

Creative Mind Shares Traits with Mentally Ill
By Alison McCook Reuters May 29, 2002

NEW YORK (Reuters Health) - The wildly creative genius often walks a fine line, as many of humankind's greatest minds have edged into the darkness of mental illness. Now a new study shows that creative people tend to share more personality traits with the mentally ill than they do with the middle-of-the-road masses.

This finding suggests that both creativity and manic depression, also called bipolar disorder, may share some of the same genetic underpinnings, Connie M. Strong of Stanford University in California told Reuters Health.

"Both bipolar disorder and creativity probably are genetically driven, and may be related to the same set of genetic predispositions," she suggested.

Strong and her co-author Dr. Terence A. Ketter measured creativity and personality traits in 48 patients with bipolar disorder, 25 patients with depression, 32 graduate students pursuing creative disciplines and 47 healthy people pursuing a relatively uncreative path in life.

Bipolar disorder is marked by extreme mood swings from euphoria and excessive energy to severe depression and hopelessness. These drastic swings can damage the person's relationships and affect their work, and sometimes lead to suicide. Depression is sometimes called a "unipolar" condition in that it is only one half of the equation that makes up bipolar disorder.

Strong and Ketter found that both creative students and those with bipolar disorders shared several personality traits. Such individuals were more open, and more neurotic and moody than the other study participants, according to findings presented at the American Psychiatric Association's annual meeting held in Philadelphia.

People with neuroticism tend to have more anxiety, lower self-esteem and lower tolerance for stress than other individuals, and they may feel alienated, victimized and resentful, the researchers note.

In an interview with Reuters Health, Strong explained that openness is a trait associated with a willingness to embrace new experiences, as well as being imaginative, curious and unconventional. These traits are often found in creative people, she added.

Because similar traits are found in those with bipolar disorder it might indicate that both creativity and the mental illness stem from a similar genetic predisposition.

"It makes sense that they are two potential outcomes of a shared predisposition,"

she said.

Indeed, previous studies have shown that there is a much higher rate of bipolar disorder in creative individuals than those in the general population.

Strong said that people with bipolar disorder might also have creative tendencies because they see the world in two ways, with the same surroundings appearing differently to them depending on whether they are feeling manic or depressed.

This "double view" of the world could allow manic depressive patients to be more open, she noted, one of the hallmark traits of creativity.

The bipolar patients that participated in Strong's study appeared to be many times as creative as patients with depression, and showed even higher levels of creativity relative to those without mental illness. In fact, creativity among treated bipolar patients matched that seen in the graduate students pursuing creative degrees.

Strong added that it was important to note that bipolar disorder patients showed high creativity despite the fact that they were being treated for their condition. Many patients are afraid to take medication for their disorder out of fear that it will impair their creativity, but these findings seem to suggest otherwise, Strong said.

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