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Discuss how our understanding of melancholia and approaches to treatment has changed overtime

Melancholia goes back centuries all the way back to Greek times (Jansson, 2022). The term melancholia refers to someone that lacks joy and feels high levels of low moods (Sadeghfard et al., 2016). Melancholia was first mentioned during Hippocrates time he is considered “the father of medicine” (Sadeghfard et al., 2016). In modern times the word melancholia is no longer used it is now known as a mental illness (Jansson, 2021). Melancholia is now known as depression or a mood disorder. Depression affects “more than 322 million people” (Madane et al., 2025).

Melancholia dates back as far as 370 BC where the physician Hippocrates began his work looking into mental diseases (Jansson, 2021). His belief was on the four humours these being blood, phlegm, yellow and black bile. These four humours affected someone's mood. Hippocrates believed melancholia was caused by the imbalance of black bile in the body (Madane et al., 2025). Hippocrates thought that the imbalance of black bile caused damage towards the brain and affects the way it works (Raden, 2002). He believed that the imbalance caused madness (Gonzalez, 2022). To treat melancholia during this time it was suggested that patients should eat foods that are wet, a recommendation of bloodletting was also suggested (Smith, 2013). The balance of wet, dry, hot, and cold was important towards someone's bodily health (Javier, 2014). Galen was a Greek physician during the roman era (Radden, 2002). Galen lived between 129 to 216AD (Madane et al., 2025). He brought Hippocrates theory to attention. Galens's work brought much influence in the western and eastern culture (Javier, 2014).

Since Hippocrates time to the Middle Ages there was not much change in their understanding and view of melancholia. As they still believed in Hippocrates theory on black bile and the four humours (Pormann, 2008). During the 1500s the large belief of witchcraft and demons was believed in (Radden, 2002). The work of Physician Weyers where he talked about melancholia and it being a mental disorder. He had quite a sympathetic view where he thought the disorder caused hallucinations because of the person mental health rather than due to the person being a witch (Radden, 2002). Though he thought this he still had an old-fashioned mindset. He said that as the disorder caused people to see things this related to the belief that they were witches and has magic. Whereas in reality they did not (Radden, 2002). Weyer did however believe melancholia could be the influence of the devil and those experiencing melancholia were more likely to be possessed by the devil as the hallucinations were caused by it (Radden, 2002). Scull (2015) discusses how in the 16th and 17th centuries melancholia is seen as a type of madness infecting the brain; still being thought to of been caused by black bile contaminating the mind or by the other humour yellow bile. During the 17th to 18th century melancholia tended to affect men who were artistic (Jansson, 2021). Treatment for melancholia in the Middle Ages was the same as during Hippocrates time. For example, they still used bloodletting (Carey-Bunning, 2023).

From the 18th century to the 19th century there was a major change in the view of what melancholia was. In the 1700s it was seen as a sort of insanity. Whereas in the 19th century it was started to be seen as a mental health problem (Kendler & Justis, 2024). The change in view came from the realisation that melancholia could happen without symptoms of madness (Kendler & Justis, 2024). Joesph Guislain the alienist was one of the leading people to cause the shift in view of melancholia in the

early 1800s (Kendler & Justis, 2024). By the late 19th century melancholia was widely viewed as a “mood disorder” in North America and Europe (Kendler & Justis, 2024). Another factor that largely changed the concept of melancholia was by Emil Kraepelin in 1899. He made two categories for mental disorders. He categorised them as dementia praecox and manic-depression insanity (Jansson, 2021). Melancholia was now no longer on its own as a classification instead categorised as a symptom within manic-depression insanity (Jansson, 2021). The treatment of melancholia during the 1800s was not as modern as the updated change in view of melancholia (Staff, 2021). For example, it was recommended to some patients to do activities that help better moods like hot baths and engaging in daily movement (Ban, 2014). In more extreme cases where patients were living in asylums they could have been subjected to being forced into cold baths. There were other doctors that would recommend consuming alcohol and taking the drug morphine (Staff, 2021).

By the start of the new century the use in the term melancholia began to decline (Jansson, 2020). This drop was due to two reasons. As discussed before the work of Emil Kraepelin was one of the main reasons for this (Jansson, 2020). The other being due to a Swiss Psychiatrist, Adolf Meyer. His work contributed to what would become the way diagnosis happened during the 1900s. He believed melancholia could happen without the symptom of madness. Meyer wanted to bring the word depression instead of melancholia (Jansson, 2020). His idea stuck that depression should be its own classification with the main symptom being high levels of sadness (Jansson, 2020). Freud published his findings on melancholia during World War One. He believed that melancholia and grief were very alike. While experiencing grief the person is mourning someone or something they’ve actually lost. This also takes place consciously (Sedianszky, 2025). Whereas when

experiencing melancholia this takes place in the unconscious mind. Freud discusses how this causes the person to mourn something, but they do not understand why (Sedianszky, 2025). The “APA 1952 1st edition DSM” was released. The 3rd edition became the groundwork for how depression and other mental disorders are diagnosed in the 21st century (Jansson, 2020). One way of treating depression in the 1900s was a lobotomy (Schimelpfeing, 2025). A lobotomy was a procedure created in the 1930’s. It went into the frontal lobe taking away “white fibres” (Terrier et al., 2019). It could cause problems to someone's personality (Terrier et al., 2019). Another type of treatment to depression was Electroconvulsive therapy this was when an electric shock was done on the top of the head, this would cause seizures (Schimelpfeing, 2025).

Our understanding of melancholia today is now known as depression. Depression is mentioned as two different types the first being major depression disorder which is considered the worst type (Madane et al., 2025). Another type being depression that links to anxiety (Jansson, 2022). Nowadays clinical depression is on the rise. The amount of people taking antidepressants has been on the rise since the treatment was introduced. It is becoming one of the leading causes of disability around the world (Jansson, 2022). Some people argue that depression is at an all-time high because doctors are over diagnosing people with just sadness that affects all of us (Jansson, 2022). One main symptom of depression is the decline of interests in activities that someone use to enjoy. Depression is commonly diagnosed when a patient shows persistent symptoms of low mood for two weeks (National Institute of mental health, 2024). To help to treat depression sessions of “counselling and psychological therapies” can be used (Aleem et al., 2022).

To conclude, over time treatments and our understanding of melancholia has changed massively. From the first mention of melancholia with Hippocrates believing in black bile causing imbalance in the body (Madane et al., 2025). The belief that this caused madness in the person experiencing melancholia (Gonzalez, 2022). Where the treatments were eating wet food and the use of bloodletting (Smith, 2013). Then from Hippocrates time to the Middle Ages there was not much change in the understanding of melancholia as they still believed in the four humours theory of black bile (Pormann, 2008). Also, due to the large belief in the supernatural this affected the way they thought (Radden, 2002). The large shift in view came in the 19th century where the belief of melancholia being caused by the imbalance of black bile had started to change. The belief that melancholia caused madness was not thought as the main cause and now seen as a mental disorder (Kendler & Justis, 2024). By the 20th century melancholia was rarely used as it was now known as depression (Madane et al., 2025). The treatments overtime has changed massively from bloodletting in the Greek times (Smith, 2013). To the suggestion of drinking alcohol in the 19th century (Staff, 2021). Then the use of lobotomies and electroconvulsive therapy in the 1900s (Schimelpfeing, 2025). Finally, modern times where therapy (Aleem et al., 2022) and the use of antidepressants are preferred (Jansson, 2022).

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