

A Crisis in My Mental History

John Stuart Mill

Introduction by the column editor:

There are many well-known figures in history whose mental illness has been brought to light—Abraham Lincoln, Winston Churchill, Edgar Allen Poe, Ernest Hemingway, and Isaac Newton among them. And there are those whose accomplishments are extolled but whose mental illness largely is known only to scholars. One such person is the philosopher John Stuart Mill, best known as the author of *On Liberty* (1859) and *The Subjection of Women* (1869). Mill's autobiography was published in 1873, the year of his death, and included a section titled "A Crisis in My Mental History." This personal account, describing a major depressive episode that occurred about 177 years ago, is rich in content and is presented in this month's column as yet another example of the contributions made to mankind by persons with mental illnesses.

John Stuart Mill was born in London on May 20, 1806, the eldest son of James Mill, a utilitarian who played a significant role in the intellectual, political, and economic life of Britain until his death in 1836 (1). James Mill spent four to five hours a day educating his son (1) in such a manner that "his emotions were starved, his artistic instincts and esthetic cravings were thwarted, and his feelings and sentiments were ignored or thrust aside" (2). The point of this education was to create a "creature of reason, a logical machine schooled in the

stern discipline of rigorous analysis" (2). John Stuart Mill had no contact with peers and was responsible for tutoring his brothers and sisters (1,2). Apparently all went well until Mill reached the age of 20, when he had an episode of melancholic depression. Mill's account (3) of this episode, or crisis, follows.

From the winter of 1821, I had what might truly be called an object in life; to be a reformer of the world. My conception of my own happiness was entirely identified with this object. I was accustomed to felicitate myself on the certainty of a happy life which I enjoyed, through placing my happiness in something durable and distant, in which some progress might be always making, while it could never be exhausted by complete attainment. This did very well for several years, during which the general improvement going on in the world and the idea of myself as engaged with others in struggling to promote it, seemed enough to fill up an interesting and animated existence. But the time came when I awakened from this as from a dream. It was in the autumn of 1826. I was in a dull state of nerves, such as everybody is occasionally liable to; unsuspceptible to enjoyment or pleasurable excitement; one of those moods when what is pleasure at other times, becomes insipid or indifferent. In this frame of mind it occurred to me to put the question directly to myself: "Suppose that all your objects in life were realized; that all the changes in institutions and opinions which you are looking forward to, could be completely effected at this very instant: would this be a great joy and happiness to you?" And an irrepressible self-consciousness distinctly answered, "No!" At this my heart sank

within me: the whole foundation on which my life was constructed fell down. All my happiness was to have been found in the continual pursuit of this end. The end had ceased to charm, and how could there ever again be any interest in the means? I seemed to have nothing left to live for.

At first I hoped that the cloud would pass away of itself; but it did not. A night's sleep, the sovereign remedy for the smaller vexations of life, had no effect on it. I awoke to a renewed consciousness of the woeful fact. I carried it with me into all companies, into all occupations. Hardly anything had power to cause me even a few minutes' oblivion of it. For some months the cloud seemed to grow thicker and thicker. The lines in Coleridge's "Dejection"—I was not then acquainted with them—exactly describe my case:

*A grief without a pang, void, dark
and drear,
A drowsy, stifled, unimpassioned
grief,
Which finds no natural outlet or
relief
In word, or sigh, or tear.*

In vain I sought relief from my favourite books; those memorials of past nobleness and greatness from which I had always hitherto drawn strength and animation. I read them now without feeling, or with the accustomed feeling minus all its charm; and I became persuaded, that my love of mankind, and of excellence for its own sake, had worn itself out. I sought no comfort by speaking to others of what I felt. If I had loved any one sufficiently to make confiding my griefs a necessity, I should not have been in the condition I was. I felt, too, that mine was not an interesting, or in any way respectable distress. There was nothing in it to attract sympathy.

John Stuart Mill was a 19th century English philosopher of great repute. Jeffrey L. Geller, M.D., M.P.H., is editor of this column.

Advice, if I had known where to seek it, would have been most precious. But there was no one on whom I could build the faintest hope of such assistance. My father, to whom it would have been natural to me to have recourse in any practical difficulties, was the last person to whom, in such a case as this, I looked for help. Everything convinced me that he had no knowledge of any such mental state as I was suffering from, and that even if he could be made to understand it, he was not the physician who could heal it. My education, which was wholly his work, had been conducted without any regard to the possibility of its ending in this result; and I saw no use in giving him the pain of thinking that his plans had failed, when the failure was probably irremediable, and, at all events, beyond the power of his remedies. Of other friends, I had at that time none to whom I had any hope of making my condition intelligible. It was however abundantly intelligible to myself; and the more I dwelt upon it, the more hopeless it appeared.

My course of study had led me to believe, that all mental and moral feelings and qualities, whether of a good or of a bad kind, were the results of association; that we love one thing, and hate another, take pleasure in one sort of action or contemplation, and pain in another sort, through the clinging of pleasurable or painful ideas to those things, from the effect of education or of experience. As a corollary from this, I had always heard it maintained by my father, and was myself convinced, that the object of education should be to form the strongest possible associations of the salutary class; associations of pleasure with all things beneficial to the great whole, and of pain with all things hurtful to it. This doctrine appeared inexpugnable; but it now seemed to me, on retrospect, that my teachers had occupied themselves but superficially with the means of forming and keeping up these salutary associations. They seemed to have trusted altogether to the old familiar instruments, praise and blame, reward and punishment. Now, I did not doubt that by these means, begun early, and applied unremittingly, intense associ-

ations of pain and pleasure, especially of pain, might be created, and might produce desires and aversions capable of lasting undiminished to the end of life. But there must always be something artificial and casual in associations thus produced. The pains and pleasures thus forcibly associated with things, are not connected with them by any natural tie; and it is therefore, I thought, essential to the durability of these associations, that they should have become so intense and inveterate as to be practically indissoluble, before the habitual exercise of the power of analysis had commenced. For I now saw that the habit of analysis has a tendency to wear away the feelings: as indeed it has, when no other mental habit is cultivated, and the analysing spirit remains without its natural complements and correctives. The very excellence of analysis is that it tends to weaken and undermine whatever is the result of prejudice; that it enables us mentally to separate ideas which have only casually clung together: and no associations whatever could ultimately resist this dissolving force, were it not that we owe to analysis our clearest knowledge of the permanent sequences in nature; the real connexions between Things, not dependent on our will and feelings; natural laws, in proportion as they are clearly perceived and imaginatively realized, cause our ideas of things which are always joined together in Nature, to cohere more and more closely in our thoughts. Analytic habits tend altogether to weaken those [associations] which are, to speak familiarly, a mere matter of feeling. They are therefore (I thought) favourable to prudence and clear-sightedness, but a perpetual worm at the root both of the passions and of the virtues; and, above all, fearfully undermine all desires, and all pleasures. To know that a feeling would make me happy if I had it, did not give me the feeling. My education, I thought, had failed to create these feelings in sufficient strength to resist the dissolving influence of analysis, while the whole course of my intellectual cultivation had made precocious and premature analysis the inveterate habit of my mind. I was thus left stranded at the commence-

ment of my voyage, with a well-equipped ship and a rudder, but no sail; without any real desire for the ends which I had been so carefully fitted out to work for: no delight in virtue, or the general good, but also just as little in anything else. The fountains of vanity and ambition seemed to have dried up within me, as completely as those of benevolence. I had had some gratification of vanity at too early an age: I had obtained some distinction, and felt myself of some importance, before the desire of distinction and of importance had grown into a passion: and little as it was which I had attained, yet having been attained too early, like all pleasures enjoyed too soon, it had made me blasé and indifferent to the pursuit. Thus neither selfish nor unselfish pleasures were pleasures to me. And there seemed no power in nature sufficient to begin the formation of my character anew, and create in a mind now irretrievably analytic, fresh associations of pleasure with any of the objects of human desire.

These were the thoughts which mingled with the dry heavy dejection of the melancholy winter of 1826–7. During this time I was not incapable of my usual occupations. I went on with them mechanically, by the mere force of habit. I had been so drilled in a certain sort of mental exercise, that I could still carry it on when all the spirit had gone out of it. Two lines of Coleridge were often in my thoughts, not at this time (for I had never read them), but in a later period of the same mental malady:

*Work without hope draws nectar in
a sieve,
And hope without an object cannot
live.*

In all probability my case was by no means so peculiar as I fancied it, and I doubt not that many others have passed through a similar state; but the idiosyncrasies of my education had given to the general phenomenon a special character, which made it seem the natural effect of causes that it was hardly possible for time to remove. I frequently asked myself, if I could, or if I was bound to go on living, when life must be passed in this manner. I

generally answered to myself, that I did not think I could possibly bear it beyond a year. When, however, not more than half that duration of time had elapsed, a small ray of light broke in upon my gloom. I was reading, accidentally, Marmontel's "Memoires," and came to the passage which relates his father's death, the distressed position of the family, and the sudden inspiration by which he, then a mere boy, felt and made them feel that he would be everything to them—would supply the place of all that they had lost. A vivid conception of the scene and its feelings came over me, and I was moved to tears. From this moment my burden grew lighter. The oppression of the thought that all feeling was dead within me, was gone. I was no longer hopeless: I was not a stock or a stone. I had still, it seemed, some of the material out of which all worth of character, and all capacity for happiness, are made. Relieved from my ever present sense of irremediable wretchedness, I gradually found that the ordinary incidents of life could again give me some pleasure; that I could again find enjoyment, not intense, but sufficient for cheerfulness, in sunshine and sky, in books, in conversation, in public affairs; and that there was, once more, excitement, though of a moderate kind, in exerting myself for my opinions, and for the public good. Thus the cloud gradually drew off, and I again enjoyed life: and though I had several relapses, some of which lasted many months, I never again was as miserable as I had been.

Afterword by the column editor:

Mill has produced a wonderfully descriptive account of his mental status. One Mill biographer stated that, with one exception, "there is perhaps no more touching description of a young heart helplessly and hopelessly in the throes of deep and bitter melancholia" (4). Mill's first episode lasted six months by his own account, although Mill biographers believe that the episode may actually have lasted four years (1). Mill himself reports that he had relapses (3).

The cause of, or precipitants to, Mill's depression are not known. Mill ascribes his decline to overwork (3).

Some have ascribed it to the turmoil of adolescence or to the tenor of the times (1). Others have described the etiology as the repressed death wishes toward a tyrannical father and the accompanying unarticulated guilt (2). The episode has been labeled as a classic case of the Oedipus complex (1). I shall refrain from analyzing this case—to do so would be to violate the American Psychiatric Association's code of ethics (5) (section 7, subsection 3).

In addition to serving as evidence that another important historical figure had a significant mental illness, Mill's encounter with depression is significant in that it profoundly affected his philosophy and his writings. His need to reconcile the intellectual, rational self with the feeling, irrational self led him to a broader definition of liberalism than what he had been exposed to and a resulting liberal political and social philosophy that contemporary readers associate with Mill (1).

It is perhaps one of psychiatry's great ironies that from a scholar's episode of depression grew some thoughts on autonomy that have remained fundamental to the struggle to define psychiatry's role in organized societies. It is Mill who said, "The only freedom which deserves the name, is that of pursuing our own good in our own way, so long as we do not attempt to deprive others of theirs, or impede their efforts to obtain it. Each is the proper guardian of his own health, whether bodily, or mental, or spiritual. Mankind are greater gainers by suffering each other to live as seems good to themselves, than by compelling each to live as seems good to the rest" (6). ♦

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gers of "splitting" and possible ways to avoid it. Kaiser Permanente's "fluoxetine first" program exemplifies the kind of clinically informed, ethically sensitive, fiscally prudent drug benefit management our health care system needs. Other programs—both public and private—should emulate it. ♦

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