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What Neuroscience Has To Say About The 'Tortured Genius'

By Sarah Klein

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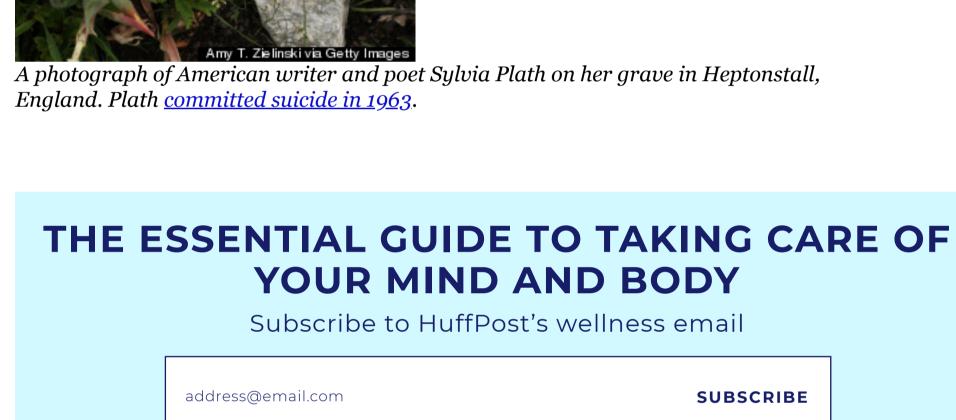
Every suicide leaves behind mourners grasping for answers, but when the

person in question is a high-profile celebrity known to have struggled with

mental health issues, it's tempting to fall back on the age-old trope of the "tortured genius." It's an idea deeply embedded in our culture: the artist, musician, poet, novelist or comedian who excels in his or her field, but is tormented by inner demons. By this logic, the coexistence of creativity and mental illness is not a coincidence: The talent and the demons are thought to be inextricably linked. The torment is part of the gift. The World Health Organization estimates there are 350 million people on the planet living with depression. And the recent death of Robin Williams has stirred up the old question of whether creative genius carries with it an

elevated risk of mental illness. "It stands to reason that *some* of those people are going to be creative," Harvard University's Shelley H. Carson, Ph.D., author of Your Creative Brain, told The Huffington Post. "Certainly enough to form public opinion." The idea that <u>"great art comes from great pain"</u> has long-standing roots in public opinion, rumored to date back to ancient philosophers and poets, but our modern idea of the tortured genius likely stems from a glamorization of mental illness that took hold during the Romantic Era. At that time, so-called

"madness" was seen as "voyaging into new planes of reality," according to psychiatrist Allan Beveridge. And while it's easy enough to believe that pain helped to fuel the work of Kurt Cobain, Sylvia Plath, David Foster Wallace or Alexander McQueen -- to name just a few of the brilliant, creative, successful people who took their own lives after battling mental illness -- there is also great art that comes from no pain whatsoever.



more rare."

according to the Psychiatric Times.

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"There are plenty of geniuses who are not mentally ill, and there are plenty of mentally ill people who aren't geniuses," said HuffPost Mental Health Medical Editor Lloyd Sederer, M.D., medical director of the New York State Office of Mental Health.

"Sometimes you have the two combined. When you have geniuses who have such prominence, like Philip Seymour Hoffman or Robin Williams or John Nash, they make you think that this is more common than it is," said Sederer.

The cognitive-neuroscience community is divided on whether a scientific link between creativity and mental illness actually exists. The earliest cited investigation into the issue came from the Italian clinician Cesare Lombroso, who argued in 1888 that "genius and madness were closely connected manifestations of an underlying degenerative neurological disorder,"

In recent decades, there have been a number of attempts to find a firm

empirical basis for that idea. Some correlative points have emerged: There is

research suggesting that people with bipolar disorder, as well as the healthy

"One in four people annually in this country has a mental illness that impairs

their function. That's pretty common. The illness is pervasive. Genius is much

siblings of people with bipolar disorder or schizophrenia, are more likely to have creative occupations. People with certain genetic risk factors for schizophrenia have been found to be more creative. In 1989, Kay Redfield Jamison, Ph.D., who herself has bipolar disorder, found a high prevalence of mood disorders among a group of British writers and artists. And in 1987, Nancy C. Andreasen, M.D., Ph.D., found a higher rate of mental illness among 30 creative writers than among 30 equally educated non-writers. Past research, like Andreasen's, relied heavily upon hours of interviewing and

application of the diagnostic criteria of the time to identify mental illness.

Today, researchers have moved toward <u>administering creativity tests to</u>

subjects while monitoring their brain activity with a procedure known as

But other experts say that results showing a link between creativity and

mental illness are unconvincing. They point to small sample sizes and a

the University of Iowa's Carver College of Medicine, acknowledged that

limitation in a recent column for The Atlantic. Measuring creativity is "a

necessarily controversial task," she wrote, "given that it requires settling on

original and useful or adaptive, Carson told The Huffington Post, and that a

creative person is able to take pieces of information and "recombine them in

novel or original ways that are somehow useful or adaptive." Carson's research

dependence on self-reported biographical data from subjects. In fact, even

research with *large* sample sizes is routinely called into question for <u>failing to</u>

fMRI, or functional magnetic resonance imaging.

establish objective measures of creativity. **DEFINING CREATIVITY** Part of the problem in determining whether or not this link exists is that creativity has proven difficult to quantify in research. Andreasen, director of the Neuroimaging Research Center and the Mental Health Research Center at

what creativity actually is." The general consensus in the field is that a creative idea or product is new or

Fast Company reported.

explores what she calls the middle ground between the researchers who believe a link exists between creativity and mental illness, and the researchers who don't. She espouses what she calls a shared vulnerability model -- the idea that a person's chances of mental illness and her chances of being creative may stem from the same place, but that neither one causes the other. The outcome -- creativity, mental illness or both -- ultimately depends on other factors, like high IQ or strong memory.

Recent research from Austria builds upon this idea. A 2013 study found that

schizotypy -- that is, behavior suggestive of schizophrenia but not diagnosable

This would allow more information into the minds of both creative people and

as such -- "share an inability to filter out extraneous or irrelevant material,"

people who scored high for creativity and people who scored high for

people at risk for mental illness, and "if you have more bits of information [coming in], it stands to reason you may come up with more connections," said Carson. But the problem with defining creativity in this way, argues Keith Sawyer, Ph.D., professor at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill and author of Explaining Creativity: The Science of Human Innovation, is that "usefulness" and "adaptability" also need to be defined -- meaning researchers

often have to use other measures to determine who or what is creative. Some

studies administer creativity tests to subjects, while other studies choose

participants according to their occupation, like writer or artist, or their

Singer-songwriter and guitarist Kurt Cobain performing with Nirvana in 1994.

Another challenge in studying the link between creativity and mental illness is

that it's difficult to pinpoint where creativity actually "happens" within the

creative while left-brained thinkers were more analytical. But while certain

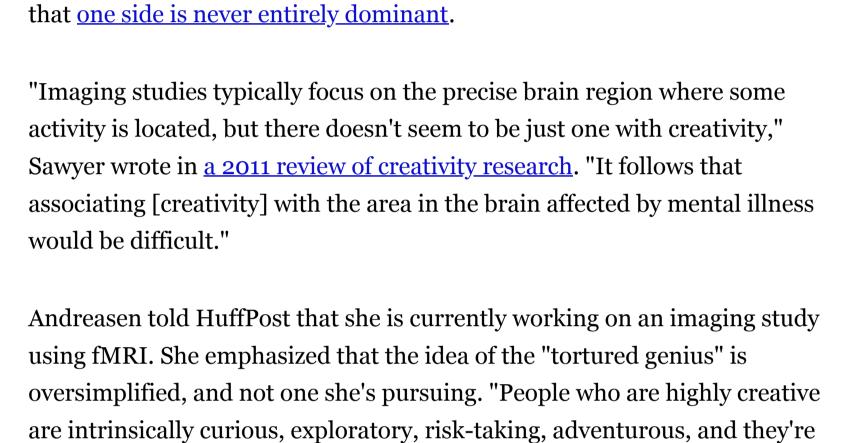
functions do take place in particular regions of the brain, research now shows

brain. Researchers once thought that each of us had one dominant

hemisphere of the brain, and that right-brained individuals were more

achievements, like Nobel or Pulitzer Prizes.

Cobain committed suicide in April of that year.



also persistent and somewhat rebellious or unconventional," she said. "When

There's an underlying fundamental way of approaching life and the world that

innate resilience and social support are what help these curious, adventurous,

you have all of those traits, it makes you more vulnerable to rejection ...

leads to both creativity and vulnerability to mental illness. But things like

exploratory people *not* develop mental illness."

willingness to believe in a link comes from."

advantage to people who work in creative fields.

In fact, Andreasen's own 2008 review of creativity research acknowledges many of the same problems with the body of literature supporting a potential link that Sawyer's does, including poorly defined measures of both creativity and mental illness and heavy reliance on self-reported data. **POPULAR PERCEPTION** In Sawyer's mind, the case is closed: There is no link between creativity and mental illness, and researchers should stop looking for one. He wonders if perhaps researchers are still searching for a link so they'll be able to provide a

patient with at least a bit of good news. "I think if you're treating people it can

be helpful in therapy to tell your patient that their mental illness has a silver

lining" -- namely, the gift of creativity, he said. "[I think] that's where their

Still, outside of the research community, many remain open to the idea, as

seen in the weeks following Williams' death. The bigger question now, says

The trope of the tormented artist is so widespread that for some people, it's

Sawyer, is why the general public is so receptive to this belief.

almost something to be taken for granted. "As an artist in an artsy community, in some ways it seems intuitive that there is that correlation," said Ellen Forney, an artist who detailed her diagnosis with bipolar disorder in the graphic memoir Marbles: Mania, Depression, Michelangelo, and Me. Maybe,

she hypothesized, artists can be more outspoken about mental illness than is

Historically, there *have* been creative thinkers who spoke about mental illness

giving them their edge. "My fear of life is necessary to me, as is my illness," the

according to Smithsonian magazine. "Without anxiety and illness, I am a ship

artist Edvard Munch, thought to have had bipolar disorder, once wrote,

accepted in other professions, or maybe mental illness somehow gives an

without a rudder ... My sufferings are part of my self and my art. They are indistinguishable from me, and their destruction would destroy my art." Forney said she had similar reservations about treatment when she was diagnosed with bipolar disorder shortly before her 30th birthday. "I was terrified to go on any sort of meds [and] even questioning if I wanted to be a stable person, because I had the same romantic idea that a lot of people do about artists," she said. "That whole 'crazy' artist was definitely part of my perception of the field, and what I thought was creative in myself."

Stability sounded "bland" to her, and many medications had a reputation for

following the manic period during which she was diagnosed, she realized she

needed help. Today, her treatment involves medication, therapy and lifestyle

productivity," she said. "When I was manic, I didn't have enough focus. When

I was depressed, I was so squashed." In both cases, she said, "I couldn't get

changes, and even stability has become important to her. "I found that

stability was good for my creativity, because a part of creativity is

much done."

"flattening" creativity, Forney said. But after falling into a deep depression

Pam Dawber and Robin Williams in a 1981 episode of "Mork & Mindy." Williams took his own life in August 2014. It's important to remember that in no way do cultural beliefs, anecdotal interviews or rigorous research suggest that being creative is cause for concern. Andreasen said that most of the creative thinkers she has studied --

with and without mental illness -- have spoken of the joy they derive from

"The more I've studied [creativity], the more I've realized we all have these

everybody can do that. You don't need to be mentally ill for that to occur."

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amazing creative capacities in our brains," said Carson. "The ability to imagine

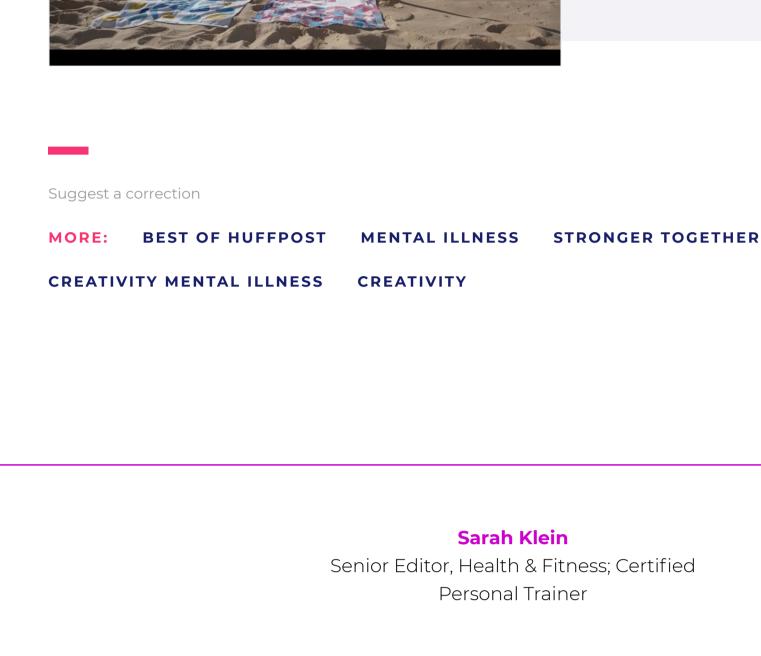
their creative pursuits. In fact, there's plenty of research indicating that

creative endeavors can boost happiness and promote relaxation.

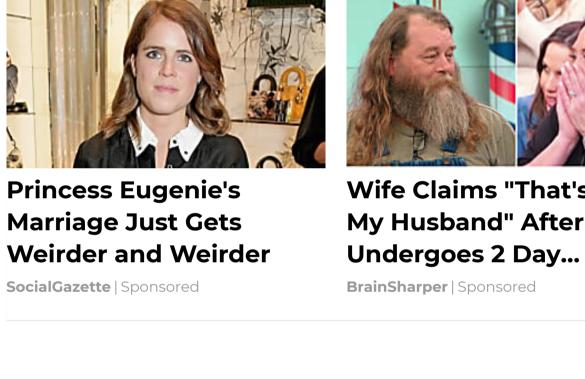
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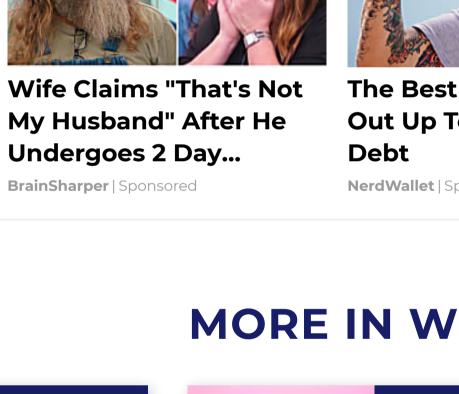
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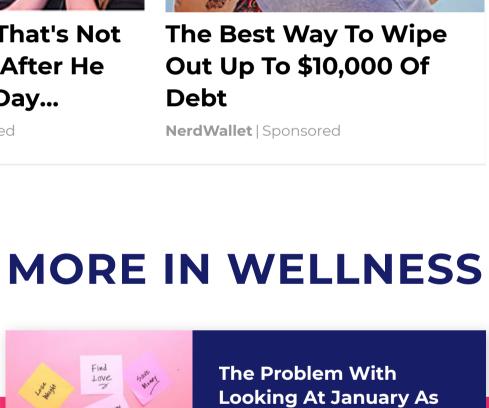
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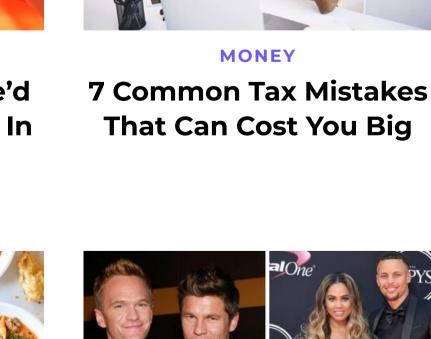


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