

It's Time to Stop Romanticising Mental Illness

BY CLARE FITZGERALD | April 4, 2014

“Oh, it’s just my OCD acting up”. “I didn’t eat so I could be pretty”. “I’m just a little ADHD”. If you’ve heard one of these statements, then you’ve experienced the ever growing romanticisation of mental illness. Incidences in which mental illness is used as the butt of a joke or to describe a quirk are on the rise and it looks like this trend isn’t going away. Mental illness is being downplayed and the view that it’s a cute personality trait instead of a debilitating disorder is hurting those who genuinely suffer from one.

Why is romanticising mental illness wrong? Simply put, it’s not romantic, beautiful, or cute. It isn’t something that is funny and it definitely isn’t something that’s a joy to have. In reality, it’s the exact opposite of everything on that list. As someone who has experienced mental illness first hand, I can tell you that it is hell. Mental illness, whether it be the likes of depression, an eating disorder, or OCD, is a silent demon that eats away at you piece by piece. It’s a daily battle and takes incredible strength to get under control. It isn’t a quirk that comes and goes at the person’s will. It’s always with you, whether you want it to be or not. It consumes you and you feel lost. It isn’t glamorous and it isn’t something someone should strive for.

Mental illness and its portrayal can be seen throughout pop culture, from television and cinema to music and fashion. But out of all them, television and cinema seem to have harnessed its full power. It is hard to spend a night flipping through channels without seeing at least one character with OCD or some sort of anxiety disorder. But it’s understandable as to why it occurs, because it makes for entertaining television. However, that doesn’t make it acceptable. While some would say it makes shows more fun to watch, it should be known that, for the most part, a false image of mental health is provided and it gives viewers the wrong idea of what really goes on. And it is wrong to take advantage of something that causes sufferers real hardship.

So, what are some examples? Well, take a look at the wildly popular *2 Broke Girls*. One of the main characters, Caroline Channing, has histrionic personality disorder, which is characterised by the sufferer’s tendencies to be overdramatic and attention seeking. Mix that with the fact her life has been turned upside down and you’ve created a character who the audience can both laugh at and sympathise with. Sheldon Cooper from *The Big Bang Theory* possesses traits related to Asperger’s Syndrome (while the show’s creator's state he wasn’t conceived with it in mind) and his neurotic behaviour is the basis of the show’s comedy. And finally, *Friends’ Monica Geller* shows signs of OCD, but instead of focusing on the troubles the disorder causes, the show decides to make jokes about how clean and tidy she is. Comb through your mind for five minutes and you’re guaranteed to think of at least five more shows.

The fashion industry has also decided to jump on the “mental illness is cool” bandwagon. Just recently, the clothing store Urban Outfitters removed two shirts that seemed to promote depression and eating disorders. One had “depression” printed everywhere and

another had “Eat Less” on the front. Both T-shirts caused outrage on social media and the company later apologised and removed them. However, in an age where depression and eating disorders are on the rise, wouldn’t one think Urban Outfitters would have known better? Obviously not. Along with that, there was the Los Angeles based company, Kitson, who sold jersey-like sweatshirts with the words “Adderall” and “Xanax” printed on the back. In an industry where mental illness is rampant, it is both disgusting and surprising to see such items.

Thankfully, while there are incidences like the ones mentioned above, there seems to be a surge in programming and awareness that highlights the real struggles of mental illness. Multiple soap operas have started featuring characters who deal with the realistic repercussions of disorders like bipolar and depression, receiving praise from many Hollywood Critics. In mainstream television, shows like *Scrubs* and *Girls*, as well as Nicholas Cage’s *Matchstick Men*, have focused on the darkness and struggles those with OCD. *Skins* and *Degrassi* are amongst the shows that have brought the reality of eating disorders into the limelight and the show *Obsessed* focused on the real life struggles of those seeking help for the likes of anxiety, OCD, and panic disorders. There are also numerous campaigns that shine a light on this often dark and secretive world; they all bring the reality of mental illness to the forefront and allow viewers to see it for what it is: difficult and unfair.

We need to continue the change mentioned above. Some forms of media are leading the way to bring the reality of mental illness to public awareness. The more Hollywood and mass media continue to romanticise or “glorify” it, the harder it will be for actual sufferers to seek help. It is already hard enough to come forward, as some often fear they’ll be judged or not taken seriously, and if something doesn’t change soon it might become engrained that their serious illness will be something to laugh at.

More awareness needs to be created and society needs to educate itself. Mental illness is a lifelong battle, not a trait that gets a few laughs, and the mainstream view of it needs to change.

Proofread by [Alex Matthews](#)