but he sees it as part of as movement to normalize mental illness in ways that is creating a new set of challenges for those experiencing severe mental illness.

Normalization and popularization of mental illness can contribute to distorted ideas and assumptions and even make mental illness into a fad. Mental illness is complicated; it is not black and white; different levels of severity exist. Normalization can discourage those experiencing severe mental illness from opening up and can even cause self-doubt in their own assessment on their mental state. This was a particular concern for Sam.

This paper explores normalization and popularization of mental illness and its effects. My approach to the topics has been influenced by my conversations with Sam and other friends, and my experiences in trying to figure out my personal mental health status. For purposes of this essay, depression is categorized as severe/clinical mental illness, and terms such as sadness, mood swings, and worry/stress are categorized as normal emotions (Rössler, 2013).

Normalization and Popularization: The Good and the Bad

Stigma is one of the most significant factors that prevents people with mental health disorders from seeking help (Schomerus & Angermeyer, 2008). As a result, there has been an increased effort to destigmatize mental illnesses. Many public figures (e.g., artists, athletes, movie stars) have come out about their personal struggles with mental illness. My peers in college also have become increasingly more open in sharing their experiences and struggles. Mental health problems also frequently appear in various forms of popular media. Growing awareness has been paired, for good and bad, with increased calls for normalization.

The upside is that normalization and popularization have significantly reduced the stigma associated with mental illness, allowing society to become more empathetic and supportive toward those experiencing mental illness, which creates a more positive, help-seeking environment throughout communities (Gulliver, Griffiths, & Christensen, 2010). Additionally, normalization of mental illness has caused a paradigm shift in how people view mental health overall, and more people finally recognize the severity of mental disorders. This has led to an increase in government-funded initiatives and a focus on mental health in schools. Overall, mental health is being taken more seriously, and improvements have been made in classification and treatment of mental disorders.

Despite the good aspects of normalization and popularization, the downsides include creation of a culture and environment that contributes to misinformation and distorted notions about what is and isn't mental illness. This trend leads to widely characterizing normal emotions such as sadness as depression and to increases in misdiagnoses, misprescriptions, and prevalence rates (Frances, 2010).

Misuse of Words

Often times people joke about being depressed; even people suffering from severe mental illness joke about depression, perhaps as a way of crying for help. Currently, when someone claims to be depressed, some people assume they are clinically depressed; others may think they are just experiencing a bout of sadness. The inability to actually tell if someone who uses the word depression is clinically depressed creates referral dilemmas for professionals, family members, and peers. Moreover, it further erases the distinction between normal emotions and severe mental illness and makes it harder for decision makers to appropriately allocate resources (Smith, 2017). Ultimately, the situation is worsening as children increasingly are exposed to the misuse of mental health words to an extent that their working definitions for depression, anxiety, etc. are heavily flawed and misleading.

The Impact of Media

Mental disorders in the media (e.g., movies, television, songs, news reports) often are inaccurately portrayed, overdramatized, and even romanticized (Harper, 2005). And as popular presentations increase, so does superficial familiarity and a sense that severe mental illness is commonplace.

All this has been exacerbated by social media sites like Tumblr, Facebook, and Twitter. Some sites offer users a degree of anonymity that encourages a sense of relative safety in opening up about mental health concerns. Many see these sites as sources for support, attention, and a sense of belonging. The easy and enticing access has resulted in a bandwagon effect with increasing numbers of posts about "mental illness" (Perloff, 2014). This is further erasing the line distinguishing normal emotion from severe mental illness.

Social media does encourage some individuals to open up and to learn that others also are struggling. I think, however, it is likely that some individuals experiencing normal mood swings or sadness post their concerns as worries about being mentally ill, and these posts contribute to an online culture where mental illness appears increasingly pervasive and melancholy. Social media often becomes an echo chamber that reinforces ideas of melancholy and depression to a point where it can seem weird not to be experiencing such problems (Wong, 2018).

Overall, the various media play a role not only in blurring the line between normal emotion and mental illness, but also make some people feel worse by creating situations where negativity begets negativity.

Debate about the Impact of Media

A research study on the effects of sad music reported that it can be good for coping and increasing empathy. Other studies suggest that sad music can induce a depressed mood and genuinely make people feel sad "through a combination of empathetic responses to sad acoustic features, learned associations, and cognitive rumination" (Taruffi & Koelsch, 2014; Morrow & Nolen-Hoeksema, 1990; Huron, 2011).

A Pitch for Peer-to-Peer Support

Schools present young people with many situations and challenges that can greatly affect their emotional well-being. Schools can encourage peer support in formal and informal ways to help address those students who need support in coping (Naslund, Aschbrenner, Marsch, & Bartels, 2016).

One formal approach is seen in peer resiliency programs. The goal is to provide emotional support/advice/guidance and methodology to address nonsevere emotional/mental concerns, while

also focusing on mental health education. Peer resiliency programs use volunteers who are trained in "active listening and empathic responding; boundaries, privacy, and ethics; applied positive psychology principles and resilience skills; motivational support to reinforce evidence-based treatment for stress, depression, and anxiety; and mindfulness approaches to resilience" (see Resilience Peer Network – https://www.resilience.ucla.edu/resilience_peer_network.). Such programs can also be a gateway to needed help for those who are severely depressed but are initially wary of seeking professional treatment.

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Also see Project AWARE – https://www.samhsa.gov/nitt-ta/project-aware-grant-information

For more about the school's role in addressing mental health concerns, see:

> *Addressing Barriers to Learning: In the Classroom and Schoolwide*
> available at this time as a free resource at
> http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/improving_school_improvement.html