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mental health [2]



Vincent van Gogh is perhaps the most recognized painter of all time; his sunflowers, starry night and self-portraits continually captivate the imagination. His severed ear meanwhile has become a legend in its own right with tasteless souvenirs on offer, including an ‘ear eraser’ and figurines with a detachable ear. This act of self-harm was the culmination of a mental health crisis and, in an age of increasing sincerity towards mental health dialogue, it’s time to show sensitivity towards Vincent’s struggles, and to learn from them.

Struggle

Though known as a painter, it was through his written words, in more than 2,000 letters (of which 820 survive), that Vincent laid bare the real turmoil and torment of his mental health battles.

Writing mostly to his brother Theo, Vincent spells out his suffering, describing “horrible fits of anxiety… a feeling of emptiness and fatigue in the head”. “If the storm roars too loudly, I drink a glass too many to stun myself,” he writes, alluding to his use of the potent liquor absinthe [3].

Vincent’s illness reached psychotic dimensions [4] by the end of 1888. He experienced terrifying hallucinations and severe agitation during one episode. “My head is sometimes numb and is often burning hot, and my thoughts are confused,” wrote one letter [5]. “I feel as though one is bound hand and foot, lying in a deep, dark pit, powerless to do anything.”

Through honesty and candour, Vincent shows the stark reality of his struggle with mental health, leaving a legacy of representation for those living with severe mental illness. More recently, the artist Sinéad O’Connor [6] showed us her suffering, uploading a distressed video to Facebook in 2017. “She was a truth teller,” writes journalist Hannah Jane Parkinson [7], who has herself written honestly on the ugliness of her illness, and the tendency for mainstream media to normalise and even glamorise poor mental health. “Forget Instagram influencers, Sinéad O’Connor showed mental illness as it truly is.” Vincent did the same.

Self-expression

Vincent also spoke through his paintings. “His art was a painting of his life,” writes Professor of Sleep Medicine Meir Kryger, seeing in the painting ‘*The Night Café’* a life tormented by abnormal sleep and nightmares. “This painting is one of the ugliest I have done,” reflected Vincent. His feelings of isolation and marginalization are said to be seen [8] in the ‘clashes and contrasts’ of colour, with ‘every corner of the room refracted through the lens of Vincent’s tartan vision of inner torment’.

Dark and stormy skies replace starry nights in Vincent’s final paintings [9] and were expressions of sadness and loneliness. In one haunting example, ‘Wheat Field with Crows’, black birds, startled perhaps by a gunshot, fly in a starless sky, with pathways leading to nowhere. Just before he died - from a gunshot wound - Vincent was working on ‘Tree Roots’, a theme on which he had written years earlier:

‘Frantically and fervently rooting itself, as it were, in the earth, and yet being half torn up by the storm. I wanted to express something of life’s struggle’.

Expressing himself through art, Vincent was seeking remedy for himself – at a furious pace (completing 70 paintings and 30 drawings during the last ten weeks of his life). Today, it’s called art therapy, and is recognised as a form of psychotherapy. There can be power in the paintbrush [10].

Stigma

Often coming from a place of misunderstanding or fear, stigma is when people who experience mental illness are viewed or view themselves in a negative light. It can mean that mental health issues are not treated with the same energy and priority as physical health problems.

Dr Martin McShane, former National Clinical Director for Long Term Conditions has called for ‘parity of esteem [11] ’ – for mental health to be taken as seriously as physical health. “If you fall down and break your hip, an ambulance will be with you in minutes to give emergency care at the scene before taking you to A&E. If, however, you suffer an acute psychotic episode in the street, you are just as likely to be attended by a police car and taken to a cell,” he reflected.

Stigma can also silence the conversation [12] around mental illness. “It should be the same as telling people why your leg is in a cast,” suggests one journalist – but it’s not: mainstream conversation shrinks from Vincent’s mental illness, but makes much of his self-harm.

Vincent had a rare ability to see physical and mental illness in the same light. “I knew well enough that one could fracture one’s legs and arms and recover afterward, but I did not know that you could fracture the brain in your head and recover from that too,” he wrote. “What consoles me a little is that I’m beginning to consider madness as an illness like any other and accept the thing as it is.” Today, it’s recognized that acceptance [13] of a mental health problem can be key to recovery.

Difficulty of diagnosis

“Well over 150 physicians have ventured a perplexing variety of diagnoses of his illness,” writes psychiatrist [14] Dr Dietrich Blumer. The confusion of multiple, overlapping diagnoses include everything from epilepsy to a brain injury at birth, excessive alcohol intake, depression, bipolar disorder, lead poisoning [15] (from ‘nibbling at his paints’), Ménières disease, and even sunstroke. “I do not know quite what to say or how to name it,” wrote Vincent.

Today, one in four adults are diagnosed with at least one mental health problem in any given year. According to NHS England, mental health problems represent the largest single cause of disability in the UK.

Doctors draw on your experiences, feelings, behaviours and physical symptoms over a period of time to make a diagnosis. For some, a diagnosis is a positive experience, allowing a name to what’s wrong and the start of a treatment plan; for others, it can feel like an ill-fitting, overly-simplistic label, and even an insult. Mind, the mental health charity, makes clear that “a diagnosis does not have to shape your entire life, and may come to be a relatively minor part of your identity”. One blogger [16] writes on how she is more than her mental illness; more than her anxious, troubled mind; more than her dark and dreary days. Vincent was certainly larger than any label.

Celebrating success

“Ah, if I’d been able to work without this bloody illness! How many things I could have done, isolated from the others, according to what the land would tell me,” wrote Vincent, shortly before his suicide in 1890.

Seeing his illness as a destructive element that derailed his artistic genius, Vincent here challenges the romantic notion - long-held, yet disputed - that mental illness somehow enhances creativity, enabling the artist to see the world in a different way.

Impaired by illness, Vincent’s successes are all the more staggering. His ‘Portrait of Dr Paul Gachet’ still holds the record for the most expensive van Gogh painting to be sold, fetching $83m in 1990; if ‘Sunflowers [17]’ came onto the market again, it is estimated that it would be worth several hundred million dollars.

Whilst we can’t all paint masterpieces, or compose the ‘Messiah’ (which George Frideric Handel wrote whilst living with deep depression), success is possible in your mental health journey. Progress and success look different to everyone; it’s important to celebrate your mental health milestones. The National Council for Mental Wellbeing [18] suggest practising gratitude and celebrating small victories, perhaps through journaling, to help you tend to your emotional wellbeing: “Sometimes simply getting out of bed on a bad day can be a cause for celebration”.

If you are experiencing feelings of distress and isolation, or are struggling to cope, The Samaritans offers support; you can speak to someone for free over the phone, in confidence, on 116 123 or visit the Samaritans website to find details of your nearest branch.

MEDICAL JOURNALISTS' ASSOCIATION

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