

Famous People and Mental Illnesses

Isaac Newton, most famous mathematician of the 17th Century was responsible for many scientific discoveries we take for granted today such as the "corrected" Gregorian calendar date. Newton's greatest mathematical discovery was the gravitational relationship between the earth and the moon, and of centrifugal force. Newton was well educated, had access to the best knowledge of his day and was wealthy in later life. He suffered from several "nervous breakdowns" in his life and was known for great fits of rage towards anyone who disagreed with him which some have labeled Bipolar Disorder which was unknown at the time. In 1705 Newton was the first Scientist to be knighted by Queen Anne for his great scientific contributions.

Ludwig van Beethoven, composer, had bipolar disorder which some have said gave him such creative power that his compositions broke the mold for classical music forever. He was a child prodigy which his father tried to exploit. His "manic" episodes seemed to fuel his creativity. He wrote his most famous works during times of torment, loneliness, and suffering psychotic delusions. It took him 12 years to finish his last and 8th Symphony in total deafness. He then medicated himself with the only drugs available in that day to bring some relief –opium and alcohol- and died several years later of liver disease.

Abraham Lincoln, 16th President of U.S. suffered from severe and debilitating and on occasion suicidal depressions, as recorded by Carl Sandburg in his comprehensive six-volume biographical analysis of his life. "A tendency to melancholy" Lincoln once wrote in a letter to a friend, "...let it be observed, is a misfortune, not a fault." The most amazing part of his story was the sheer determination with which he willed himself to overcome his serious affliction and still achieve all he was able to achieve for our young and troubled nation at war with itself.

Vincent Van Gogh, famous painter and artist was labeled peculiar with unstable moods most of his short life. He suffered from epileptic seizures some believe from excesses of absinthe, very strong liquor popular among talented people for inspiring greater creativity. Many have tried to give a definitive diagnosis of his illness through reading his personal letters. From them it seems clear that his depressive states were also accompanied by manic episodes of enormous energy and great passion. Van Gogh committed suicide at age 37.

Winston Churchill, Prime Minister of Great Britain who, as one of the "Big Three" (Churchill, Roosevelt and Stalin) to lead the world to the defeat of Hitler in WWII, told in his own writings of suffering from "black dog" Churchill's term for severe and serious depression. Less often talked about are his writings of how he often self-medicated with alcohol to deal with these times. Like so many other famous people with a mental illness, he was able to make the great contribution he did through sheer personal determination. There was a nation, he said, and a world depending on his efforts to lead Britain and the world in the defeat of their common and formidable enemy of Nazism.

Virginia Woolf, the British novelist, born of privilege, experienced the mood swings of bipolar disorder her entire life. She wrote to make sense out of her mental chaos and gain control of madness; and was greatly admired for her creative insight into human nature. She was tolerated by friends and family, receiving great care and understanding during her entire life and because of this,

never had to face institutionalization, the only medical “treatment” in those days. She died at her own hand by filling her pockets with stones and walking into a nearby river. The cause of death was determined as "Suicide, while the balance of her mind was disturbed."

Jane Pauley, NBC newsbroadcaster, since the age of 25, talks candidly about her depression and bipolar illnesses. In her new book, "Skywriting: A Life Out of the Blue," she tells about her childhood and family problems, and how she discovered her need for medication to control mood swings.

Linda Hamilton, actress, has gone public with her diagnosis of bi-polar disorder diagnosed at a young age. Hamilton, well known for her part with Arnold Schwarzenegger in "The Terminator" movies explains how helpful medication has been for her and that she understands she will have to be on medication for the rest of her life. .

Shawn Colvin, Winner of two Grammys in music, talked about her struggle with depression. Colvin has suffered from major depressive disorder for more than 20 years. "During the worst times, I shut the world out, refusing to get out of bed. Even the smallest tasks were overwhelming," she said.

Judy Collins, singer and songwriter, has written a book titled "Sanity and Grace: A Journey of Suicide, Survival and Strength," (2003). The book chronicles her journey as a survivor of depression after the suicide of her 33-year-old son in 1992. She states that her own spiritual life and practice have been a strength for her as she battles with her illness.

Dr. Kay Redfield Jamison, prof. of psychiatry at Johns Hopkins University, Baltimore, MD, author of many books on mental illness. Dr. Jamison has bipolar illness herself and has attempted suicide. Her book "Touched With Fire," lists and describes many famous persons whose lives have been changed by bipolar illness.

Maurice Bernard, portraying Sonny Corinthos on "General Hospital" weekdays on ABC, tells the National Mental Health Association that he suffered from bi-polar disorder for many years before he was diagnosed and given medication to bring his illness under control.

William Styron, author, writes about his own depression in his book, "Darkness Visible: A Memoir of Madness, " (1990) and his decision to seek help. His earlier works which he wrote prior to his diagnosis and admission of his illness described with uncanny accuracy, the symptoms and the problems he would experience later in his life. He was one of the first to write about other famous persons who struggled with mental illness and for explaining the almost unexplainable experience of a brain disorder to those who had never experienced it in a way which gained their sympathy and admiration.

John Nash, Nobel Prize Winner in mathematics, has faced a lifelong battle with schizophrenia. He was known as the “Phantom of Fine Hall” at Princeton where his reclusive, ghost like figure could be seen roaming around, leaving messages of his mathematical genius on the boards of empty classrooms. His struggle was well documented in the book "A Beautiful Mind," by Sylvia Nasar which was later made into a movie by the same name.

Carrie Fisher, the child of two Hollywood stars (Debbie Reynolds and Eddie Fisher) and actress, in her own right, played Princess Leia in "Star Wars" movies. Early in the 70's she says she started using cocaine. Her experiences with drug addiction led to her first best selling book, *Postcards From the Edge*. The book was made into a film in 1990 starring Meryl Streep. Her illness comes from her mother's side of the family.

Lionel Aldridge, a football player for the Green Bay Packers during the 1960's, developed paranoid schizophrenia and was homeless for 2 1/2 years. "Once I accepted and cooperated with the treatment, I started to beat the illness," he said. He now speaks to groups to help them better understand mental illness. He states that he is completely symptom free and that helping others understand mental illness is "therapy" for him.

Eugene O'Neill, famous playwright, author of "Long Day's Journey into Night," and "Ah, Wilderness!" came from a deeply troubled family background, suffering from clinical depression the greater portion of his life. His most famous plays were written between 1935 and 1943 despite persistent mental illness. He is the only American playwright to have won the Nobel Prize for literature.

Vivien Leigh, actress made famous by her leading role in "Gone With the Wind" and her creative genius for stage and screen, suffered from serious bouts of manic depression, tuberculosis, and poor health her entire life. It was, in fact, because of her illness, that she was frequently cast into roles that required a personal experience of the torment that comes from the experience of this disease. Vivien was once able to make a full recovery after shock treatments, only to succumb some years later. A nervous breakdown associated with a miscarriage proved to be the unraveling of her marriage with actor Lawrence Olivier who continued to be a devoted friend. She was finally diagnosed with cyclical manic-depression with hallucinations and had to be confined to a nursing home only to recover and return to the screen for her last movie. Leigh finally succumbed to the tuberculosis at the young age of 53 while filming "The Ship of Fools". She became known and admired for her ability to fulfill her passionate dream for stardom despite her TB and debilitating manic-depression.

Ruth Graham (daughter of Ruth and Billy Graham) writes about her many years of suffering with depression, drugs, eating disorders and thoughts of suicide in her 2004 book "In Every Pew Sits A Broken Heart," Church was never the comfort for her that it seemed to be for others. An adult with a tragic life behind her, she was finally able to talk about it. Being the daughter of a famous preacher she felt she should not have problems. Through the steady love of her family she was able to feel God's forgiveness. Her message today is that being a Christian doesn't guarantee us a perfect life. She hopes her story will give those who want to serve others a place to start in knowing what to do and say.

Brooke Shields talked about her disabling Post Partum Depression in her newly published book "Down Came the Rain: My Journey Through Postpartum Depression." Shields reported she first had difficulty bonding with her baby and later thought of hurting it and even killing herself. She was able to gain a significant improvement in her mood through medication and the help of a skilled nurse-helper who recognized her problem and encouraged her to get help.

Additional Famous People Known to have Coped with Symptoms of Mental Illness

Leo Tolstoy, author
Charles Dickens, English author,
John Keats, poet,
Michelangelo, artist
Bette Midler, entertainer
Charles Schultz, cartoonist
Dick Clark, entertainer
Irving Berlin, composer
Rosemary Clooney, singer
Jimmy Piersall, baseball player. Boston Red Sox
Burgess Meredith, actor,
Peter Illyich Tchaikovsky, composer
Charlie Pride, singer
Sylvia Plath, poet and novelist.
Janet Jackson, singer
Patty Duke, actress,
Roseanne Barr, comedian
Marlon Brando, actor
Maurice Bernard, actor
Buzz Aldrin, astronaut
Margot Kidder, Actress
Jonathon Winters, comedian
Pat Conroy, author
Ernest Hemingway, Pulitzer Prize-winning novelist,
Tennessee Williams, American playwright