

## Oversharing vs Authenticity

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### **Mental Health ambassadors lead the way**

The ancient Greeks believed that mental and physical health were interrelated and that the body and mind should be in harmony.

Greek philosopher Socrates famously said: “The unexamined life is not worth living.”

Surely, that could be interpreted, in modern parlance, as a call for psychotherapy where those in need of counselling, through talking, gain self-knowledge and explore ways to improve their mental wellbeing.

Aristotle famously wrote: “It is through our darkest moments that we must focus to see the light.”

We’ve come a long way since trephination, the treatment that cut a hole in the skull to expose the brain used more than 7 000 years ago to cure mental illness – and its then closely linked cousin, demonic possession.

Through the centuries “madness” – as it was labelled – was treated with a host of barbaric methods that included exorcism and prayer, lobotomy, bleeding, vomiting and purging and the use of ice and restraints. Asylums, where patients were often chained to beds, were probably the most extreme form of torture for the mentally infirm.

It’s little wonder that people have used extreme measures to hide signs of mental ill health.

Like Charlotte Brontë’s fictional character Bertha who, in the 1847 Jane Eyre novel, was described as “violently insane” and locked in her room by her husband Edward Rochester.

It is a relief that 21st century attitudes around mental illness are more open, accepting and sympathetic. This has led to more sharing of painful and troubling issues surrounding matters of the mind.

Writing for Forbes, psychotherapist and international best selling mental strength author Amy Morin makes a clear distinction between oversharing and being authentic.

Oversharing, she says, is often a misguided attempt to gain sympathy. If you share your mistakes in an effort to help others learn, you are being authentic. If, however, you share your hardships to gain pity, you’re oversharing.

Celebrities who have come out and spoken openly about their mental health fall into the first category, helping remove some of the stigma and making seeking help for troubling matters of the mind easier.

Widespread accessibility to social media has helped get their message out to a large audience.

Super model Chrissy Teigen, wife of multi platinum recording artist John Legend, opened up about struggling after the birth of her first child, daughter Luna.

In 2017 Glamour Magazine published an essay she’d written: “I had everything I needed to be happy, and yet, for much of last year, I felt unhappy. What basically everyone around me – but me – knew was that I had postpartum depression.”

Explaining why she had chosen to speak, she said: “I want people to know it can happen to anybody, and I don’t want people who have it to feel embarrassed or to feel alone.”

The response, and gratitude, from women who said she had opened the door for them to examine their own post birth despair was explosive.

Chrissy has 34.9-million followers on Instagram, is active across all social media platforms, and regularly appears on national television in America.

Her reach is immeasurable and her voicing her own battle with what Winston Churchill used to call “the black dog” – depression – allowed others to feel free to talk about their affliction too.

The 23-year-old Japanese/Haitian tennis player Naomi Osaka, Japan’s most famous athlete, was asked to light the flame to open Tokyo summer Olympic Games 2020.

But this public event masked what has been a tumultuous year for her.

Despite a first-round victory at the French Open, she quit the tournament after being fined for refusing to attend mandatory post-match press conferences. She said unsympathetic questioning after games impacted her mental wellbeing.

Naomi Osaka explained that she had experienced “long bouts of depression” since winning the 2018 US Open and often had “huge waves of anxiety” before speaking to the media.

Her speaking out has allowed other athletes to speak about their trauma too. Fans, and fellow anxiety sufferers took to social media to applaud her. Walking away from the possibility of winning such a coveted trophy in the interests of her own mental health was seen as brave, and her taking care of herself.

The South African Depression and Anxiety Group (SADAG) reports that anxiety disorders are the most common, with one in five South Africans affected by these illnesses every year.

The hoary old line “pull yourself together” or the worn out platitude “it will all be alright” has been, rightly, relegated to the rubbish heap.

Today, armed with information, everything is different about how we see and treat mental health. Instead of asylums there are psychiatric hospitals where the emphasis is on short-term stays. It is more usual that people consult psychologists, psychiatrists, marriage and family therapists, school counsellors, clinical social workers and religious leaders.

There is also a cornucopia of drugs available to alter mood, stabilise unhealthy thoughts and provide relief from some of the extreme symptoms of these unseen illnesses.

And authentic sharing helps people realise they are not alone in their feelings of hopelessness and despair.

- Carson Daly, host of the American talent show, The Voice, said he never planned to talk publicly about his struggles with mental health. That changed when National Basketball Association player Kevin Love shared his story about having a panic attack during a basketball game. Daly said he realised he’d suffered with debilitating anxiety and panic for 20 years and not known how to define it. He then sought help.
- Twenty-four-year old singer/actor Demi Lovato at eighteen told her story of bullying, addiction, an eating disorder, cutting, and depression. She recently explained that it was during her treatment for addiction and eating disorders that she was diagnosed with bipolar disorder.
- Titanic actor Leonardo DiCaprio has admitted to having an obsessive compulsive disorder – feeling compelled to walk through doorways numerous times and step on sidewalk stains left by chewing gum.

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- Harry Potter actor Daniel Radcliffe has also suffered from OCD since he was five-years-old.
  - Lady Gaga, despite her success as an actor and musical sensation, has spoken openly about her struggles with post-traumatic stress disorder. The trauma of having been raped at 19, she is quoted as saying, has helped her understand the trauma of others.

The World Health Organisation's guidelines state that promoting mental health is an integral part of public health. WHO stresses that mental health is more than the absence of mental illness; that there is no health without mental health.

The pandemic has seen an unprecedented rise in anxiety and depression across the world.

A recent CNN special devoted to mental health issues specifically related to the pandemic dealt with the havoc that fear, uncertainty and isolation has wreaked.

American Public Health's Lisa Carlson told how supply shortages, economic stress, fear of illness and disrupted routines were important factors, but that "real grief" was at root the worst of it.

"We don't have a vaccine for our mental health like we do for our physical health so it will take longer to come out of those challenges," she said.

Twenty years ago, a World Health Report recorded that one in four people in the world will be affected by mental or neurological disorders at some point of their lives.

They put the figure at 450-million people – two decades ago. When considering the pandemic, that multiplies many fold and it becomes apparent how important it is that mental health has come into sharp focus in recent years.

It is also a relief that celebrities, authentically talking about their own struggles, allow ordinary people to open up about theirs.