

**Creativity and Bipolar Disorder Being Explored
By Psychosocial Research Team in Vancouver
by Bruce Saunders and Erin Michalak**

People have long wondered about the bipolar nature of creative people, some citing the illness as the key to their brilliance. Was it Meniere's "ringing in his ear" that contributed to Van Gogh's brilliance? Was it schizophrenia? Many people believe he lived with bipolar disorder, but now everyone wants to claim him as theirs. Although his art sells for millions today, he was impoverished and tortured during his lifetime.

Kay Redfield Jamison is one who believes Van Gogh also had bipolar disorder, as we understand it today. She attributes her own brilliance, as well as her drive to study bipolar disorder, to the condition. Her book, Touched With Fire, Manic-Depressive Illness and the Artistic Temperament, explored the connection between the outputs of writers like Lord Byron, F. Scott Fitzgerald, Herman Melville, Robert Lowell, Alfred Lord Tennyson, Virginia Woolf, Percy Bysshe Shelley, Edgar Allen Poe, and Ernest Hemingway to the gift of the condition. Her film, 'To Paint the Stars,' presented the case for bipolar disorder being the source of Van Gogh's creative drive. 'Moods in Music' chronologs her investigations of composer Robert Schumann. Jamison's extensive Curriculum Vitae is a testament itself to the power of the creative spirit.

So many artists - like Jackson Pollock, Pablo Picasso and Jean-Michel Basquiat - and comedians/actors - Robin Williams, Margot Kidder, Ben Stiller, Jim Carry, Kevin MacDonald, Stephen Fry, John Cleese, Patty Duke - have declared their bipolar condition. The "lists" are long, including Agatha Christie, Isaac Newton, J.C. Penney, Abraham Lincoln, Napoleon, Victor Hugo, Marilyn Munroe . . . some even speculate Moses Is this just anecdotal phenomena?

There is a fairly large body of evidence that indicates that people with bipolar disorder can be highly creative, and that a disproportionate number of highly creative people live with the condition. In a review by Kay Jamison, biographical studies suggest that among people who achieved heights of fame and success in the creative world, bipolar disorder is highly over-represented. In one study of a representative sample of 13,700 people, bipolar disorder was found to relate to choosing a more creative occupation. In another study, 43% of writers attending the highly prestigious University of Iowa Writer's Workshop met the criteria for bipolar spectrum disorders. When asked about the advantages of having BD, over 80% of people describe creativity as one of the benefits.

Bruce Saunders, of Movie Monday in Victoria, has noticed the connection, both from his perspective of living with bipolar disorder himself, from attending and co-facilitating a

mood disorders support group for 20 years, and from showing films weekly in the city's psychiatric hospital auditorium for eighteen years. "So many people I meet," Saunders reports, "are almost desperately creative. It's the blood that runs through their veins, it's what matters most in their lives. If it is taken away by interventions - like meds that cap the creative drive - it's no wonder people go off meds to try to get that back. If that urge is understood, nurtured, if there is a context in peoples' lives to acknowledge that most important side of their nature, their outcome will be more likely positive. Finding a balance is critical. I've experienced the problem and the solution in my life, I see the need all around and I see a blindness in many service providers to that need in our lives."

In her book, Riding The Rollercoaster, BC author Marja Bergen (who also identifies as living with bipolar disorder) includes a chapter about "The Creative Response," with headings like "Protection Against My Depression," "Art As Medicine" and includes a heading with a warning, "When Our Imagination Takes Control." It bodes us well to understand this powerful process in recovery. A section titled "Our Passions, High and Low" starts with the quote: "The happiness of a man in this life does not consist in the absence but in the mastery of his passions" - Alfred, Lord Tennyson.

Although there are many anecdotal reports about the connection between bipolar disorder and creativity, very little research has been conducted into what might be useful to help these sometimes talented, sometimes afflicted, people survive the chaos that often accompanies bipolar disorder. One problematic issue is that when people are manic, they sometimes believe that they are naturally more creative. In fact, available research evidence suggests that the quality (as opposed to quantity) of creative output may be reduced during mania; instead, it may be the less elevated mood periods (such as times of hypomania) that are associated with heightened creative output.

Healthy creative output also appears to be high in family members of people with bipolar disorder, who are themselves undiagnosed.

There are potential risks of holding beliefs about the relationship between creativity and bipolar disorder that may be misguided or based on lack of evidence. For example, beliefs around the possible detrimental impact of medications upon creativity may alter the likelihood that a person will take medications that could help them achieve optimal quality of life. Having said this, one of the problems with this area of scientific research, as it currently stands, is that it appears at times immature and under-developed. Also, standard medication and psychological treatments developed for people with bipolar disorder may not be optimally designed for those in creative professions, where lack of routine, late nights, exposure to drugs and alcohol, etc. may be the norm.

These observations led Dr. Erin Michalak, an Assistant Professor of Psychiatry at the University of British Columbia in Vancouver, and a team of people (researchers, musicians with bipolar disorder, and representatives from the Sean Costello Memorial Fund for Bipolar Research) to design a series of studies to advance research in this area.

One unique feature of her team's approach is that it uses 'community-based research' methods to study health and quality of life in people with bipolar disorder. In community-based research, people with a bipolar disorder, their family members and their clinicians are all understood to have valuable expertise, and are invited to participate in research and knowledge exchange.

Michalak and her team are planning a series of events for the Spring of 2011 in Vancouver, where community members will meet with scientists to explore the topic of creativity and bipolar disorder. "Each year our team conducts what we call a 'community consultation day' designed to examine a particular topic of interest to the bipolar community," she says. "This year, we knew that we wanted to focus on consulting with creative people with bipolar disorder. But we also knew that we ourselves would need to get creative in order to engage with this population and not rely on traditional scientific methods. We've therefore designed three different events through which people can get involved.

The first event on the evening of March 31st involves the screening of a powerful documentary called 'Crooked Beauty' and some film shorts. The second event on the UBC campus on April 1st is a community consultation day called "Creativity in BD: 'Touched with fire,' or burnt out? Igniting a dialogue." Finally, on April 1st, there will be an evening event called "The Creative Life: A night of music celebrating bipolar disorder."

"We will have international exposure and recognition for asking questions that no one else has posed," adds Michalak, "and providing some resources for answering them."

"As a person living with BD, I'm really delighted that research is being directed into finding the "sweet spot" between the bipolar creativity urge and the need to assure an even enough temperament to live well," says Saunders.

Bruce Saunders, who has designed the documentary screening night, is a landscape gardener and the facilitator of Movie Monday, in Victoria, British Columbia (www.moviemonday.ca). Erin Michalak is a psychologist and founder of the Collaborative RESearch Team to study psychosocial issues in Bipolar Disorder (CREST.BD, www.crestbd.ca). The Sean Costello Memorial Fund for Bipolar Research, honours the life of a renowned blues musician who lived with the condition (www.seancostellofund.org); members of the organization helped galvanize the events described above. If you are interested in learning more about psychological or social factors as they relate to bipolar disorder or the events described above, please visit www.crestbd.ca and/or e-mail erin.michalak@ubc.ca.