

Consider the changing understanding and treatment of melancholia across the centuries

In this essay I will be explaining the understanding and change in understanding of melancholia throughout the centuries. More specifically, I will be exploring melancholia before and up to the eighteenth century, the nineteenth, the twentieth and the twenty-first centuries. Additionally, I will be researching how treatment has changed along with the understanding. Melancholia is the term used for feeling “deeply sad” (Oxford Dictionary, 2023). Melancholia is now more commonly known as depression. The definition of depression is feeling a “persistent sadness” and losing interest in previously enjoyed activities (World Health Organisation, 2023). It is clear that our understanding and treatments of melancholia has drastically changed from early Greek times to the 21st century. Hippocrates, who is often referred to as ‘the father of medicine,’ was the first to explore the idea of melancholia in the 5th century BC which shaped our understanding of melancholia today.

In Greek times, Hippocrates, who is known as ‘the father of medicine’, created the idea and first understanding of melancholia. Hippocrates was a Greek physician who introduced many innovative ideas about the human body. He was a highly respected man as he saved Athens from a plague epidemic. Hippocrates also contributed to modern medicine majorly as he introduced numerous medical terms which are still used today, such as symptom diagnosis, therapy, trauma and sepsis. Additionally, he described many diseases without superstition. Hippocrates was the creator of the four humours which he believed was what caused peoples illnesses. The four humours came from the idea that the body was made up of soul and body and that illness came from an imbalance of bodily fluids rather than from the gods or anything supernatural. The four humours consist of blood, yellow bile, black bile and phlegm. Each humour contributes to making the body well in health. Melancholia fits into the black bile humour, for example if you had too much black bile in your body then you would feel melancholic. It was believed that people who had too much black bile were creative and thoughtful people, such as poets, this then caused the melancholia.

Many Greeks at the time thought making sacrifices to Zeus would appease him as he had an influence over madness. The number of sacrifices increased during the season of autumn and winter as black bile is associated with the season of autumn as it is dry and cold. Hippocrates' suggestions of treating melancholia were to exercise, bloodletting and purging. In today's time we can see that Hippocrates ideas are still in use as exercising is a great way to help melancholia as it releases endorphins and puts you in a better mindset.

During the Middle Ages, melancholia was one of the most diagnosed disorders in Europe. This could be because many believed that the psychological effects of melancholia were to be creative, thoughtful, and considerate, which then made someone with melancholia more effected by tragedy which led them to be pessimistic and have a gloomy outlook on life around them.

During the time that the Middle Ages moved into the renaissance, insanity and mental illnesses became much more visible to public as they had an 'insane' leader; King Henry V1 who quite possibly had schizophrenia. King Henry's 'mental breakdown' was Infront of the whole of England so people who were melancholic saw this and felt compassion and sadness for him, which could have triggered a melancholy phase. Another example of society being exposed to tragic events is bedlam. Bedlam was a mental facility where people could go and watch patients for entertainment. Furthermore, William Shakespeare was a huge part of this period and at least 20 out of 38 of his plays were about madness such as, King Lear, Ophelia, and Hamlet. To summarise, this era was incredibly miserable and focused on the 'insane' people of society which would cause people to become melancholic.

Moving into the 18th century Melancholia was named a 'nervous disorder' by physician William Cullen who was a professor at Edinburgh school of medicine. He

believed melancholia was “a partial insanity without dyspepsia.” Cullen called it this as he believed many intellectuals were melancholic so they could not be fully insane as they still had areas of intellect working. However, in the late 18th century, Daniel Tuke, an English physician, challenged Cullen's views and argued that delusions had been incorrectly identified as melancholia's main symptom. Tuke believed that melancholia was a disorder of moral sentiment (mood) rather than a disorder of intellect. However, he did not rule out Cullen's idea of the disorder of intellect, he argued that diseases like dementia were rather suited to the idea.

Although doctors of this time had a better understanding and theories of melancholia, bloodletting and purging was still a popular method of treatment. They believed that bloodletting was an efficient method of treatment as when one of the four humours, previously discussed, is in dominance then you will become ill. Blood was believed to be the most dominant humour and in order to become in good health again, you would have to take part in bloodletting so all four humours could become balanced again. Many popular methods of bloodletting included using leeches, cupping, and venesection. Venesection was the most commonly used method which involved slicing the skin at a vein then placing cupping devices on these areas.

In the 1900's melancholia was often viewed as a mental illness and a form of depression. Although it was more common to be diagnosed with melancholy, treatments for such were still outlandish. Bloodletting and purging were no longer a treatment, but electroconvulsive therapy was introduced. Electroconvulsive therapy was a method that involved sending an electric current through your brain. When doing this, the electric current would cause brief electrical activity in your brain causing the patient to have a seizure in hopes to relieve symptoms of mental illness. However, hydrotherapy was also a popular form of treatment which involved patients being put in hot baths or showers in order to induce a calming effect on them. Hydrotherapy is still recommended in today's understanding of depression.

The first psychotropic drug was introduced in 1958 by scientists Klaus Schmiegel and Bryan Molloy, with the help of David Wong. This drug was called Thorazine which calmed anxiety, agitation, and confusion. However, the list of side effects of this drug is lengthy, a few side effects include; "stiffness, fever, dizziness, insomnia, blurred vision and trouble having an orgasm" (John P. Cunha, 2023). Although melancholia was becoming more common, society often viewed people with

melancholia as being mentally unwell and sometimes seen as weak or lacking moral character. Even though this was the majority's view, many people recognised melancholia as a serious illness and advocated for better treatments as people became more normalised with the idea of being mentally unwell.

Jumping to the 21st century, melancholia is more commonly known as depression. Today's definition of depression is a "persistent sadness and a lack of interest or pleasure in previously rewarding or enjoyable activities" (World Health Organisation, 2023). Depression today is recognised as a common and serious mental health illness. Depression is widely normalised and talked about, unlike in previous times. The reason depression is so normalised today is because of media. Social media is so easy to access today that mental health disorders are much easier to talk about and find information on illnesses, such as depression. Although social media has brought light to mental health disorders, there are many cons to this. Some could argue that the media has brought too much normalisation and recognition to these illnesses to a point where they are encouraged to have depression and anxiety, some films and books even romanticise such illnesses. As we are so open and familiar with the symptoms of depression, some people may mistake normal mood swings and sadness for depression when in actuality it is very normal to experience these things.

Today's scientists believe that there is not just one cause of depression, it can vary from a stressful life event to a chemical imbalance in the brain (NHS, 2023). Another cause of depression is having depression run in your family making it a hereditary disease, which means genes are passed from parent to child and such disease is in those genes. Depression today is treated by antidepressant drugs and therapy.

There are many types of therapy such as, behaviour therapy, cognitive therapy, and humanistic therapy. cognitive therapy (CBT) is believed to be the most effective type of therapy as it teaches you to overcome negative thoughts and feelings. A person with depression is often offered antidepressants such as sertraline and fluoxetine.

Sertraline was created by scientists Billie Kenneth Cole and Willard Welch and came to use in 1991. sertraline has many benefits such as, lifting moods, improving sleep, and increasing energy level. However, like any drug sertraline has side effects including nausea, headaches and having a low sex drive causing trouble to orgasm (NHS,2023). There are similarities in sertraline as with Thorazine such as having low sex drive and unable to orgasm.

In conclusion, melancholia has been viewed as many different things throughout time and treated in many ways. Although the Greeks and people in the Middle Ages treated melancholia in some questionable ways, today's doctors and scientists still use some of their knowledge and teachings in today's practice's.

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