



Creativity and mental illness - do you have to be mad to be creative?

Professor Dr Raj Persaud

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Introduction: Professor Frank Cox, Fellow of Gresham College

When one says there is no need to introduce the speaker, one tends to go on for ages and ages. I'm not going to do that. Tonight, your speaker is in fact very well known to everybody. It is Raj Persaud, who is consultant psychiatrist at the Institute of Psychiatry. He is in fact also the Visiting Gresham Professor for the Public Understanding of Psychiatry, and this is the third series of lectures that he has done. Without any further ado, I will ask Raj to give his first lecture on creativity and mental illness.

Raj Persaud

Thank you very much. I'm really pleased to have been invited yet again to give another series of lectures here at Gresham College. We live in an ancient city, with ancient traditions, and often we can forget that. This College and the lectures that are being given here are part of a tradition that goes back to the 16th Century, and I always feel very moved by that thought, how lucky we are in London to be able to avail ourselves of these magnificent traditions.

Some of you will know that I'm a consultant psychiatrist, and I work in the NHS at a hospital in South London called the Bethlem Royal & Maudsley Hospitals. The Bethlem Royal is the second oldest public hospital in Britain. It was founded in the 13th Century here in London, not very far away from here, in Bishopsgate. It has moved several times in its history and now it is out in Beckenham in Kent. When it was in Bishopsgate, back in the 13th Century, those were the suburbs of London then, and whenever London has grown it has moved; for example, it moved to the current site of Moorfields Hospital, where my wife is an eye surgeon, and then it moved to the Imperial War Museum, where that is now. That building actually is the original Bedlam building. It keeps having to move because as London expands it becomes not so acceptable to have a large psychiatric hospital right in the middle of the City, so it always has to move out yet again to the suburbs, where it is now in Beckenham. My ward is Gresham 1 Ward at the Bethlem, and I suspect Thomas Gresham may have had something to do with endowing that ward a long time in the past, so there is a kind of circularity to some of the traditions.

I am going to talk a little bit today about the psychology of creativity, a very important subject I think, and very neglected by the world in general and by those in my subject, psychologists and psychiatrists. You hear a lot about the mystery of consciousness and how consciousness is a really deep and fascinating problem, but you hear much less about the mystery of creativity. I want to contend that creativity is a much better mystery, a much more fascinating puzzle, than that of consciousness. I suspect that consciousness as a problem will definitely be solved at some point in the future, with the right brain scanning technology - and we are constantly making advances. I am confident it is going to be solved.

One of the things that makes creativity such a fascinating, and a deeper, more wonderful puzzle, is the fact that I am not convinced that it might ever be solved, even with the magnificent brain scanning technology we have now, and I will tell you why. What we would have to do if we were going to solve the puzzle of

creativity is, to take an example from history, we would have to get someone like Newton, at the moment the apple falls on his head and he discovers gravity - his 'Eureka' moment – we would have to have him in the brain scanner at that moment, and be able to scan his brain, to see the brain activity patterns at that moment of magnificent inspiration. What are the chances that we are ever going to be able to do that? What the chances of ever being able to get a Mozart, stick him in the brain scanner, or stick a wonderful lady composer or writer in the brain scanner at the moment of inspiration and scan the brain at that moment, and therefore develop the insight into where in the brain creativity comes from? For that reason, I think creativity remains a much more magnificent and deeper and more wonderful mystery.

But to start off with, one of the things that people forget about creativity is creativity, at its heart, is about being different. I want to tell you a little story about one of the most different people who ever taught me at medical school. At medical school – I trained at University College in Gower Street, again not very far away from here – they had a tradition back then, way back when I was a medical student, of when you went and did general practice, you did two kinds of general practice. You went and attached yourself to an urban general practice and saw what inner city medicine was like, and then the medical school sent you out to the rural countryside to live with a countryside GP for a couple of weeks to see what countryside medicine was like, the idea being you would see that there was a very big difference.

Now, because you had to go and live with this GP for two weeks, there was a system whereby the GPs had a Rolodex file in the Dean's Office at the medical school, listing their interests, where they were, etc. You went to go and look in this little box with the cards, and picked out the GP that most attracted you or interested you in terms of going to live with them, and rang them up, from their details on that card, and made the arrangements to go out there. Now, being a very disorganised medical student, I was the very last person to go and look in the Rolodex box, and as a result, when I got there, there was only one card left in the box, so I got the guy that everyone else had rejected. Now, most of these cards, as I said, had the GP's name, address, some details about their family life – you know, we have a couple of pets, we have three children, we love golf, that kind of thing. This card had just one sentence on it. It said: 'No wimpy lettuce eaters!' That was a bit ominous!

I rang the number on the card. The 'phone rang for an awfully long time before eventually it was picked up, and it became apparent to me that I was talking to someone with a very slurred voice at the other end. We made arrangements to meet – he was going to pick me up from the train station – and right at the end of the conversation, he said, with a very slurred voice, 'What do you drink?!' I was actually practically teetotal at the time, but I had to think of something quickly, so I said, 'Whisky.' Then the voice came on the phone, said, 'Right, I'll get a crate of that in!' I had a sense I was dealing with someone with a few substance misuse problems...

I arrived at the train station, got off the train, and looked up and down the platform. It was deserted, and I thought, 'Oh my God, there's been a problem, a mix-up. He's not made the train. I'm going to have to try and find him some other way.' So, I walked towards the exit, and I fell over someone...and it was him! He'd passed out on the platform. I helped him up and we staggered over to his car. This was obviously in less enlightened times, when people had less of a problem with drink driving. We set off.

I was very nervous, but he seemed to sober up very quickly in the car. We are driving through the rural countryside, middle of nowhere, he suddenly pulls the car over and stops, and I wonder what the hell is going on now. So, he gets out the car, and he strides purposefully across one field, and I run after him. We go across another field, then another field, then another field, and then we come to a field where there is a solitary horse, in the middle of the field, quietly chewing the grass. He said to me, 'You see that horse over there?' I said, 'Yes.' He said, 'I bought that horse for my wife, and as a result of me buying that horse for my wife, she had horse riding lessons, and then she ran off with the horse riding instructor. That horse is the reason for my divorce!' And then he proceeded to swear at the horse for about half an hour!

When we got back in the car and we drove off, it began to dawn on me that I was dealing with someone probably in the middle of a bit of a nervous breakdown as a result of his divorce. He kept saying to me in the car, 'I'm going to show you what British general practice is all about!'

And so we drove into the little village where his practice was, and we drove right past the surgery, and I thought 'U-oh.' Then we kept driving, and then we came to a hotel with a sauna in it, and he said, 'We're going to go to the sauna for the afternoon.' I was a bit nonplussed by this, but we went to the sauna. Then I discovered that, in the sauna, you had to be naked. I've got to tell you right now, I don't do public nudity, particularly when I'm with a guy who I've only just met 20 minutes ago and who is in the middle of a divorce! I was getting very nervous by this time. I was afraid, 'any port in a storm' may be what he is

thinking.

So we're sitting there in the sauna, and I'm very nervous, and then two naked women came in, which came as more of a shock – I had no idea it was a mixed sauna. And then it turned out of course that what this guy was doing – because he was in the middle of this divorce, he'd split up from his wife – he was out trying to meet women. He started chatting them up straightaway, and this obviously was his favourite haunt to meet women, and he told them that he was a test pilot for the RAF, which again came as a shocker to me! But you know, it seemed to work, it seemed to be very successful...and I'll be talking some more about some of those tactics in my lecture on seduction in a few weeks' time.

Then, we were on call that night. In those days, you're on call from home, and we got a call in the middle of the night and he arranged to see the patient in his surgery. So it's about midnight, we're driving out to his surgery, he leans over to me and says, 'This is a patient who is a bit depressed, and I think she has got an eating disorder as well. Do you know anything about eating disorders? Because I don't know anything about them at all!' he said. So I racked my brains and I said, 'Well, I only know one thing about eating disorders. I seem to remember reading somewhere that some women who've got an eating disorder have sometimes been sexually abused when they were children and there may possibly be a link, but you know, it's only a tentative memory in my mind.' He said, 'Okay, okay.'

So we got to the surgery, we parked the car, went in, and we're waiting for the woman, and it's quite a big reception area that we're waiting in. Then the woman arrives, and she is halfway through the front door, and about to take off her coat, but she's still halfway through the front door, taking off her coat, when he suddenly shouts out to her, 50 yards across the reception area, 'I say, were you ever sexually abused as a child?!' I thought to myself, 'Oh my god! Whatever happened to building rapport, that kind of thing?!' She suddenly stopped, taking off her coat halfway, and said, 'Actually, yes I was, and I've never told anyone before.' He turned to me and he said, 'You're a genius! I'm giving you an A!'

The next day, we were in the clinic for the very first time, and I thought it was going to be interesting to see him in action.

The first patient came in, and I'm sitting there with him, and the patient relates a set of symptoms. He thought hard after the symptoms were related, and then he said, 'I hardly ever do this because the drug I'm thinking of prescribing for you is incredibly powerful and very expensive, so we hardly ever prescribe it on the NHS. So, I hardly ever do this, but on this one occasion, I think I'll make an exception and I'll prescribe this drug.' So having given this drug this magnificent big build-up, the patient left, clutching the prescription as if it was the Holy Grail.

The next patient came in, related a completely different set of symptoms. He paused for a moment, sat back and thought for a second, and he said, 'I hardly ever do this...' and then he gave exactly the same spiel about this drug! He prescribed the drug, patient leaves, clutching the prescription as if it's the Holy Grail. And he does this with practically every single patient that we see that morning.

I bumped into the local pharmacist a few days later in the high street, and he said, 'Are you a medical student with that GP?' I said, 'Yes, I am.' He said, 'Would you please try and get him to stop prescribing Penbritin – (Penbritin is a very old form of penicillin) – because they don't make it any more?' he said, 'and it's getting incredibly difficult to get hold of, and he's prescribing it for everything!'

So you could say this was a very different GP, a very different doctor, and some people would say actually he had some of the key elements of the creative individual... He didn't really care what people thought about him. I only met him for a short while, and already he was saying stuff that was a bit outrageous to me. Creative people have to not care about what others think about them, because in the creative process, when you come up with a new idea, a creative idea, what is really fascinating is that all the best, most wonderful creative ideas have always met with a huge amount of resistance when someone first came up with them. And what we understand from the psychology of creativity is not just that you have to come up with new and original ideas, you have got to be able to put up with resistance and fight to get your idea accepted. So there's a kind of fighting bit that is important as well.

You often have to be a bit of a risk-taker, because if you are going to come up with new ideas, people are going to think of you as being a bit odd, and you will have to not care what people think about you, but you also have to be able to take risks.

You have to look at the world – and here's a key point – in a different way, and we'll come back to this shortly in terms of how we measure creativity.

It was clear to me that this GP was looking at the world in terms of his practice in a very different way to the way I had been taught at medical school. Up until that moment, what I had been taught at medical school was that medicine is about the patient comes in, you make a diagnosis, you give them the treatment, and if there isn't a diagnosis for which there's a treatment, you let the patient know that. His view of medicine was very different. His view was you tried to let the patient feel special and you let the patient leave feeling very happy. So we had a very different view of practising medicine, and a different way of looking at the world.

Now, we'll come to that in a moment in terms of the thorny problem of how we measure creativity. To have a science of the subject, in order to study a subject, you have to start with measurement – how do we measure the phenomenon? That's very, very important, and with creativity, the measurement issues in psychology are particularly difficult. I've talked in previous lectures, as many of you who have been here before will know, about how the problem of measurement is fundamental to the problem of the science of psychology. How do you measure love? How do you measure emotions in a scientific manner, thereby allowing yourself to be able to study them? But the importance of studying creativity and measuring it comes back to why creativity is so important in the first place. It is important for several reasons.

At a national, economic level, it is an extremely important issue for our national economy. I've got some bad news for you in terms of our economy. We're not a country that has lots of natural resources. We don't have a lot of oil, for example, any more, unlike some other countries. So we can't rely on our wealth to come from natural resources. Can we rely on hard work? Well, I've got some bad news for you on that front...! And really, it's two words, and the words are 'India' and 'China'. The bad news is this: no matter how hard you're prepared to work, and I'm sure you're all very industrious individuals, there are millions of people in India and China willing to work harder than you for about a tenth of the pay, okay? So as a national economy, for us to be competitive in the future in this world, we can't rely on resources, and we can't rely on hard work. What are we going to rely on? We're going to have to rely on innovation, being different, and being creative. Our economy is going to turn on how creative we are as a nation. So at a national level, I think we've got to think about improving our understanding of creativity and encouraging it. Interestingly, Japan, four years ago, their Prime Minister talked about Japan having a national creative strategy; in other words, thinking about Japan and Japanese people becoming creative - at a national level, they are evolving a strategy, because they understand that in the future, economies will succeed or fail on how creative the population is within it.

But beyond the national level, what about the more personal level? I want to argue today that creativity is very important to us on a personal level, in terms of whether you are successful or not in your organisations, or at work, or at a personal level. I will give you one example.

This is an example that comes from Robert Sternberg, a famous Harvard psychologist, who has devoted himself to the study of success and creativity. He came up with a very interesting example from real life. He had a patient who came to him, who loved his job – he was working in the automotive industry as a fairly senior manager, and he had a great job, he loved this job, but he had a common problem that many of us have, which is he hated his boss. His boss was a nightmare, and he really loathed the boss, and because he hated the boss so much, he was thinking of changing job. So he went to a headhunter to discuss what other job prospects there were out there, in terms of him changing job and escaping from under the yoke of this dreadful boss. And then he had a flash of creative inspiration, which was he worked out a way of using the headhunter to completely change his way of looking at the problem.

He realised that one way of looking at the problem was the way to get out from under this boss's yoke was to change jobs, but a more creative way of thinking about it was getting the headhunter to find a job for the boss! He said to the headhunter, 'I've got a boss, very talented individual – I wonder whether you couldn't think about some organisations that might be interested in him moving there?' And guess what? There's nothing more flattering than getting a phone call out of the blue from a headhunter when you didn't think you were on the job market! So sure enough, this headhunter rang the boss, out of the blue, with some various ideas. The boss was very flattered, had no idea where the interest had come from, but was indeed tempted by one of the jobs that the headhunter discussed with him, and the boss moved to another organisation, and our hero applied for the boss's job, because it was now vacant, and got the job! What a creative way of thinking about the problem, and a creative way of using the headhunter! So again, you see how creativity can be really helpful in our personal lives.

At a deeper, even more fundamental, personal level, one of the key issues I see in my clinics all day in terms of people's depression and their dissatisfaction is that they are bored. They are often bored with

their lives, and I think creativity, becoming a more creative individual, plays a key role in having a more interesting life. I will talk a little bit later about some tips, about how to improve your creativity in your everyday life.

But, in order to study creativity, we have to measure it. So I am going to test your creativity this evening by talking about some of the measures, and using some of the measures on you here. We will take a little bit of audience participation.

The problem is, how are we going to measure creativity? One way I could do it is to measure how many symphonies and novels and so on each of you have produced in the last five years or so - and let's say for a moment that you have all produced symphonies and novels and works of art. One of the problems then becomes is how do I compare your work of art with someone else's work of art? I could go for just numbers. If you have produced 50 paintings in the last year, and someone else only produced two, I could say, you, the guy you produced 50 paintings, is more creative than the one who just produced two. But is that actually a right measure? I mean, you could have produced 50 paintings of garbage, and my two paintings could be wonderful masterpieces.

So, there is a judgement problem here right at the heart of deciding how you measure creativity, and it is a problem that dogs the field. What they do in the creative industry world in terms of the study of creativity is to adopt a panel of experts, and they get the panel of experts to judge how creative your works are, but we all know that there is a problem. Are the experts really, really expert, or could it be the case that your bit of creativity, your fantastic novel, say, is so far ahead of current thinking that the panel of experts rejects it, but actually you are a genuinely creative person? Most great works of art, in terms of novels, for example, were initially rejected by the publishers they were sent to, and there are many famous examples of that. The Beatles were originally rejected by the first few record companies they went to. So we come back to a fundamental problem.

The field has moved in a different direction; the field has moved in a direction – and there are some criticisms of this obviously – which is it sets you problems that it takes a creative mind theoretically to come to answer. The idea is they are probing one of the key constructs in creativity, which is looking at the world in a different way. Now, this is obviously a different way of measuring creativity, but the nice thing about it is there is a correct answer, theoretically, in terms of the problems. I am going to just show you a few of the problems and see what your thoughts are.

My apologies about the advanced high tech visuals we are using! The first problem is an ancient coin. An antiquarian coin dealer gets a visit from a man with this coin, and the coin is an ancient coin, and on the one side it has got an emperor's head, and on the other side, it has got 544BC written on it. The man is obviously trying to sell this coin to the antiques dealer, but the antiques dealer immediately picks up the 'phone and calls the police, because the antiques dealer immediately knows the coin is a fraud, it is false. How does he know that?

Anyone living in 544BC would not have known it was 544BC, because BC is Before Christ, and Christ had not been born for quite a few centuries. So one of the things that that is probing is your ability to think about what 544BC means, and how it might mean something different when we look back in history to what it means at the time you are creating the coin.

Here is another example, and this is a real world example – again, excuse us for the advanced high tech audio visuals here. Basically, this example comes from Tallahassee, Florida. In Tallahassee, Florida, in America, you have wide American suburban streets, and this is a dumpster truck, the garbage truck that comes along to collect your garbage every Thursday morning. These are these magnificent American suburban houses. These are the big lawns in front of the house. Now, the poor garbage collectors have to pull up the truck outside the house, they have to get out of the truck, go down the long driveway of these big houses, round the back of the house to pick up the garbage cans, full of garbage, then walk back to the garbage truck, empty the garbage cans, walk back round to the back of the house, leave the garbage cans there, and then come back to the truck. The truck moves on to the next house, and they repeat the process. This is a test that I set at one of these lectures a few years ago, so if you were there and you know the answer, don't shout it out. I would prefer it if people who haven't seen this problem before try to solve it. The garbage people, collectors, came up with a scheme by which they could halve the number of journeys to the back of the house to pick up and empty the garbage. At the moment, they have got to make 4 journeys. They reduced it to two journeys. How did they do that?

[Audience member – A spare set of bins?]

Right, and then what? Very good. Okay. This is hinging on the idea that most people are not terribly attached to their bins, right? So the idea is the garbage men get out, they pick up these bins, they come to the garbage truck, they empty the bins in the garbage truck, and then they take these empty bins to the next neighbour's house. They leave the empty bins round the back of this neighbour's house, they pick their full bins up, go to the garbage truck, empty them, and then take the new empty bins to the next neighbour's house. So your neighbour ends up with your bins. But who cares? One of the things about creative thinking is about the idea that most people are thinking about emptying garbage in terms of people being attached to their bins, but they are not. We are attached to many possessions, but we are not that attached to our bins, and so it doesn't matter if you end up with your neighbour's bins.

We have a very creative audience! You have already got these very quickly. Here is another one. I am going to give you two egg timers. You have got a 7-minute egg timer and an 11-minute egg timer. How do you time a 15 minute egg with a 7-minute egg timer and an 11-minute egg timer?

You put them both on the go at once. When this reaches the end, you know there have to be 4 minutes left. So you let the 4 minutes elapse, and then you turn this over immediately – 4 plus 11 equals 15, so you have got your 15 minutes. Now again, the creative leap here is the fact that most people are thinking of egg timers, that you use them in sequence; they don't think about the fact that to do a timing, you might use them at the same time. So that's another measure of creativity, and they would set that up as an experiment, and they would time how long it took you to come to the solution.

Here is one final one. You have got a triangle of coins. Just moving 3 coins, just 3 coins, how can you make the triangle point downwards? It is pointing upwards at the moment.

Ah, this one has flummoxed even the garbage collecting experts! I have numbered the coins so that you can refer to a number if you want to tell me which coin you want to move.

Most people, when they are thinking about making the triangle point downwards, are thinking of the pointy bit of the triangle, right? Actually, all triangles have to have a base, so the intellectual leap is to think about focusing on the base instead of the pointy bit. If you move these 2 coins to there, you then make the base, and that one goes to the top there. So again, the thinking differently leap is about when I ask you to make the triangle point down, everyone thinks about the pointy bit, and they are not thinking about that fact that all triangles have to have a base and it is better to think about the base bit first.

So creativity is about thinking about the world in a different way. That is the essence of creativity. Of course, one of the problems that leads to, if you think about the world habitually in a different way, is you can often end up with a thing called mental illness, and there does appear to be a very strong link between creativity and psychological dysfunction. A lot of research has been done on this, and one very famous study found that – and a lot of studies correlate with this – two-thirds of successful, published writers are actually currently either depressed or have been seriously depressed at some time in their lives, and that contrasts with the one in 10 figure that you would expect, roughly, for the population. Another study found that writers were 10 times more likely to commit suicide than the general population. In the creative arts in general, the figure is roughly 50% of people who are productive and successful in the creative arts have had depression or are suffering from depression at some point in their lives. Of the arts – you can think about music, writing, painting – anyone here want to take a stab at which art form is associated with the most mental illness of all, the highest rate of mental illness?

People are going for music, painting - sculpture some people going for. But it is poetry. One study found three-quarters of poets were depressed or had suffered from a serious depression, and that is the highest rate found of any art form. We will come back to why that might be a little bit later.

So, there does seem to be a strong link between creativity. You find high rates of mental illness amongst creative individuals, and there are various theories about what is going on there. Some people talk about maybe an N-shaped curve, the idea being that if you begin to think about the world in a slightly odd or different way, if you do it to a little extent, then that makes you a little bit creative, and if you do it to a larger extent, you are obviously more creative, but if you do it a lot, a lot, a lot, then you move beyond the creative bit into the serious mental illness bit. So maybe there is a certain amount of thinking differently about the world that is helpful, but once you do it too much, you move into the mental illness realm.

There is some support for that from some fascinating studies done recently, particularly in Iceland, where they have a kind of closed population – there is not a lot of immigration or emigration in Iceland, so there is a kind of closed genetic database to look at – which found that the relatives of people with serious mental illness like schizophrenia were more productive and creative than the general population. If you think of

genetic loading for something like schizophrenia, maybe, if you have got really, really big genetic loadings – you actually have frank hallucinations and delusions – then you develop the mental illness. Maybe if you have a lower loading, as you would find in relatives, like your brothers and sisters and parents, you have just enough creativity to make you productive and successful, but not too much of this strange way of thinking to lead you into serious mental illness. So that is some evidence for the N-shaped curve idea.

Then there is a two-factor idea. The two-factor idea is the idea that there is a factor somewhere out there in our psychology which leads to creativity, like divergent thinking, thinking about the world in a strange and unusual way, but the other key factor you need if you are going to be successful and productive and write great novels and so on, is a kind of resilience factor, an ability to cope with stress, and also an ability to understand that whatever interesting and creative idea you come up with, you have got to be able to see the world through other people's eyes, not just your own eyes, if you are going to sell the record, sell the book to a publisher. You have got to be able to function in the world, and so you need that second key factor as well as the first factor, which is being able to look at the world in a strange, unusual way. So you have got to be able to look at the world in a strange, unusual way and then stop looking at it in a strange, unusual way and look at it in the way that other people look at it in order to be able to sell your book. It is that key tension which underpins the problem, which is that many creative people have the first factor but not the second factor, and that is maybe why they end up in trouble.

There is a third theory, which is that maybe productively creative people feel emotions more intensely, and because they feel them more intensely, that is in a way why they want to communicate their emotions to the outside world. They have a need to communicate and express themselves, and that is where the creative arts come from. Maybe what is driving them is this intense feeling, and it is that intense feeling that also underpins emotional problems, because maybe what is different about depressed people or people who have psychological dysfunction compared to the rest of us is not just that they have more intense feelings but then they think deeply about these intense feelings. So it is not just what you feel, but the fact you dwell on it and ruminate on it, and that cognitive style might actually not just be linked to mental illness but might also be linked to being productively creative. Maybe that is part of the creative process, to be more aware of yourself and your emotions, and therefore want to express them as well. So maybe there is a common cognitive underpinning.

But there are some sceptics out there. For example, some people would say that maybe the link between creativity and mental illness is more apparent than real. Take one famous example: John Nash, who got the Nobel Prize for Economics. Russell Crowe starred in a film on John Nash's life which has become very popular and successful, 'A Beautiful Mind', where he got an Oscar. Now, there have been many, many people who have got the Nobel Prize for Economics. Not many of them - none other that I am aware of - have had a Hollywood major feature film made of their lives. Why is that? Well, if you are very, very successful but also suffer from mental illness, your life will be a lot more interesting. Interesting things will happen to you; therefore you will attract biographers and people who want to make films about you. Therefore, we will have more attention devoted to that, the group of people who are mentally ill and creative, and therefore it will become more apparent than real, the idea of that link.

There is another very interesting theory around, which is that maybe it is so ingrained in all of us, that there is a link between mental illness and slightly weird-thinking psychological dysfunction and creativity. That may even contaminate the people who are judging major competitions, like the Nobel Prize for Literature, because a famous study was done which looked at not just people who are good writers, but also looked at people who won major prizes, like the Pulitzer Prize or the Nobel Prize for Literature, and found that you were more likely to suffer from serious mental illness if you got one of these big prizes. One of the theories around that was this idea that maybe if you are on the Nobel Laureate Committee and you are having to think about to whom you award the Nobel Prize for Literature, and you have four contenders, and one of them has a serious mental illness or is famous for having a serious mental illness, if you have the view that genius is tortured, that creativity is strongly linked to mental illness, you are likely to think that guy is the real genius, because he has got this key magic ingredient, which is this key thing of being disturbed psychologically and also being productive creatively. So it may influence judgements of creativity, it may contaminate judgements, and therefore you get a bias in terms of the link that you see.

In my own clinical practice I see a lot of creative people, and I wonder sometimes whether, because it is a notion that is widely around – that being creative is linked to mental illness -many creative people can use the link as a bit of an excuse for bad behaviour. So they can go out drinking on the town or doing difficult or disturbed things, and then say, 'Well, you know, it's just the way that I am because I have to be this way in order to be creative.' So is it an excuse for bad behaviour as well?

I want to come to a conclusion shortly because I don't like to talk for too long, but can we improve our creativity, given that I have talked about how important it is?

I have a friend, who is a very well-known cartoonist but who shall remain anonymous, who has to come up with a cartoon every day. To many people, that would be a nightmare, to have to come up with something funny every day. He had a very interesting tip, which I don't think he is going to thank me for sharing with the competition, but his tip was that at the beginning of the day, he doesn't sit down and try to think of a good joke when he tries to come up with a cartoon. He sits down and tries to think of 10 bad jokes. Usually, a good joke will come out of the 10 or 15 bad jokes. I thought that was a really interesting idea, because one of the things that we know about creative people is they don't mind failing, they don't care about other people's judgements and, in a way, it releases inhibitions to give yourself a task of coming up with 10 or 15 bad jokes. You are much more likely not to feel too inhibited, and therefore something creative or productive might come out of that.

So, one first tip is to not think that you have got to sit down and come up with the Sistine Chapel or the Mona Lisa, to be generative, just come up with stuff, and don't judge it too much - and the idea of brainstorming feeds into that.

There are a lot of very interesting ideas around at the moment, and one of them comes from Ben Fletcher, a psychologist from the University of Hertfordshire, who came up with a very interesting idea and, oddly enough, it was around the notion of weight loss. His diet plan is the most unusual diet plan in the world, because it doesn't ask people to stop eating or eat less or even try to lose weight. All he asks people to do is try every day to do something a bit differently to what you normally do, so, for example, listen to a different radio programme to what you would normally listen to, or read a different magazine, or go to work by a different route. He just asks people to break their habitual patterns and try something a bit different every day. One of the tasks, and you might want to try this as well, is he gives people random adverbs at the beginning of the day – and you could do this by just looking in the dictionary and coming to a word at random – and you have to behave like that for the rest of the day! You have to use that adverb and that should govern your behaviour, and that means you are going to be different to the way that you normally are.

The amazing thing they found was that people on this programme are just trying to break habitual patterns of a lifetime, because our lives do tend to get repetitive. People who do things a bit differently every day lost weight. They are not entirely quite sure why this is, but may be one of the reasons they lost weight was simply they liberated themselves, in terms of thinking in a more unconstrained way about how they might lead their lives. Perhaps one of the reasons that people have difficulty changing is they are trapped by a network of habitual patterns, and that is what makes us eventually feel bored about our lives.

Here are another couple of tips. Try to surprise one person every day – in a nice way! And try to surprise yourself every day, at least once, with a piece of behaviour that you don't normally do. The idea is that if you try to do things differently in a small way, every day, then you will begin to think differently about the world.

To come to a conclusion, I will take a famous example, perhaps the most famous example in history in terms of a well documented example of a link between creativity and mental illness. I want to read you a short excerpt from a biography of Robert Schumann, one of the great composers of the 19th Century. This biography is called 'Robert Schumann: Music and Madness' by Peter Ostwald. I am just going to read you a short excerpt from it:

'Just past noon on Monday the 27th of February 1854, a figure suddenly emerged from a house in Dusseldorf and turned left on the cobbled street. Although it was a cold, rainy day, the man wore only a thin robe and slippers. His face was pasty, his eyes were downcast, and he was sobbing. Walking unsteadily, he headed for the Rhine River, only four blocks away. A narrow pontoon bridge led to the other side, and to get across it, one had to pass a tollgate. Absentmindedly, he searched in his pocket for money. Finding none, he smiled apologetically and offered his silk handkerchief as a token fee, and then before anyone could stop him, he rushed down the incline leading to the bridge, ran part-way across, paused briefly, and threw himself headlong into the icy torrent. Some fishermen on a nearby boat went immediately to the man's rescue and managed to pull him out of the water, only to see him try to jump in again. They finally used force to bring him ashore. There, a bystander recognised the man as Dr Robert Schumann, a distinguished composer and music critic, who until recently had served as the conductor of Dusseldorf's Symphony Orchestra and Choral Society. At 43 years of age, he was suffering from severe mental illness.'

Schumann, from that suicide attempt, was moved to a private psychiatric clinic near Bonn, and he was treated by a psychiatrist called Dr Franz Richarz. Community care in the sense that Dr Richarz, the psychiatrist, had originally proposed was out of the question for Schumann, who was far from home and completely isolated from his family. Only a few friends, including Brahms, ever visited him. Remember there was a big stigma, as there still is now, but even bigger back then, around mental illness, so often people would just forget about a relative or a friend in a psychiatric hospital. Probably an even greater obstacle for Dr Richarz in treating patients was his progressive deafness, which led to his early retirement. Schumann, when he talked at all, spoke softly, even after the composer recovered from the acute phase of his psychosis.

So, a few days later, still inside this asylum, Brahms visits him. Schumann had declined pitifully during his third year of hospitalisation, and he was abjectly psychotic when Brahms visited him in April 1856. 'We sat down,' Brahms writes, 'it became increasingly painful for me. His eyes were moist. He spoke continuously but I understood nothing. Often, he just blabbered, a sort of ba-ba-ba-ba, da-da-da-da. While questioning him at length, I understood the names Marie, Julie, Berlin, Vienna, England, not much more.'

Richarz says that Schumann's brain is decidedly exhausted. In his regressed condition, Schumann refused to eat, and this negativistic behaviour was potentially suicidal. Richarz mentioned another disturbing item: Schumann was drinking wine, but before finishing the last drops, he suddenly paused and said, 'There is poison in the wine.' Thereupon he poured the rest on the floor. The behaviour would normally be called paranoid.

Because he is near the end, Clara, his wife, comes to visit him, and we have a very moving account of the last moments of Schumann's life.

It seemed to Clara that Schumann was always talking a lot with his spirits. He would become restless if one stayed with him too long. One could barely understand him any more. When the next day she went to see him again, she said his limbs twitched constantly, and his speech was often very violent. Brahms thought Schumann had some kind of attack, which the doctors believed would soon be followed by death. Nevertheless, Clara tried to feed the emaciated patient, apparently with some success. He accepted wine and jellied consommé with the happiest expression and, truly in haste, he gulped the wine from Clara's fingers – 'Ah he knew that it was me.' He seems to have taken food when Clara offered it, and he swallowed it without gagging or vomiting, all suggesting that his terminal self-starvation was probably voluntary.

The fact that he ate so impulsively after a prolonged period of starvation may have contributed to his death. So Clara, in coming to feed him, and him accepting the food, this biographer thinks unwittingly may have hastened Schumann's death, because Schumann suddenly ate after a long period of not eating. The biographer argues that: 'Sudden feeding of patients who have lost a great deal of weight as a result of chronic starvation can induce circulatory collapse, a physiological shock so severe that many cannot survive.' Schumann died at 4pm the next day, 29th of July 1856. He was alone. Clara had gone with Brahms to pick up a friend at the train depot. Clara writes: 'I saw him only half an hour later. I stood by his corpse, my ardently beloved husband, and was quiet. All my thoughts went up to God with thanks that he is finally free, and as I knelt at his bed, it seemed as if a magnificent spirit was hovering over me. Ah, if only he had taken me along.'

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