
The History of the Treatment of Mental Illness in the Middle Ages

Treatment of Mental Illness During the Middle Ages

The first mental hospital was established in Baghdad in A.D 792, later more hospitals came about in Damascus and Aleppo. In these hospitals (or asylums rather) people with mental disturbances were isolated from general population and treated. In that time period many of the people classified as being mentally unwell suffered from hysteria, epilepsy, manic reactions and melancholia. During the Middle Ages in Europe, scientific inquiry into abnormal behavior was limited, and the treatment of individuals who were disturbed was based more on ritual and superstition instead of actual understanding about the individuals condition.

During the last half of the Middle ages in Europe, a trend emerged in efforts to understand abnormal behavior involving a behavior called mass madness. Mass madness was a widespread occurrence of group behavior thought to be caused by hysteria. Groups of people were effected by dancing manias. Rural areas were afflicted with outbreaks of lycanthropy which was a condition where people believed they were possessed by wolves and began to imitate their behaviors. Undoubtedly, many of the peculiar cases of mass madness were related to the depression, fear, and wild mysticism engendered by the terrible events of this period. People simply could not believe that frightening catastrophes such as the Black Death could have natural causes and thus could be within their power to control, prevent, or even create.

In the Middle Ages in Europe, management of people who were mentally disturbed was left largely to the clergy. Monasteries served as refuges and places of confinement. During the early medieval period, people with mental disturbances were typically treated with kindness. Priests used, holy water, sanctified ointments, touching of relics, visiting holy places and exorcisms to treat patients. Such treatment could mean engaging in seemingly bizarre ritualistic-type practices. One example was a clergyman making a drink of lupin, bishopswort, henbane, and garlic. He would pound these together, add ale and holy water, then make the suffered to drink it.

Exorcisms is another bizarre example of the typical monastic treatment of the mentally disturbed in the Middle Ages. An exorcism can be defined as the expulsion of demons or other evil spirits reputed to have taken possession of a person, place or object. Some exorcists would attempt to identify the demons by their name and find out how many demons were involved. Exorcists needed to know whether the demon would leave on its own or if it had to be forced to depart

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from the body. Many people believed that performing an exorcism had a beneficial psychosomatic effect but in some cases it was the opposite.

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