

The Tranquilizing of America (Revisited)

By Kristi Geurian and Daniel Spadaro

Prelude: This article, The Tranquilizing of America... Revisited, was first published in 1998 by Christian Medical and Dental Associations in their publication, Today's Christian Doctor. Although the drug treatments mentioned may be outdated, the overall premise of the article remains intact. Are we too quick to go to drug therapy, thus obstructing God's better plan for the patient? This is a relevant question for all Christian pharmacists to consider.

In 1979, an excellent book entitled The Tranquilizing of America: Pill Popping and the American Way of Life¹ was published. In it, the authors warned of the consequences that a society in search of a "chemical calm" might face.

As members of a society increasingly obsessed with its serotonin level, it is wise to look to the Bible for insights. It may also be helpful to look back to societies that believed moods and behavior were influenced by factors other than neurochemicals and the severity of one's toilet training.

Cases

A. He was an excellent law student, very social, musical, and a great debater. While he was still in law school, he had a near-death experience during a lightning storm that caused him to "get religion." He quit law school and became a monk to search for God. He became very introspective and isolated as he struggled to understand himself and his God. He suffered from obsessive thoughts regarding his sinfulness, and his inability to rid himself of it. In an effort to make himself acceptable to God, he devoted himself to extended times of prayer and fasting.

Excerpts from writings:

"I know in what hours of darkness I sometimes wrestle... "The devil assails with great violence, going about to overwhelm you with heaps, floods and whole seas of sins, to terrify you and to drive you to despair."

Possible diagnosis: Major depressive episode with psychotic features.

B. He was a gang leader, thief, and drunkard with a bad temper. While he was in the army, he somehow won the affection of a Christian girl whom he eventually married. One evening during the early years of their marriage he came home drunk. His wife told him that she did not have to be married to a drunkard and that she would leave him if he ever came home drunk again. He quit drinking that night and never drank again. With her encouragement, he finally became a Christian, but he was plagued with doubts about his salvation. He feared that he had committed the unpardonable sin.

Excerpts from writings:

"A very great storm came down upon me, which handled me

twenty times worse than all I had met before. It came stealing upon me, now by one piece and then by another. First, all my comfort was taken from me; then darkness seized upon me; after which whole floods of blasphemies, both against God, Christ, and the Scriptures, were poured upon my spirit, to my great confusion and astonishment." "These things [thoughts] did sink me into very deep despair, for I concluded that such things could not possibly be found among them that loved God."

Possible diagnosis: Obsessive compulsive disorder with accompanying depression.

C. He was a devoted family man, very religious and a man of great position and wealth. He lost his business, children, and good health following a series of unexplained tragedies. During the course of his suffering, his faith in God was severely tested as he lost the support of his family and friends.

Excerpts from writings:

"I wish I was never born." "I have no rest, only turmoil." "If only I had never come into being; or had been carried straight from the womb to the grave."

Possible diagnosis: Major depression with suicidal ideation.

D. He was young and handsome, musically gifted, and very religious. Following a "rags to riches" scenario, he became the victim of jealousy, envy, and attempted murder due to his political popularity. He was forced to leave his friends and family in search of safety.

Excerpts from writings:

"I am a worm and not a man, scorned by men and despised by people. All who see me mock me: they hurl insults, shaking their heads." "My health is broken and my heart is sick; it is trampled like grass and is withered. My food is tasteless and I have lost my appetite. I am reduced to skin and bones because of all my groaning and despair."

Possible diagnosis: Depression with anxiety.

Discussion

In a valiant effort to alleviate suffering, the 1990s' managed-care medical approach to each of these cases would probably be as follows: Case A-antidepressant plus antipsychotic; Case B-antidepressant; Case C-antidepressant; Case D-antidepressant, plus benzodiazepine. Yet, in each of the above cases, a successful outcome was achieved without the use of medication.

Case A was Martin Luther, whose psychological torment caused him to search the Scriptures for truth. This search resulted in The Reformation as well as many writings and sermons.

Case B was John Bunyan, whose psychological struggles were instrumental in shaping one of the greatest preachers and authors of all time.

Case C was the Old Testament character Job. Job's psychological stressors led him to an audience with God and a full realization of his position as a created being.

Case D was Israel's King David. David's psychological state led him many times to write intense songs of pain and praise that remain a great source of encouragement for believers today. It is important to our discussion to realize that even with the ups and downs of David's psyche as depicted in the book of Psalms, God referred to him as "a man after my own heart." (see 1 Samuel 13:4 and Acts 13:22)

Our question is: Could psychological torment possibly be considered normal for mankind and not to be feared?

What if Martin Luther had been given Prozac? Would he have become a happy monk and placed his grace-versus-works theology aside? Zoloft for Bunyan? Would he have written *Pilgrim's Progress* or *Grace Abounding to the Chief of Sinners* with the same insight? Would he have written them at all? Also, it is odd that he stopped drinking on his own. Can that really be done without a patch or a pill or a support group? What if Job had been prescribed Paxil? His three counselors most certainly would have recommended this had it been available. Would a medicated Job have been driven to find understanding in his suffering? King David might have been given Effexor and Valium to lift his mood and calm his mind. If so, would the beauty and intensity of the Psalms have been lost? Would the character necessary to lead a nation have been molded? Would he have sought God as earnestly in a numbed psychological state as he did in his distress? Do we?

The New Testament Apostle Paul wrote in 2 Corinthians 1:8b-9 (NIV), "We were under great pressure, far beyond our ability to endure, so that we despaired of life itself. Indeed, we felt we had received the sentence of death. But this happened that we might not rely on ourselves but on God, who raises the dead."

If this godly man assumed that psychological distress is normal and not to be feared because of what we can learn from it, it would be wise to ask ourselves, as Christian medical professionals, if psychologic disturbances are truly illnesses that must be treated with psychoactive medication. For if emotional torment (which at times may be prolonged and very dark) is a tool in the hand of a loving God to teach us to trust in Him alone, and we rush to medicate away all the pain, might we not be interfering with God's spiritual growth plan for many of our patients?

Reference:

Hughes, R. (1979). *The Tranquilizing of America: Pill popping and the American way of life*. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich.



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**Test all things;
hold fast what is good
1 Thessalonians 5:21**

