

Summer A 2014
WGS 348-Y + Y1
Online BCE/WGS course

Mental Illness, Gender, and Psychiatry Course Syllabus

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Virtual office hours: any time on email and on the phone by appointment.

Course Description

The understanding of "mental illness" has undergone dramatic changes in the last two centuries, and these changes have accelerated at the end of the 20th century. What counts as mental illness? How do we approach it? How do we "treat" it? In this class we will discuss various constructions of mental illness as well as laws, policies, and cultural attitudes that purport to address it and "help" those who suffer from it. We will take in consideration the genderization of mental illness and the pathologization of "devious" sexualities and bodies. We will utilize academic studies as well as first-person narratives and online testimonies, the last of which have proliferated immensely in the last decade. This class will deal with very sensitive material so I expect from the participants seriousness, attentiveness, and respect.

Welcome and Brief Introduction to the Class

Welcome everyone to our class! I hope taking this class will be a rewarding experience for all of you.

The media bombard us daily with talk about mental illness. Mental illness comes up whenever serious episodes of violence occur (typically mass shootings); it comes up in relation to deployed soldiers and especially returning veterans; it comes up in advertisements, in schools, in magazines, in movies and TV shows, in news specials, and of course at the doctor's office. In this class we are going to try to unpack the concept of mental illness. Is every disturbance of mood or thought a mental illness, or does this designation apply only to the serious ones, like schizophrenia and bipolar disorder? Why is mental illness called "illness?" Is it an illness just like cancer, hepatitis, or carpal tunnel syndrome? Or is it more, as many people claim, something like diabetes, a lifetime condition that must be controlled with regular medication? For all these conditions we know what part of the body is ill. But what part of the body is ill when people

become “mentally ill?” Some say the brain, but is this the case also when, say, we experience intense sorrow that won't go away? Great anxiety that lasts for months? Phobias? Does the brain get “ill” every time we experience something that makes us feel greatly unhappy, distressed, or different?

These are some of the questions we are going to try to answer in the course of the semester.

I hope you will find the readings and other texts as stimulating and fascinating as I do. I hope we'll learn a lot from each other.

I wish you all a great semester!

Learning Objectives

- Maybe the most important objective for this course is that we all question what we already know about mental illness (yes, I mean myself too). There is a lot of common knowledge about mental illness that is simply erroneous and unsupported by research. At the same time *there's a lot of lived experience on the part of people who suffer from mental distress that rarely gets listened to*. So the first objective, maybe the most important, for this course is that we open ourselves up to the texts and to each other, and question all we believe we already know about mental illness.

- Another objective is learning a bit about various ways in which people address mental distress. We are generally exposed to one model (the medical model), but there are others, and it's important that we know that they exist and that they work.

- We will read material in which mental pain and its expressions (in psychiatric parlance, "symptoms") are presented not as "illness" but as a natural response to awful life situations. An objective of this course is that we view those who suffer from mental pain as people who are responding to traumatic life events and not as people who need to be marginalized, controlled, coerced, or looked at with wariness and distrust.

- I would like everyone to take away from this course a sense that people in psychic distress can be healed only by the community, and that *the only healing stance is one that is grounded in respect, compassion, listening, and true understanding*.

Required Books

Ellen Forney, *Marbles: Mania, Depression, Michelangelo, and Me: A Graphic Memoir*. Gotham, 2012

Judith Herman, *Trauma and Recovery: The Aftermath of Violence -- from Domestic Abuse to Political Terror*. Basic Books, 1992

Gail Hornstein, *Agnes' Jacket: A Psychologist's Search for the Meaning of Madness*. Rodale, 2009

Class Requirements

For this class you will read the assigned books (though sometimes you will be asked to read only sections of them) and other material that is posted in the course modules and on the course site on Blackboard. Your work consists of:

- a) reading carefully and possibly ahead of the deadline, so that you can properly reflect on the material;
- b) posting journal entries for every reading on our dedicated class blog (instructions on how to access the blog are given on the course website);
- c) working on and submitting one final project of the approximate length of 2,500 words or 10 double-spaced pages.

Here are brief explanations of these requirements:

Journals: Post four thoughtful journal entries of one paragraph every week. The journal entries must be on the books assigned for the course (please ignore instructions to the contrary in the modules). I will consider as **not done** journal entries that are sloppy, show that you haven't given the texts enough thought, or give me the impression that you have not read or viewed the material. I will tally the journal entries at the end of the week. **You cannot back-post. If you want to post about previous material, post in the current week.** The journals count at 70% of the final grade.

Projects: You will have to do one project for this class. This project will count for 30% of the final grade. You will post your project in your own personal blog. You will choose the topic for your project and we will discuss it. When I'm satisfied that your project is going to work I will approve it.

Grade Breakdown: The journals alone count as 70% of the final grade. The project counts as 30% of the final grade.

Facebook Group: If enough of you have a Facebook account we can create a private Facebook group in which we can all post material (news items, pictures, etc.) we come across that related to the class. This will allow us all to share material we would otherwise not be able to show to each other.

Things you need to know before you begin this class

- Plagiarism means using other people's work or your own previous work without quoting it and attributing it. In other words, if you use other people's work or your own previous work, you have to put it in quotation marks and state in parentheses your source. If you

plagiarize you will get an automatic F. If you are not sure whether you are plagiarizing or not, contact me. There is no excuse for plagiarizing.

- I am aware that it is very easy for you to get your work done by other people. I consider this a class-failing offense and I'll submit you randomly to tests meant to ascertain that you are writing your own work. I will take protestations as prima facie evidence of guilt.
- You can contact me at any time on email or on the phone. "I didn't know [how to do] x" is never an excuse in this class because you could have asked me.
- We may touch upon topics that you find disturbing and triggering. If this is the case, stop reading immediately and contact me.
- This is a Women and Gender studies class and it is, consequently, a safe zone for women, gay and lesbian people, bisexual people, and transgender people. If you cannot be respectful of people's race, gender, religion and sexual orientation you will be reprimanded. After two reprimands you will be asked to withdraw from the class.
- In this class we may and probably will be talking about sensitive issues. You will be utterly respectful in the face of whatever people choose to disclose and will never belittle or ridicule or otherwise disrespect what they say. If you don't like what they say you may respectfully engage them but will never make them feel wrong. Failure to abide by this commitment will result in a reprimand and, upon a second reprimand, the request that you withdraw from the class.
- PLEASE SEND ME AN EMAIL STATING: "I understand the class's requirements and I agree to them," signed with your name. YOU CAN'T ATTEND THE CLASS IF YOU DON'T SEND ME THIS EMAIL.