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Discuss how our understanding of melancholia and approaches to treatment have changed over time.

In this essay I am going to be exploring melancholia. I will be discussing what melancholia was, I will also be looking at how the treatment and beliefs of melancholia changed over time. The view of melancholia and madness has changed so much over the years, this is because there is always ongoing research in psychology to help improve practice and support for those who need it (Weir, 2023). The concept of melancholia originated from Hippocrates in the 4th century BC, the term was used to describe what we now know to be mood disorders (Tacchi & Scott, 2017). Melancholia was known as the black bile disease, and it displayed as a constant state of fear and low mood (Hoppe, 2019). I will now be exploring what melancholia was and how it was treated in more detail.

As mentioned above the idea of melancholia came from Hippocrates who was a doctor in ancient Greece (Smith, 2019). Hippocrates was the first doctor to view medicine as a science (Kostakopoulos et al., 2024).

Focusing back on melancholia, Hippocrates proposed a theory called the 4 humours; this was used to explain diseases. (Clausen, et al, 2020). The four humours are four different bodily fluids that were believed to affect the body and mind. These four fluids are phlegm, blood, yellow bile and black bile (Javier, 2014). Inflammation and mania were believed to be due to excess blood in the body. Congestion and lethargy were due to excess phlegm. Excess yellow bile was thought to cause indigestion and irritability (Garon, 2023). Melancholia was believed to be caused by excess amount of black bile in body. Other diseases that were thought to be caused by excess black bile were dysentery and skin rashes (Madane, et al., 2025). Those who experienced

melancholia displayed symptoms such as low mood, anxiety, hopelessness, excessive crying and loss of appetite (Scull, 2015).

Moving onto how melancholia was treated back in ancient Greece. The recommended treatments for melancholia were fresh air, good balanced diet, exercise, sleep and bloodletting (Schimelpfening, 2025). These were thought to balance the humours in the body which as we know an imbalance of the humours specifically black bile were thought to cause melancholia (Brumby, 2023).

Another physician called Galen built on Hippocrates ideas, Galen was around during the 2nd century (Nutton, 2025). He continued with Hippocrates theory of the four humours, but he believed that those with melancholia suffered from delusions as well as the symptoms that Hippocrates outlined (Telles-Correia & Marques, 2015). Galen also recognised that melancholia may present differently in everyone, he mentioned that some may have suicidal ideation whereas other may be petrified of death (Jackson, 1986).

Now looking at the medieval times also known as the Middle Ages, this period lasted between the 5th century and the 15th century (World history edu, 2021). During this time there wasn't many new ideas produced. This is because mental illness was thought to be caused by demons, the devil, God and other spiritual entities (Lewis, 1934). Exorcism, praying, worshipping became the treatment for mental illness (Espí Forcén, & Espí Forcén, 2014).

One of the works that was produced during this time was proposed by Alexander of Tralles. Alexander was a doctor in the 6th century (Scarborough, 1997). Alexander had taken on ideas from Galen and built on them (Jackson, 1986). Alexander

emphasized the symptoms that he called “deranged states”. These states included euphoria, suicidal and homicidal thoughts or behaviours and rage (Jackson, 1986). Alexander also suggested that some people with melancholia may experience symptoms continuously, where others may have periods of rational thoughts which would allow them to continue with their commitments (Jackson, 1986). Based off this he recommended that doctors look at each patient individually and suggest treatment based on the individual’s symptoms (Jackson, 1986).

In the 16th and 17th century there was a return of scientific study in psychology (Lewis, 1934). Robert Burton was a writer who made significant contributions to psychology during the 17th century (Britannica, 2020). Burton himself had struggled with melancholia, in his book he states that he is writing his book to avoid his own melancholia (British Psychological Society, 2021). It was powerful of him to share this during a time where madness was talked about so poorly. Burton explored melancholia from many different perspectives, he believed that melancholia could be caused by several factors rather than one set cause for everyone (BookBrief, 2025). Burton really emphasized the impact that environmental factors can have on an individual's mental health. Environmental factors include lifestyle choices, diet, social interactions etc (BookBrief, 2025). This is a big step up from the possible causes that were previously considered, as melancholia is now being looked at from different perspectives which can provide more insight into how it affects each individual. Burton recommended balanced diet, exercise, friendship, music and reading as treatments to melancholia (British Psychological Society, 2021).

The 17th century is when the great confinement started, it lasted up until the 1800s. During the great confinement those who were poor, mentally ill, criminals and homosexual were sent to asylums (McBride, 2019). However, the aim of the asylums was to lock away anyone who was different rather than help them which resulted in most people being locked up for the majority of their life (Palm, 2024). There was no difference between how patients were treated, the criminally insane and those with melancholia were treated the exact same by staff. Those who were in asylums were usually kept in unliveable environments, they were beat, restrained and had little to no contact with the caregivers (Palm, 2024). Then in the 18th century Pinel, who was a French doctor advocated for better care in asylums and recommended talking to the patients as a form of treatment (Palm, 2024)

Exploring more of the work of Philippe Pinel. He suggested that mental illness is caused by prolonged exposure to stress and in some circumstances genetics (Britannica, 2025). Pinel wanted to change the way that asylum patients were treated, he believed that like physical illnesses, mental illness could be cured. This is important because during this time mental illness was seen as incurable which contributed to the poor treatment of patients (Hashemi & Morrison, 2020). Pinel had developed psychological treatments for his clients rather than physical, he did this by observing them and considering their symptoms. Pinel had treated all patients with respect and kindness, he ensured that he built good relationships with them as he believed that this would help them recover (Hashemi & Morrison, 2020).

In the early 19th century melancholia was mainly seen as delusions, psychosis and mania (Kendler, 2017). However, later in the 19th century the word depression was

starting to become a more popular term to describe melancholia. It was also seen less as insanity and focused more on the mood affecting symptoms (Berrios, 1988). In the late 19th century, a German psychologist named Emil Kraepelin made significant contributions to psychiatry. Kraepelin did not believe that certain symptoms were linked to one set disorder. From his work experience he believed that every mental illness had a certain combination of symptoms (Ebert & Bar, 2010). Kraepelin had used the term manic-depressive insanity when referring to melancholia, and he had developed many subcategories to explain different types of melancholia (Radden, 2002). The treatment of melancholia in the 19th century included shower baths which were used as alternative and more humane option to the cold baths used in asylums. Some doctors had also recommended an alcoholic drink with every meal throughout the day (Matthews, 2017).

20th century is when the diagnosis of depression was formed. In the 1900s melancholia was no longer a valid diagnosis but was one of the criteria for major depressive disorder this was because the criteria for both disorders overlapped majorly (David, 2013). In the 1900s there were many treatments recommended for major depressive disorder. One of these was the lobotomy, this was a brain surgery where a doctor would remove some of the brain tissue to break down connections in the brain (Mehta, 2022). Although the procedure had some success, it was stopped due it being considered unethical and the low success rate (Robb-Dover, 2023). Another treatment used was electroconvulsive therapy, this is where electroshocks are delivered to the patient to induce seizures. This was thought to cure mental disorders, this treatment has been improved over the years and is still in use today for extreme cases (Robb-Dover, 2023). Finally, in the late 1900s medications were being developed and used to

treat mental disorders. Medication has helped to put an end to the inhumane treatments used and helped treat patients in the community rather than in hospitals (Robb-Dover, 2023).

Finally, in the 21st century melancholia is known as melancholic depression which falls under major depressive disorder (Shaikh, 2021). The symptoms of melancholic depression include feelings of despair, weight loss, depression which is worse in the morning and extreme feelings of guilt (Shaikh, 2021). The treatments for melancholic depression are medications, electroconvulsive therapy is still used in severe or treatment resistant cases and numerous different therapies are available (Singh, 2025). Some patients may still require hospitalisation; this is only used when an individual is classed as a severe risk to themselves or others. Hospital treatments have improved massively and are now a safe place for patients to recover and receive 24/7 care by mental health professionals (WebMD, 2024).

From what was explored above, melancholia has changed drastically over the years. From starting as mood-based symptoms, to symptoms of psychosis and delusions and finally back to mood-based symptoms. We can also see how treatment and views of melancholia have changed for the better. It is amazing to see how much changed has happened, especially in the last few centuries.

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