

# THE SURPRISING BENEFITS OF BEING (SLIGHTLY) CRAZY

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Despite being the greatest and most influential mind in human history, Isaac Newton, by all accounts, was a bit of a headcase,<sup>1</sup> as well as a total dick. Newton was famously petty and vindictive. He would go through manic episodes where he would work furiously for days at a time without eating or sleeping. Afterward, he would fall into deep depressions, refuse to see or speak to anyone, and often contemplated suicide. During these darkest episodes, Newton would often have hallucinations and speak to imaginary people. Kind of like a four year old.

Newton wasn't the only troubled scientific genius, of course. Nikola Tesla churned out over 200 inventions in his lifetime, including the first prototype of an electric motor, the first remote control, and helped to invent X-ray photography. He invented a more efficient form of electricity than Edison, which prompted Edison to go full-asshole and attempt to destroy Tesla's career.

What's lesser known is that Tesla had an intense phobia of dirt and germs and a curious obsession with doing everything in multiples of three. He would compulsively calculate everything in his immediate environment, like how many cubic centimeters of food he was about to eat or how many meters he was going to walk to the toilet. He spent years living in hotels without ever paying his bills. He, like Newton, also reported blinding visions and hallucinations in some of his most intense creative periods.

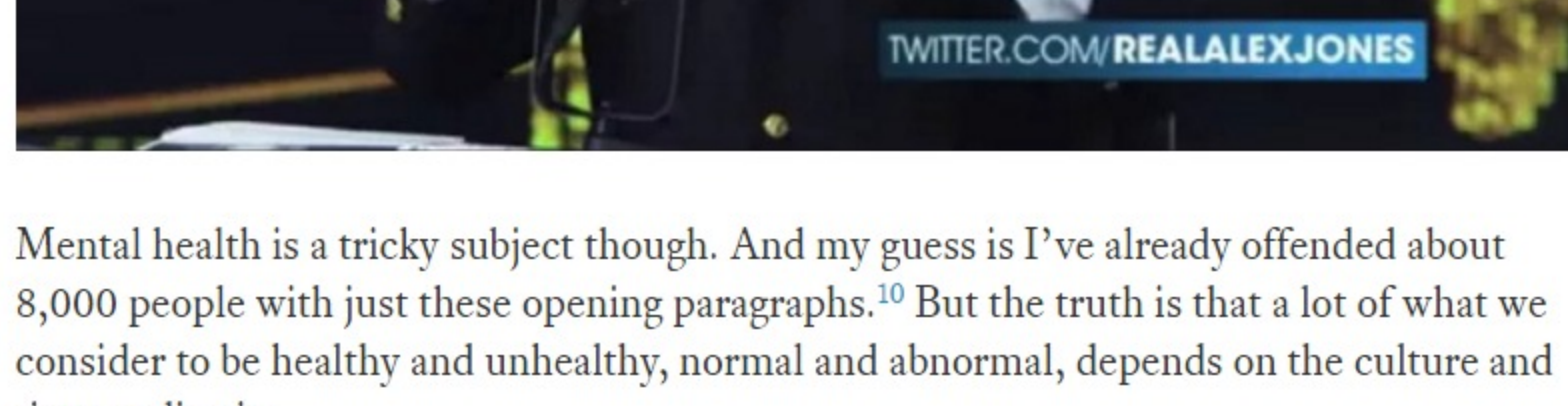
Why does it seem that a disproportionate amount of the artistic and scientific geniuses in the world are a bit loony tunes? Many of the greatest literary figures of the past 300 years either drank themselves to death or put a bullet in their mouth.<sup>2</sup> The heroin-overdosed musician is almost a cliché at this point, it's so common. Hell, you're almost not even considered a real rock star unless you OD'd at some point.

The Roman philosopher Seneca once said, "There is no great genius without a tincture of madness."<sup>3</sup> We've all intuitively understood that people who are geniuses are often a little bit crazy. We accept it, even if we don't know exactly why it's so.

Yes, authors are actually more likely to be depressed than the general population. Similarly, scientists are more likely to be schizophrenic and visual artists are more likely to be bipolar.<sup>4</sup>

But while mental illness may push some people to the extremes of creativity or discovery, for the majority of people, it sucks. Compared to "normal" people (as if "normal" even exists), people with mental illnesses have more chronic physical health problems,<sup>5</sup> have difficulty forming and maintaining relationships,<sup>6</sup> earn less money,<sup>7</sup> and live shorter lives.<sup>8</sup>

And for every quirky genius like Newton, who, in between re-inventing mathematics and formulating the fundamental laws of physics, probably had varied and interesting conversations with his mother's sofa, you get people with mental health issues that do extraordinarily awful things as well — think The Unabomber, or crazed cult leaders, or school shooters, or even worse, a guy like Alex Jones:<sup>9</sup>



Mental health is a tricky subject though. And my guess is I've already offended about 8,000 people with just these opening paragraphs.<sup>10</sup> But the truth is that a lot of what we consider to be healthy and unhealthy, normal and abnormal, depends on the culture and time we live in.

In fact, among psychiatrists, notions of health and disease change from generation to generation. They argue all the time over the definitions of diseases like ADHD, schizophrenia, and bipolar disorder. Centuries ago, when depression was known as "melancholia," it was believed to be caused by an imbalance of bodily fluids called "humors." Homosexuality was once considered a formal mental disorder all the way up until 1986.<sup>11</sup>

Even in the Seneca quote I mentioned above, the Latin word for "madness" was used very differently from what it has been translated to today. For ancient Romans, it meant something more like inspiration or illumination, and so it was something to aspire to.

One of the reasons mental disorders are often difficult to define is that many of their characteristics are, in one sense, extreme versions of "normal" traits seen in all of us.

For instance, we can all be a little obsessive from time to time and do stupid stuff we wouldn't normally do. Maybe your kitchen utensils have to be arranged just so or else you start freaking out thinking the whole house is about to explode. You don't have OCD, as many people joke, but you do have a particular fixation on some things being "in order" so that you feel comfortable and secure. I think most people have something like that in their lives, it's just a question of to what degree.<sup>12</sup>

Being anxious can be a good thing. It means we should probably pay attention to whatever it is we're anxious about and take some sort of action. But most of us have areas of our lives where we ruminate and worry too much. I had a friend in college who used to vomit before every class presentation she had to give. For years, I struggled with a crippling social anxiety in particular social settings. These things are surprisingly normal.

Or have you ever sworn that someone said your name, only to look up and no one else is even in the same room? Or you thought you saw something move out of the corner of your eye, but then you turn to look and nothing is there? Yeah, we all have. Humans have an incredible ability to imagine things that aren't real. It's such a staple of the human brain that sometimes we do it without realizing we're doing it.

But for the vast majority of us, it's easy to figure out when our minds went on their own little picnic and we can quickly rejoin reality. People with certain types of schizophrenia, on the other hand, have trouble distinguishing the "real world" from their imagination.<sup>13</sup> People with general anxiety disorders are so overcome by their anxiety that they cannot lead a functional life. People with extreme OCD similarly live in a constant state of not feeling in control of their own minds or actions.

So the point is, we're all a *little bit* crazy, in our own ways. There's just a *spectrum* of human behavior, and those with "mental illness" (quotes intended, because this shit is all subjective and is always changing) often lie on the extremes of certain human behaviors.

Our psychological faculties are like athletic ability or height. Most of us cluster around a stable average height, but there are people at the extremes—some are dwarfs and some are giants. And just as the dwarfs and the giants experience the world much differently than the majority in the middle, the people at the extremes who see the world differently from the majority in the middle also have a very different experience.

And those extremes, while usually negative, are the same extremes that result in bursts of creativity and genius. And it's not a question of getting rid of them, but rather how we manage them.



Image by Alex Plesovskich.

Kurt Cobain was often described by close friends and family as a person who was absolutely terrified of being humiliated. He may have conveyed this apathetic rockstar personality, keeping up appearances that *he didn't give a fuck*, but actually, he gave a huge fuck about what everyone thought to the point of having severe anxiety and depressive episodes.<sup>14</sup>

But these same people will tell you that he was a machine during rehearsals and in the studio. Cobain was obsessed with honing his craft as an artist. Nirvana had rehearsal sessions that lasted upwards of 15 hours before recording *Nevermind*. This led him to become rock's biggest pioneer since The Beatles. It also eventually led him to eat the end of a shotgun barrel.

Temple Grandin revolutionized the cattle industry in North America and is credited today with providing one of the greatest leaps forward in the humane yet practical treatment of livestock. If you eat meat, there's probably a good chance that Temple Grandin had something to do with how that meat arrived on your plate at some point.

She also happens to be autistic. Her autism makes her "think in pictures," and ultimately, that's her gift—or at least that's what everyone thinks is her gift.

People assume that even though she was disabled, she overcame her disability and turned it into some great advantage. They believed Grandin's gift was to disregard other people's objections when they got in the way of her principles. But—and this is important—it wasn't that she didn't care about what other people thought, it's that she *didn't know how to care about what other people thought*. Her handicap was also her greatest asset.

Grandin didn't overcome her disability, she drags it with her, like a mule pulling a plow through a field, each lumbering step tearing up what's behind her in order to build what only she can see in front of her. And she has no choice but to do it this way.

If we consider that the nature of being extreme translates into both big risks and big rewards, then perhaps "mental illness" is one of nature's ways of making a risky bet and hoping it will pay off.

It's like Mother Nature waltzes into the casino every now and then and bellies up to the roulette table to lay all of her money down on double-zero. If she hits it, the payout is big (with someone like an Isaac Newton, who ironically, never married or had kids, but increased the reproductive fitness of humanity for centuries after he lived). But if she comes up with nothing, then she ends up broke and looking to sneak into the all-you-can-eat buffet without being noticed.

But there's another evolutionary angle to this: and that is that some tendencies of mental illness, in certain situations, may have been beneficial in the roving tribes of our ancestors.

A psychopath obviously poses a big risk, particularly to those who get close to him, but his psychopathic qualities might make him a shrewd leader, even if he's a ruthless one. If it just so happens that a tribe needs a shrewd, ruthless leader to guide them through an unpredictable and unstable environment, the psychopath might be their best option.<sup>15</sup>

A schizotypal member of the tribe might have been delusional, but he could also be a source of a few hair-brained ideas that ended up paying off in a big way for everyone. Maybe he hallucinates a burning bush telling him to round people up and mass-migrate them to more fertile land. Maybe he hallucinates 10 commandments and carries them in stone and declares him and his friends God's chosen people. Maybe this ends up being the beginning of all Abrahamic religions and most of Western civilization.

Paradoxically, the same things that should cause these disorders to fall out of the gene pool are the ones that keep them in it. Their biggest handicap is also their biggest advantage. And the same extremes that hinder individuals could be what provides the "tincture of madness" for their genius and creativity. And, in many ways, we all benefit from it.<sup>16</sup>

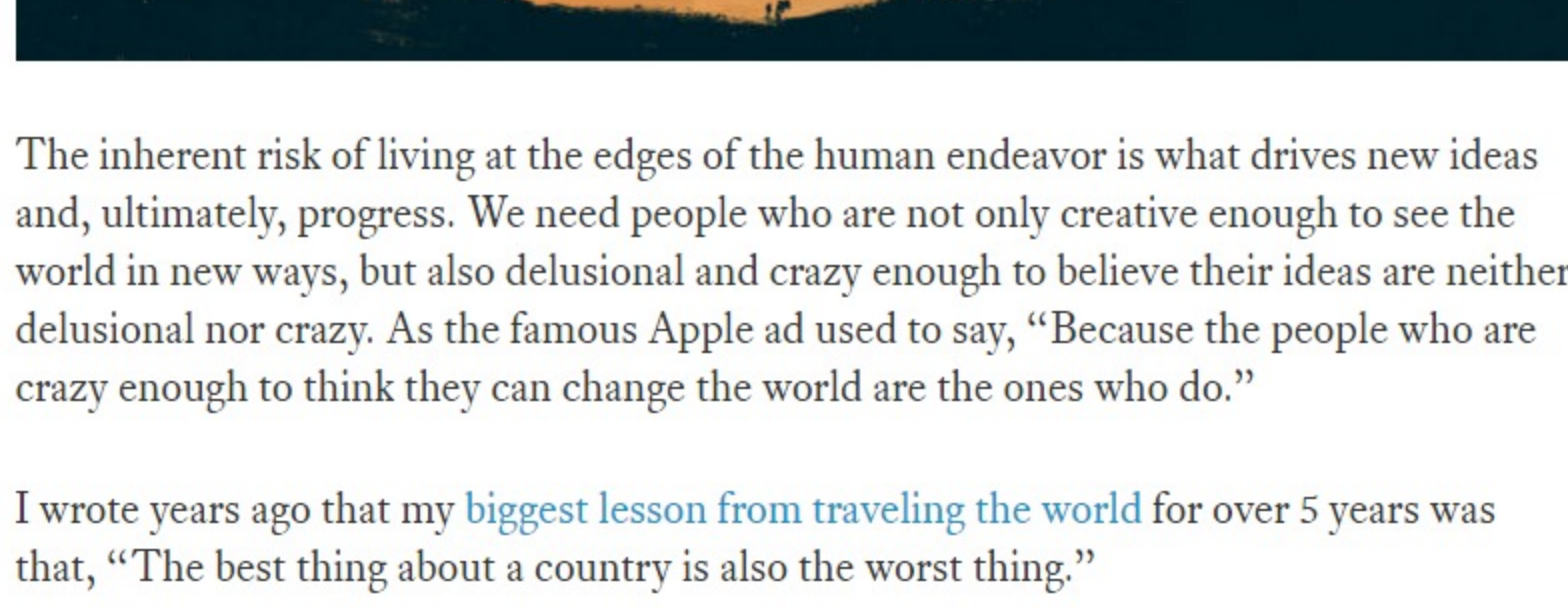
Modern society is no different. We need stable, "boring" people to create the stable and boring industries we depend on every day, like the water and electric companies and the grocery store. And we need a lot of these people. They create the backbone of civilization.

But like our tribal ancestors, modern society needs wildcards and weirdos too. Humanity needs some sort of innovation in order to take a gamble just as much as we need the stability that runs our everyday lives.

Maybe the hypersensitive anxiety that gives panic attacks to the girl at your office is the same hypersensitive anxiety that will inspire her to write a brilliant novel or poem.

Maybe the psychopathic asshole CEO of your company is good at making business decisions precisely because he's a psychopathic asshole. He only sees the numbers, not people. And strangely, you all benefit financially from his lack of empathy.

Maybe that autistic kid in your calc class will go on to produce major advances in quantum physics and win a Nobel prize one day. So stop stealing his lunch money, asshole.



The inherent risk of living at the edges of the human endeavor is what drives new ideas and, ultimately, progress. We need people who are not only brave enough to see the world in new ways, but also delusional and crazy enough to believe their ideas are neither delusional nor crazy. As the famous Apple ad used to say, "Because the people who are crazy enough to think they can change the world are the ones who do."

I wrote years ago that my [biggest lesson from traveling the world](#) for over 5 years was that, "The best thing about a country is also the worst thing."

Well, I think that's probably true with people too. I've learned over the years that my brain's tendency towards quick boredom and constant need for novel stimulation is likely what drives my creativity as a writer.<sup>17</sup> My wife's obsessiveness about detail (and her scary degree of cleanliness) is also the thing that makes her such a talented designer and artist. She sees the tiny errata that make all the difference. My friend's almost psychopathic willingness to question everything people do and believe is what makes him such a good psychologist. Another friend's quirkiness and social awkwardness is what makes him willing to take on huge entrepreneurial risks that have sometimes paid off big.

The examples could go on forever. But the point here is that a certain degree of insanity seems to be beneficial sometimes. It's just a matter of directing that insanity in the right direction.

And since we're all a *little bit* insane, then our awareness of our own eccentricities and tendencies has very real consequences for our own lives. Learn your brain. Learn its quirks. How is it different than others'? How is it the same?

Mental health, in the vast majority of cases, is therefore not a question of "curing" or "fixing" people, but recognizing where the strengths of an extreme brain may lie, while simultaneously learning to cope with its weaknesses.

Many people have some degree of shame around the way their brain works. They're too sensitive, they're told. Or they're too brooding and introspective. Or they spend way too much time screwing around with fantasy novels and drawing pictures. Or they're too fastidious and obsessive about their appearance, or too hyper and manic, or whatever.

My response is this: Own it. Like any other part of your body, your mind comes pre-packaged with its own advantages and disadvantages. Learn them and use them well. And the way to do that is not through blind conformity or through hiding your idiosyncrasies. It's through accepting them and then expressing them.