

of religious superstition and knight chivalry was being replaced with the new scientific one. The conflict of these two worlds shows throughout the engraving. The doubts sown by the new scientific age on old established mystical and religious notions created enormous internal conflict for many, a conflict resulting for deep thinkers such as Durer that would lead to a profound melencholia or what would today be termed as “major depression”.

For the majority in the early Sixteenth century, including Durer himself, ideas on melencholia remained firmly medieval and symbols of these can be seen throughout the woodcut. Physiological theories on human disease were based on ideas originating from antiquity of the four principle, “humours” of the body, blood, phlegm, yellow bile and black bile. It was believed that the four acted in fine balance and that an excess of any one in relation to the others would lead to disease, either physical or mental. An excess of blood, or “sanguis” would lead to a “sanguine” disposition, outgoing, confident but also fiery and unpredictable. An excess of “phlegm” would lead to a “phlegmatic” disposition, calm and unemotional. An excess of yellow bile would lead to a “choleric” disposition, a leader with energy and passion and ambition. On the other hand choleric could be mean-spirited, suspicious, and angry. An excess of black bile, needless to say would lead to a disposition of “melencholia”, or depression, but melancholics could also be great thinkers and perfectionists, often brilliant. Durer certainly saw himself as a “melancholic”. The pictorial motif of the “head in the hands”, seen with Durer’s angel, was a symbol for the melancholic.

Further medieval symbolism is seen in the mystical powers that were associated with numerology, and in particular the number four. This number was thought to represent a profound underlying link to nature and the universe, hence for example the 4 seasons, the 4 ages of man, the 4 elements (earth, fire, water and air) and of course the 4 humours of human physiology. The importance of the number four is demonstrated in the 4 sided number panel just above the angel. It demonstrates many supposed magical mysteries associated with the number four. Every vertical and every horizontal as well as every diagonal add up to the same number, 34, but Durer has also hidden personal messages of melancholy within it. The reverse of 34, is 43, the age Durer was when he constructed the number square. The 5 in the second row is upside down. It is thought to represent the fifth month of May. The month in which his mother died that same year. The significance of the upside down 5 in the language of medieval symbolism can be related to other well known upside down symbols such as a torch that pointed downwards or a “tree of life” depicted with its roots pointing upwards. These inverted symbols all indicated death. Durer even manages to date this sad event and his work to the year 1514, depicted in the middle of the bottom row. Historians are uncertain as to how the death of his mother, who lived with him, affected him, however there is no dispute that he was in a childless and unhappy marriage. It seems Durer was undergoing what would today be termed as a “mid-life crisis”.

As symbols are seen of a rapidly fading bygone medieval age in Melencholia, so too are seen symbols of the new dawning age of science. Some art authorities see the young sketching child to the left of the angel as representing the naïve, uneducated, medieval, artist striving for artistic perfection. The mature adult angel also strives for perfection and knowledge, but with the benefit of modern science and instruments to

achieve this as seen by the precision mathematical compass in her hand. The angel is surrounded by other symbols of the new science. Durer was born in Nuremberg, which could not compete with Venice or Florence in the realm of the visual arts, however his home town was famed for the production of exquisite precision instruments, it was the European centre for the newly emerging technologies of the scientific age. Nuremberg had only just recently produced two ground breaking instruments in the form of the first globe of the world and the first time piece with a spring loaded mechanism. Measurement was an essential element of the new sciences, and this is symbolised by the compass, hour glass and the scales above the right wing of the angel. Yet despite all the modern advances of science the angel is still melancholic. There is the anxiety of the new, old cherished beliefs such as the magic of numbers are being increasingly challenged by the new precision technologies that measure both time and space. The entire known world has been depicted in the form of the globe and time itself can now be precisely determined. Major changes can bring anxiety, even depression. Happiness has not resulted for the angel despite the advances in the sciences. With the loss of old notions and ideals, to what would people now turn for their values in life? The new sciences have destroyed cherished beliefs and sowed new doubts, all this for many, such as Durer, in the early Sixteenth century would lead to a profound melencholia.

Durer today would have been diagnosed as having depression during the year of his famous work, Melencholia. He had many of the classical risk factors for this condition, he was over the age of 40 years, had suffered personal loss, the breakdown of his marriage and he lived in a society where the very foundations of the old ideas on human existence and purpose were being challenged on all fronts. The work remains relevant to us even now in the 21st century. Increasingly we are being challenged in what H.G Well's described as our "infinite complacency" over our supposed "empire over matter". We now know that one day the world will end by the natural processes of our Sun, yet this end may come very much sooner than this by our own hand, due to our inability to live in harmony with our life giving environment, a wholly unimagined concept in Durer's day. As Durer lived thorough a time of profound change in thinking about humanity's place in the universe, so too do we live through a newer age of even less certainty about the long term viability of the human place in the universe. This seems a cause for melancholic reflection, just as Durer's angel depicts, yet perhaps there is some flicker of hope. The melancholic, though prone to thoughtful reflection, was also capable of brilliant innovation, a product of the scientific age. It is this aspect of the melancholic disposition which holds out some hope that the new sciences introduced in Durer's day will yet provide a shining light, a rainbow after the storm, a "light at the end of the tunnel". Perhaps that is what Durer himself hoped for when we look at the top left hand corner of his masterpiece, "Melencholia".

MAJOR DEPRESSION

Criteria for Major Depressive Episode¹

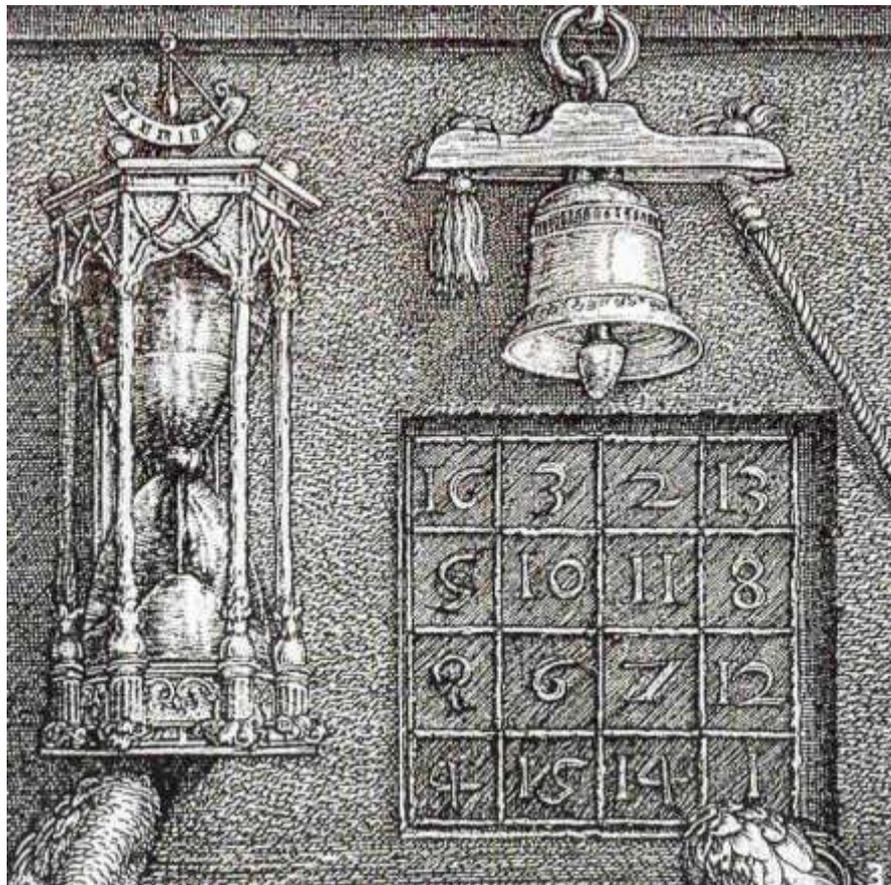
- A. Five (or more) of the following symptoms have been present during the same 2-week period and represent a change from previous functioning: at least one of the symptoms is either (1) depressed mood or (2) loss of interest or pleasure.

Note: Do not include symptoms that are clearly due to a general medical condition, or mood-incongruent delusions or hallucinations.

1. Depressed mood most of the day, nearly every day, as indicated by either subjective report (eg. appears tearful). **Note:** In children and adolescents, can be irritable mood.
 2. Markedly diminished interest or pleasure in all, or almost all, activities most of the day, nearly every day (as indicated by either subjective account or observation made by others).
 3. Significant weight loss when not dieting or weight gain (eg. a change of more than 5% of body weight in a month), or decrease or increase in appetite nearly every day. **Note:** In children, consider failure to make expected weight gains.
 4. Insomnia or hypersomnia nearly every day.
 5. Psychomotor agitation or retardation nearly every day (observable by others, not merely subjective feelings of restlessness or being slowed down).
 6. Fatigue or loss of energy nearly every day.
 7. Feelings of worthlessness or excessive or inappropriate guilt (which may be delusional) nearly every day (not merely self-reproach or guilt about being sick).
 8. Diminished ability to think or concentrate, or indecisiveness, nearly every day (either by subjective account or as observed by others).
 9. Recurrent thoughts of death (not just fear of dying), recurrent suicidal ideation without a specific plan, or a suicide attempt or a specific plan for committing suicide.
- B. The symptoms do not meet criteria for a Mixed Episode (see P. 335 DSM IV).
- C. The symptoms cause clinically significant distress or impairment in social, occupational, or other important areas of functioning.

- D. The symptoms are not due to the direct physiological effects of a substance (eg. a drug of abuse, a medication) or a general medical condition (eg. hypothyroidism).
- E. The symptoms are not better accounted for by Bereavement, i.e after the loss of a loved one, the symptoms persist for a longer than 2 months or are characterised by marked function impairment, morbid preoccupation with worthlessness, suicidal ideation, psychotic symptoms, or psychomotor retardation.

If major depression is suspected, then refer to CATT.



Detail "Melancholia", 1514

References:

1. DSMIV
2. Quoted in: Behavioural Disorders in 4th Ed. Emergency Medicine Tintinalli

Dr J. Hayes
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