

The Hazards of Psychiatric Diagnosis

by **Dr. Peter Breggin**

“I have a biochemical imbalance.”

“My kid is ADD.”

“I’m Bipolar.”

“I suffer from Clinical Depression.”

“I have Panic Disorder.”

Is there anything wrong with diagnosing ourselves or even accepting the mental health diagnoses of psychiatrists, family doctors, psychotherapists and other health professionals?

Psychiatric diagnoses are seductive. They seem to give us important information about ourselves and our emotional ills. They provide a key to what psychiatric drug we may need. It seems rational and scientific. In reality, psychiatric diagnosing is a kind of spiritual profiling that can destroy lives and frequently does.

First, there’s the obvious cookie cutter problem. People can’t be easily fit into the prefabricated labels contained in the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* from whence all official diagnoses emanate. Diagnoses frequently change, often in an effort to justify this or that drug. It’s not realistic, enlightening or empowering to reduce yourself or your child to one of these diagnoses. Psychiatric diagnoses are simplistic.

Consider this: Psychiatric diagnoses are always negative. There are no such diagnoses as “Exceptionally Able to Face Stress” or “Remarkably Resilient” or “Courageously Independent in the Face of Abuse.” That’s how I like to think about the people that I try to help—as heroes or potential heroes in their own life stories. I never want them to sum up, categorize or symbolize their lives in such a demeaning fashion as a psychiatric diagnosis.

But that’s only the beginning of the problem. These diagnoses imply that you or your children have a disease, especially an underlying biochemical imbalance. This can be discouraging and disempowering. Having a psychiatric diagnosis tends to make us feel helpless to transform our lives or the lives of our children for the better. It makes us feel less responsible for our own psychological and spiritual recovery and for that of our young and dependent children.

Medical diagnoses are real. When you learn you have pneumonia, diabetes or even cancer, you quickly discover that there are potential remedies. There are scientific tests and studies to diagnose the disease and to evaluate its treatment. Medical diagnoses don't demean your mind and your soul, they describe your bodily impairments.

Psychiatric diagnoses are not genuinely medical; they are not based on biological defects or disorders. There are no objective tests. They are not about the body; they are about the mind and spirit. The medical aura that surrounds psychiatric diagnoses give them a false validity. Psychiatric diagnoses are not rooted in science but in opinion.

Psychiatric diagnoses take power and authority over your life, and the lives of your children, out of your hands. They place that power and authority in the hands of health professionals. Often it takes but a few minutes in an office to transform you or your child from a complex human being into a product on the psychiatric assembly line—and endless assembly line that can lead to a ruinous lifetime.

Perhaps worst of all, these diagnoses almost inevitably lead to the prescription of psychiatric medication to you or your child. [Psychiatric drugs are toxins to the brain; they work by disabling the brain.](#) None of them cure biochemical imbalances and all of them, every single one of them, cause severe biochemical imbalances in the brain. The adverse effects of these drugs on the brain and mind are stunning. In my recent scientific books and articles, including *Medication Madness*, I have demonstrated they cause [medication spellbinding.](#) Spellbound by psychoactive drugs we cannot adequately judge the impairments they create in our brain and too often we mistakenly feel “improved” when in fact our feelings have been dulled or artificially jacked up, and our judgment about ourselves and our lives have been impaired.

But something more subtle occurs when we accept a psychiatric diagnosis for ourselves or a loved one. We lose empathy for ourselves and our loved one. Instead of learning about and identifying with the sources of our emotional pain and suffering, and our failures in life, we ignore our real lives and explain ourselves away with the diagnosis. To understand ourselves or anyone else, to help ourselves or anyone else, we must care about the details of the life before us.

In trying to understand and to overcome our emotional distress and failures, and to succeed in our lives, we must take the time to look at ourselves in a caring and empathic fashion. We must pay attention to what happened to us as children. We must, with a sympathetic eye, be courageous enough to view the trauma, abuse, or ordinary stresses of growing up that all of us endure while growing up. We must be able to see the wrong lessons we have drawn from our lives so that we can correct them and go on to live more responsible, rational and loving lives.

And if we are going to help others, we must take the same attitude toward them. We must put ourselves in their shoes and dare to feel and to grasp what they have been through—to share as much as possible that experience in a caring and even loving way. This is empathy—to feel, to care, to understand in a responsible, courageous and loving fashion.

The destructiveness of psychiatric diagnoses could fill a book. You and your loved ones, and those you seek to help can never be understood through a psychiatric diagnosis. Psychiatric diagnosis is like looking at the world through wrong end of a spiritual telescope. Instead you have to open your heart and your mind to knowing what you have endured, and the mistakes you have made, and the right choices you have made, and the good things you have done that have led you to this moment in your life. You must be ready to appreciate your life and the life of anyone you seek to help.

Let me leave you with this thought: However dismal and overwhelmed you feel—that's how much potential there is within you for a wonderful life. If you didn't have that spiritual potential, you wouldn't suffer so horribly from its frustration. Without a spiritual fire burning within you, you would feel like you were suffocating. Never ever give up on yourself by reducing yourself to a lifetime psychiatric diagnosis. Think of yourself as a potentially courageous, responsible, rational and loving being struggling to become everything you have ever wanted to become. That's empathy for yourself. And view everyone you wish to help from that same spiritually empowering viewpoint.

Peter R. Breggin, MD is a psychiatrist in private practice in Ithaca, New York, and the best-selling author of many books including [Brain-Disabling Treatments in Psychiatry, Second Edition](#) (2008) and [Medication Madness: The Role of Psychiatric Drugs in Cases of Violence, Suicide and Crime](#) (2008). His website is www.breggin.com. Dr. Breggin and his wife Ginger have formed a [new reform organization](#) that encourages professionals and laypersons to appreciate empathic therapeutic approaches to themselves and to others. The first [Empathic Therapy Conference](#) will be held April 8-10, 2011 in Syracuse, New York.

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