

Is diagnosis necessary?(LETTERS)(Letter to the editor)

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Robert E. Kay

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Neither the authors of the Psychodynamic Diagnostic Manual discussed in your report ("Manual's Breadth May Aid Diagnosis," March 2006, p. 1) nor those hoping to produce the DSM-V have apparently thought deeply about the article by Dr. Robert Kendell and Dr. Assen Jablensky (Am. J. Psychiatry 2003;160:4-12).

That article concluded: "At present, there is little evidence that most contemporary psychiatric diagnoses are valid, because they are still defined by syndromes that have not been demonstrated to have natural boundaries," not to mention the fact that we have no objective tests of any kind for anything we do outside of EEGs in sleep disorders. That is, in the trenches now, and in the foreseeable future, everything still depends on what the patient or their collaterals choose to tell us; what we choose to hear; what we choose to offer by way of ideas, medications, and tender loving care; what they choose to listen to and carry away; what they choose to do in the here and now that might neutralize the past; and then what they choose to tell us about the results. And if I read the tea leaves correctly, more and more mental health folks are going to ignore the whole idea of diagnosis, and focus instead on the various kinds of psychic pain, i.e., symptoms that our patients are having and what we can do to relieve their distress—with or without medication—while promoting security, pleasure, insight, confidence, and better connections with other people.

Meanwhile, many are beginning to realize that, give or take a little genetic loading in some cases, most of what we're dealing with is a childhood onset stress and/or deprivation disorder, or COSADD. This realization is based on the fact that a great deal of what we do with children is, to some degree, nonbiological, unresponsive, inappropriate, punitive, and/or unnecessary, like sending them to that well-intentioned but scary, boring, confusing, cortisol-producing and therefore brain-damaging place called school. We do this even though all toddlers seem able—without any formal teaching, whatsoever—to teach themselves how to speak the native tongue, one of the most difficult things we'll ever do.

Thus, the Educator's Newsletter reported in 1987 that 80% of kids enter school with high self-esteem. By the time they're seniors, only 5% still like themselves.

Finally, I need to believe that my patients are doing better as the years go by, partly because they no longer feel that they're in the grips of some obscure neurodegenerative disease of "biochemical imbalance," an idea for which there is no evidence at all. In the meantime, the phenomenon of neurogenesis suggests that, with good experiences like feeling cared for by an important person such as a therapist—or by having achieved a reasonably decent life after school was over—that the stressed-out brain will quite slowly repair itself to some significant degree.

Robert E. Kay, M.D.

Apt. 15E, 210 Locust St.
Philadelphia, PA 19106-3924
267-414-3758

LETTERS

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