Our myth of creativity includes suffering. We imagine that artists, like Christ figures, suffer for our sake, enduring poverty and terrors in order to bring us beauty and healing. We might take strange comfort in the idea that mental illness reveals truths that ordinary sane people miss. Vincent Van Gogh, according to Don McLean in “Starry, Starry Night,” could have freed his neighbors from small-mindedness: “How you suffered for your sanity,” he sings. “How you tried to set them free… This world was never meant for one as beautiful as you.”

In fact, mental illness is the opposite of lovely. It steals time; at worst, it shortens lives. Van Gogh died at 37 years old. As a group, the mentally ill are not notably creative or visionary. Rather, science suggests, we find creativity closer to the middle—in the in-between.

Mild, not clinical, manifestations of experiences like mania and psychosis give people a creative edge; a little helps. But less is more.

The Price Of Genius
Even “mad geniuses” need their wits, both intelligence and sanity, to...
ON THE BIAS
Kalb lists nearly 30 shivering and vomiting. triggered bouts of abdominal distress. Visits frequent complaint was notables. His most medically afflicted journalist Claudia Kalb in dizziness,” writes fingers and toes, bouts of crying and that it’s a wonder he did example, was so crippled disabilities. Darwin, for which sometimes must pursue their wild imaginings. They also need enormous drive, which sometimes must overcome serious disabillities. Darwin, for example, was so crippled by mysterious symptoms that it’s a wonder he did any work at all. He had bouts of crying and experienced of “fatigue, dizziness, eczema, boils, muscle weakness, cold fingers and toes,” writes journalist Claudia Kalb in Andy Warhol Was a Hoarder, her book on medically afflicted notables. His most frequent complaint was abdominal distress. Visits from his neighbors triggered bouts of shivering and vomiting. Kalb lists nearly 30 possible diagnoses for Darwin before settling on anxiety. Brian Wilson of the Beach Boys pushed his creativity to soaring heights—until it was crippled by schizophrenia. In Kalb’s well-researched book, we hear that Marilyn Monroe had borderline personality disorder and Howard Hughes obsessive compulsive disorder, Andy Warhol was a hoarder, and Abraham Lincoln was depressed. It seems that Frank Lloyd Wright had narcissistic personality disorder and Howard Hughes obsessive compulsive disorder, Andy Warhol was a hoarder, and Abraham Lincoln was depressed. It seems that Frank Lloyd Wright had narcissistic personality disorder and Howard Hughes obsessive compulsive disorder, Andy Warhol was a hoarder, and Abraham Lincoln was depressed. It seems that Frank Lloyd Wright had narcissistic personality disorder and Howard Hughes obsessive compulsive disorder, Andy Warhol was a hoarder, and Abraham Lincoln was depressed. It seems that Frank Lloyd Wright had narcissistic personality disorder and Howard Hughes obsessive compulsive disorder, Andy Warhol was a hoarder, and Abraham Lincoln was depressed. It seems that Frank Lloyd Wright had narcissistic personality disorder and Howard Hughes obsessive compulsive disorder, Andy Warhol was a hoarder, and Abraham Lincoln was depressed. It seems that Frank Lloyd Wright had narcissistic personality disorder and Howard Hughes obsessive compulsive disorder, Andy Warhol was a hoarder, and Abraham Lincoln was depressed. It seems that Frank Lloyd Wright had narcissistic personality disorder and Howard Hughes obsessive compulsive disorder, Andy Warhol was a hoarder, and Abraham Lincoln was depressed. It seems that Frank Lloyd Wright had narcissistic personality disorder and Howard Hughes obsessive compulsive disorder, Andy Warhol was a hoarder, and Abraham Lincoln was depressed. It seems that Frank Lloyd Wright had narcissistic personality disorder and Howard Hughes obsessive compulsive disorder, Andy Warhol was a hoarder, and Abraham Lincoln was depressed. It seems that...
stay within the socially defined topic.

Mark Runco, editor of the Creativity Research Journal, uses a test for creativity in which you get points if you believe in ESP. The key is that “you are embracing socially unacceptable ideas,” explains Selcuk Acar, a professor at the International Center for Studies in Creativity in Buffalo, New York.

“Everybody has creative potential, but we censor ourselves and seek social approval.”

A second dimension of schizotypy is disorganized thinking. A third is violent or reckless behavior or violent thoughts. The fourth is social withdrawal, combined with lack of pleasure. Poets and visual artists score high on unusual experiences and violent or reckless behavior and thinking—two aspects of nonconformity—but not on the other two, which are more characteristic of the clinical population.

Creativity may be the upside of schizophrenia genes. Some research even finds that people with schizotypy attract more sexual partners. That’s hard to understand unless it is a marker for creativity—clearly more useful for survival than schizophrenia, a debilitating illness that drastically cuts your chances of raising children. The mystery is why it has persisted over centuries, but bad genes may survive when linked to adaptive traits.

Depression Calling
The survival of depression is another puzzle, since it makes people slow to a crawl and even become a suicide risk. Its link to creativity emerges most clearly with one group—creative writers. Among all the arts, creative writing also stands out as more associated with mental illness. In the Swedish research, book authors, unlike the overall group of creatives, were more likely to suffer from depression as well as schizophrenia, bipolar disorder, anxiety and substance abuse. They were also more likely to die by suicide—perhaps haunted by the deaths of Virginia Woolf, Ernest Hemingway, Sylvia Plath and many others. It’s possible “that people gravitate to writing because they’re in a depression—or sometimes doing the work depresses you,” Runco suggests.

John Cheever, the great short-story writer afflicted with depression and alcoholism, was convinced that writing depressed him. “If my child was moody, and liked to write, I would look for an alternative medium for self-expression,” Runco says. “I certainly wouldn’t want to inhibit the creativity.”

It’s All Relative
And your blood relations matter quite a bit. The healthy close relatives of people with bipolar disorder, schizophrenia and anorexia nervosa were somewhat overrepresented in the big Swedish study. Those with an autistic relative were slightly more creative as well. “The likeliest author doubles if you are a relative of someone with bipolar disorder or schizophrenia,” notes coauthor Simon Karyga, a psychiatrist at the Karolinska Institute in Stockholm.

Siblings of people with autism were also overrepresented. But people with depression and their relatives were not. Other research found that among inpatients, gene markers for schizophrenia and bipolar disorder risk were more common in creative occupations.

The evidence surrounding relatives with telltale genes suggests a pool of people suffering mild symptoms that wouldn’t necessarily warrant a full diagnosis. “There is a continuum for every mental illness. You can have a little ADHD, a little depression or a little bipolar,” explains Acar. “You may not need medication [but just] coping strategies”—getting enough sleep, eating a balanced diet, engaging in a few sessions of cognitive behavioral therapy to set your thinking right.

Imagine being “in the zone”—so excited by your project you lose track of time, forget to check your email and texts and miss meals and sleep. You may be astonished by your productivity and inventiveness. You might say you feel “manic” but happily so. But if you were to progress to the mania of bipolar disease, you might become wildly exuberant and speak in a rapid cascade of ideas—and also completely stop sleeping, impulsively overspend and hallucinate or develop delusions.

Where you are on the spectrum matters, and if you are too far along, the disease could well overpower the creative flare.

In the end, most creative achievers are not ill. What they share is motivation. Harvard psychiatrist Albert Rothenberg spent 25 years interviewing living artists and scientists, tracking their progress on various projects. He concluded that “only one characteristic is absolutely present in all creative people. They want specifically to create and be creative, [which requires] direct, intense, and intentional effort.”

Our writers are likelier than others to have the blues.

LUDWIG VAN BEETHOVEN

People With ADHD Can Think Outside The Box

Those with ADHD can have trouble completing tasks, but a new study from the University of Michigan shows they are often aided by a notably creative approach to work. According to psychologist Holly White, who led the study, the tendency of individuals with ADHD to resist conformity and ignore routine instructions and information may be a boon in fields that value “divergent thinking” —generating solutions from a single idea or piece of information—may have helped them ace White’s study, where ADHD students and controls were asked to come up with an alien fruit that might grow on another planet. The non-ADHD students came up with fruits that resembled those on Earth, but conceptions from the ADHD group were truly unique. In this task and others, the ADHD students were consistently able to veer from examples provided and come up with something truly new.

DIVERGENT THINKING
White, whose study appeared in the journal Creative Behavior in 2018, said that individuals with ADHD may be more flexible in tasks that require creating something new and less likely to rely on prior knowledge. “As a result, the creative products of individuals with ADHD may be more innovative, relative to creations of non-ADHD peers,” she said.

“This has implications for creative design and problem solving in the real world, when the goal is to create or invent something new without being overly constrained by old models or ways of doing things,” she noted.

DESPITE THE HURDLES
It’s important to remember that ADHD is also a deficit. In a 2016 meta-analysis of 89 studies drawing upon data for more than 35,000 people, researchers found that ADHD, anxiety and depression were linked to lower scores on creativity tests. But some intellectually gifted children with ADHD seemed to turn the difference it to their advantage. Teaching children with ADHD strategies for balancing original and appropriate ideas is essential, the authors wrote.