

XXXX XXXX AND XXXX XXXX
AP Psychology/Period 2
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I. Abstract

The onset of Van Gogh's depression began in early childhood. His disorder stemmed from his parents' neglect and isolation at boarding school. Even at an early age he turned to art as a way to express himself and cope with feeling of worthlessness. However, he did not feel that his art was adequate and continued to fall deeper into the depression. He became involved with several women, all ending in turmoil, and revealing that he was not able to create effective emotional attachments. This lack of romance and social life led him to become isolated and eventually cut off his ear when he learned that the woman he had been in love with did not reciprocate his feelings. After this we analyzed that he would benefit from free association and talk therapy. Unfortunately, our diagnosis and recommendation came too late to make any significant progress and he later committed suicide.

II. Case History

1. Background Information

Upon speaking to him on his first visit, Vincent Van Gogh (age 33) described having a childhood filled with feelings of abandonment after being sent to Zevenbergen Boarding School. He reported that his childhood was "austere, cold, and sterile". Feelings of despair and neglect arose due to the fact that he was separated from his parents at a young age. It is clear that Van Gogh interpreted his enrollment in boarding school as a way for his parents to avoid caring for him. However, his Mother encouraged using drawing and other forms of art as a coping mechanism for his despaired feelings.

Shortly after returning home from Zevenbergen, he began attending Tilburg middle school in 1866. It was at Tilburg that he began to show more interest in art and received some instruction regarding his beginning work. Even at an early age, Van Gogh's work was expressive, but did not match the intensity of his later works. He claimed that intensity emerged from later hardships. Despite the fact that his earlier pieces were generally less expressive in terms of communicating his emotions, he indicates his general unhappiness inhibited his ability to become fully immersed in his lessons.

Following his graduation from Tilburg, Van Gogh entered a period of his life in which he speaks fondly of. He describes this period as lucrative, due to his personal and financial success. Unfortunately, van Gogh became infatuated with a woman who did not reciprocate his feelings. It is clear, when analyzing his account of her rejection, he began to grow more increasingly more isolated, which opened a door to later psychological issues. Following these events, he was terminated from his internship causing this period of happiness to come to an end.

In addition, he became fervently religious and turned away from his art for a stretch of time. With this, he made an attempt to enter the field of theology. However, he reluctantly explains that he faced many failures during this process. Not only did he fail to pass the necessary entry exams, but he also failed a course he took at a Protestant missionary school. It is likely that these failures contributed to his lack of self-worth ongoing feeling of helplessness.

In 1880, Van Gogh returned to art as a means to express his perception of the individuals and environments around him. He became a student of Mauve, who he grew to deeply respect. Their connection was broken when Mauve discovered that Van Gogh had an arrangement with an alcoholic prostitute and her daughter. Pressures from his father led him to abandon the woman and her daughter, leaving them in a state of poverty, causing the mother to return to prostitution.

Therefore, another person he admired and longed to gain respect from had severed ties and exited his life. We conclude that these events have led him to be in the depression he is currently experiencing.

2. Presenting the Issue

Depression is often characterized by a lack of interest in activities that the subject had previously engaged and found pleasure in. In Van Gogh's case, he turned away from his art for several years and turned to religion. This is significant because art had been a coping mechanism since childhood. After deciding that religion was not the answer he became involved with a prostitute. That choice led his mentor to sever ties and he fell further into depression. That decline pushed him to reserve himself from society, but led him to become more involved with his art.

Van Gogh frequently engaged in threatening behaviors, both towards himself and others. For example, he often was accusatory of others and was verbally abusive. He engaged in many quarrels that seemed to have no purpose. Additionally, he was physically violent, and there are records of him threatening acquaintances with knives. It should be noted, however, that he never acted on these threats. Despite being able to show restraint towards others, he was often willing to harm himself. For example, after experiencing a series of delusions, Van Gogh cut off the lobe of his ear. This demonstrates that he, along with many others diagnosed with depression, lack a sense of self-worth, as he is willing to bring harm to himself. It was also revealed that he sent the mutilated part of his ear to the prostitute he formerly had relations with. This action reveals that Van Gogh may blame the prostitute for him abandoning her and does not take responsibility for his numerous failed relationships.

Another major sign of depression is suicidal thoughts and actions. Unfortunately, during sessions, Van Gogh relayed that he experienced both. As mentioned previously, Van Gogh engaged in actions of self-harm. For example, after receiving the news that the woman he loved was not interested, he cut off his own ear and nearly bled-out. However, this prolonged feelings of helplessness produced thoughts of suicide and death. Eventually, Van Gogh checked himself into a mental hospital, where this condition became exacerbated. It has regrettably been reported that, during his hospitalization he engaged in many suicidal attempts, and shot himself shortly after being released.

In terms of the duration of his condition, Van Gogh's account of his life indicates that his depression has prevailed since childhood. Most likely emerging while attending boarding school, he has reported that he has felt both useless and unwanted since early childhood. While it is not clear exactly when other symptoms emerged, sessions allow us to infer that he has certainly been living with depression for several years, and possibly most of his life.

3. Diagnosis

From studying Van Gogh, and his behavior, it is suggested that he suffers from Major Depressive Disorder. In order to be diagnosed with this disorder, he must display at least five of the following symptoms for two or more weeks. According to the DSM-V, symptoms of Major Depressive Disorder include: (1) depressed mood most of the day, nearly every day, (2) markedly diminished interest or pleasure in all, or almost all, activities most of the day, nearly every day, (3) significant weight loss when not dieting or weight gain, or decrease or increase in appetite nearly every day, (4) a slowing down of thought and a reduction of physical movement (observable by others, not merely subjective feelings of restlessness or being slowed down), (5) fatigue or loss of energy nearly every day, (6) feelings of worthlessness or excessive or

inappropriate guilt nearly every day, (7) diminished ability to think or concentrate, or indecisiveness, nearly every day, and (8) recurrent thoughts of death, recurrent suicidal ideation without a specific plan, or a suicide attempt or a specific plan for committing suicide.

Van Gogh displays five symptoms of Major Depressive Disorder. These symptoms include, (1) depressed mood most of the day, nearly every day, (2) markedly diminished interest or pleasure in all, or almost all, activities most of the day, nearly every day, (4) a slowing down of thought and a reduction of physical movement that observable by others, and is not merely subjective feelings of restlessness or being slowed down (this is referring to his self inflicted isolation and avoiding the public), (6) feelings of worthlessness or excessive or inappropriate guilt nearly every day, and (8) recurrent thoughts of death, recurrent suicidal ideation without a specific plan, or a suicide attempt or a specific plan for committing suicide.

While Major Depressive Disorder was present throughout much of his life, characteristics that imply he suffered from additional mental disorders appeared just a few years prior to his death. For example, after returning to art, he alternated between periods of insanity and intense creativity. These periods of creativity could be compared to manic episodes experienced by those with bipolar disorder. It is also said that he experienced delusions, which is another symptom of bipolar disorder. Once again, this did not become prevalent until much later in Van Gogh's life. As a result of the late, and uncertain, onset of bipolar disorder, this report will continue to focus on Major Depressive Disorder as that became a major part of his life at a young age.

III. Intervention

1. Psychoanalytic Approach

While attempting to aid Van Gogh in his depression, we found that free association, which allows him to freely express his thoughts, has been beneficial. In utilizing this

technique, he revealed the meaning behind some of his work, which was created through periods of stress and feelings of helplessness. Additionally, this allowed him to reflect on his relationship with his parents and how that affected his feeling of self-worth. The information he revealed helps explain why he had unstable relationships later on in life. Through dream analysis, we uncovered some of the meanings behind symbols within his artwork. For example, following the “heart wrenching” news that the woman he became infatuated did not reciprocate his feelings, he had several romantic fantasies about her. The subjects of these dreams were revealed in a self-portrait that depicted Van Gogh following his choice to cut off his ear. This self-portrait unveiled the lengths he would go to for her, and so a part of him could always be with her. We also found transference analysis to be helpful in explaining the relationships he had as an adult. The detached relationship he had with his parents was carried over into adulthood because he was unable to form deep, emotional attachments with others. The romantic relationships he did form lacked substance as he couldn’t reciprocate emotional attachment. However, the emotional attachments he did establish, they were central and he never openly expressed these feelings.

2. Cognitive-Behavioral Approach

Talk therapy, the primary treatment method of the cognitive-behavioral approach, also proved to be effective for Van Gogh. In the early stages of these one-on-one sessions, Van Gogh was relatively closed off, and revealed very little personal information. However, as these sessions progressed, he began to open up and reveal more about his life and feelings on past experiences. We found that the strained relationships he experienced at a young age caused him to have emotional attachment issues, including trust and abandonment issues. These challenges persisted throughout his adult life and impacted those around him. We were also able to identify past experiences that could be the source of feelings of helplessness and inferiority. Talk therapy

is designed to reveal one's obsessions and what they view as personal flaws. For example, Van Gogh was never satisfied with his work, and firmly believed that his art could be improved. Additionally, his obsessions with multiple women show that he was incapable of forming emotional attachments with others, and instead became possessive and detached, both emotionally and physically. He viewed himself as being unworthy of affection due his prominent feelings of self-doubt and hate. He idolized the individuals he admired, which often ruined these relationships. After Van Gogh revealed such information, we were able to formulate a plan that includes, the already mentioned, talk therapy in order to reverse his pattern of negative thinking. In doing this, we showed Van Gogh a series of positive reviews of his artwork. This was done in with the intention of making Van Gogh view his artwork as worthy of praise. We also discussed why he was constantly unsatisfied with his artwork, and if his opinions on his work is due to the fact that it is attached to his name. Through conversation, it was revealed that if another artist had created his work, he may view it as beautiful. As a result of this realization, we found that his self-defeating tendencies produced the idea that he was untalented. Furthermore, we deeply analyzed his past relationships, both romantic and platonic, to identify the reasons for their failure. We were hoping that by singling out these issues, Van Gogh would actualize his actions, and work on himself emotionally. Unfortunately, this encouragement was not enough, and he committed suicide by shooting himself in the stomach.

IV. References

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