

< Of Clinical Interest To All >



Recently, Dr. Gail Saltz, author and noted speaker, was interviewed on "Science Friday" on NPR radio. We thought you might take interest in the interview and Dr. Saltz's book. **We invited our NJAMFT President-Elect, Joel Levine MSW, to listen in to the interview and introduce it for us. Thank you, Joel and, at the bottom of this article, you can listen to the interview for yourself by clicking on the link.**

"The Power of Different" by Gail Saltz, M.D. is a book about understanding differences in brain chemistry and connecting the biology of the brain with an individuals' behaviors, thoughts and feelings that go awry. Dr Saltz conducted over fifty interviews with experts in the field of psychiatry, education, and high achieving individuals, all of whom have either studied or struggled with brain difference.

When studying the brain, it is helpful to think about how the brain functions normally before we identify an abnormality. The brain controls virtually everything we experience including movement, how we interpret our environment, how we control our emotions and the regulation of our bodily functions. It makes up two percent of our body weight but it consumes twenty percent of the oxygen we breathe and twenty percent of the energy we take in (NIH).

Dr. Saltz describes how labels of mental illness are not only prevalent, but overlapping. We foolishly believe that people can be categorized into one set of diagnostic criteria. Nevertheless, mental disorders are not that simple. There is a continuum of behavior that is influenced by stressors that shape us over time. Genetic, environmental and social factors are inextricably tied to determine whether someone shows symptoms of mental illness.

Scientists do not currently have a complete understanding of what causes mental illness. To better understand mental illness, you need to understand the structural and organizational complexity of the brain alongside the effects that mental illness has on thoughts, feelings and behaviors.

An example Dr. Saltz gives is showing the devastating impact of categorization as it precludes any identification of strength. Currently, under the new edition of the Diagnostic Statistical Manual (DSM V), a diagnosis of Asperger's is located under the Autism spectrum. Shame and stigma surround these diagnoses and results not only in judgement but in a sense of failure and loss of normalcy. These labels of mental illness often result in deficits in the way individuals see themselves as well as how they interact relationally. It is imperative we understand how brain differences and the symptoms associated with them are much broader than the categories we define them as. Dr. Saltz points out how the "narrow labels that we try to apply can be simplistic at best and erroneous at worst". (Saltz)

I was impressed by the many stories of individuals who later in life are thankful for the diagnosis they were given as without them, they would never had excelled to the degree they had. An interesting statistic Dr Saltz points out to us is the ten-year-old research study of Nancy Andreasen, a neuroscientist and neuropsychiatrist at the University of Iowa. In this research study, thirty writers at the University of Iowa Writer's workshop were contrasted with a control group of thirty individuals of similar age and IQ who worked in fields that are not overly creative. This study concluded that 80 percent of the writers reported some incidence of mental illness compared to 30 percent of the control group. This further underscores the need to highlight the link between brain difference and genius where things that cause our lives to be difficult often come with unique skills and aptitudes.

To listen to the NPR interview in it's entirety (17 minutes),
click <https://www.sciencefriday.com/segments/tapping-into-the-creativity-of-brain-difference/>