A BRIEF HISTORY OF MIND:

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Mental health is a phenomenon that finds its roots in sociology, psychology as well as medicine and as such, it has evolved wildly over the years since its first inception. While the stigma surrounding mental health is something that still exists to this day, it is apparent that the roots of any such taboo, as well as the origins of the current forms of treatment and therapy for mental illness, can all be found in the recesses of history. However, it must be noted that the transformation of mental healthcare is neither linear, nor is it necessarily progressive; the attitudes and approaches of man towards the disorders of the mind cycled through three elementary stages. Referred to as the etiology of mental illness, the three basic theories are the supernatural, somatogenic, and psychogenic theories.

Supernatural theories dominated a vast majority of early human history, claiming that mental illness was a consequence of the actions of evil spirits, vengeful gods, and black magic. In the Stone Ages, trephination was developed, known as the earliest form of treatment. Holes would be bored into the skull in order to allow spirits and demons to exit the body they were possessing, hence restoring them to a cured state. Trephining soon grew in popularity due to the incidental healing of the skull after the process, and was even used for a number of other illnesses such as migraines and skull fractures.

The most famous theory of mental illness in the ancient period was that of the four humours put forward by Hippocrates in 5 BCE, based on the somatogenic model. In an attempt to move away from the illogical chains of the supernatural theories, Hippocrates proposed that mental illnesses were instead caused by physical deformations of the body, giving rise to the first somatogenic ideas. According to him, the human body contained four main bodily fluids or humours- blood, phlegm, yellow bile, and black bile. In “normal” people, these four humours would be mixed in a perfect proportion, while any chemical imbalance amongst the four would consequently lead to a mental disorder, in the forms of epilepsy, mania, melancholia, or brain fever. Treatments would thus include blood-letting and prescribing laxatives to induce vomiting, so as to restore the balance of the humours within the body. The theory of the four humours gained popularity due to its logical propositions, as opposed to the irrational supernatural ideas, and as a result persisted well into the Middle Ages, even being referred to by Shakespeare in some of his many plays. Further, Galen put forward the very first psychogenic theory asserting that mental disorders were the result of psychological stresses and traumas, although this was largely ignored for several centuries. The Ancient period is also notable due to the Egyptians’ emphasis on recreational activities for the mentally ill, largely reflecting the model of mental healthcare that is used today.

While Hippocrates insisted that mental illness was a somatogenic disorder and hence the affected individuals were innocent, this view was soon challenged deeper into the Medieval Period. The mentally ill were no longer considered people, but animals, prone to violent fits of rage and lashing out, for whom the required treatment was injecting fear. Housing such a person would also be a source of shame to the family, as a result of which workhouses were established for the sick, where in exchange for work, they would reside in such public institutions under the guidance of Church officials. However, the Church clergy and monasteries could not keep up with the increasing numbers of the population being admitted, and workhouses soon made way for asylums, which worsened the condition of the mentally ill even further. These asylums were like a prison in every sense but the name, and instead of actually attempting to improve the conditions of the diseased, they served simply as institutional centers to protect the public from the stigmatised mental illnesses.