



## The Black Dog: Notes for Student Teachers

The Black Dog is a short drama piece developed and performed by secondary school students from the Hunter School of the Performing Arts. In analysing this play, you may like to refer to the resource *Risk and Resilience: A Teacher's Guide to Mental Health*. Further information is available from a number of sources, listed in the *Mental Health Resource List*.

### Discussion Questions

What mental health issues are raised by the play?

What does the opening scene suggest about society's perceptions of people with a mental illness?

What are the signs and symptoms of clinical depression? Which of these are evident in the play?

What causes depression? Has the play portrayed these causes accurately?

What would you do, if you were this young person's teacher, and you suspected she might be depressed?

This play suggests a link between adolescent depression and youth suicide. Is this accurate: does depression increase the risk of suicide?

A young person who talks about suicide like this - especially a girl - is unlikely to take her own life ... this is just a cry for help or attention. True or False?

## The Black Dog: Notes for Student Teachers

### What mental health issues are raised by the play?

The major themes are depression, suicide and the stigma associated with mental health problems. The play also considers how responding compassionately and appropriately to a troubled young person can reduce their isolation and encourage them to seek help.

### What does the opening scene suggest about society's perceptions of people with a mental illness?

This scene vividly portrays the stigma experienced by those with a mental illness. Sympathy is offered for physical injuries or illness, while the players draw away from the person who is depressed. The stigma of mental illness is complex and is related to other forms of discrimination, in which those who are 'different' are ostracised. A lack of understanding of mental illness is a significant barrier to overcoming these attitudes.

For some people, the stigma they face may sometimes seem worse than the mental illness itself. Stigma is also a very real barrier to obtaining help - many people are reluctant to come forward and ask for support from friends, family or health professionals.

There is a tendency to blame the mentally ill for their disease, implying that the illness indicates a weakness or character flaw. Many people are unaware that mental illness is often associated with an underlying biological or genetic factor - just like diabetes, asthma, or countless other disorders which do not attract the same level of discrimination. As with other disorders, such as heart disease, there is an interaction between these biological factors and a person's lifestyle or environment.

There are a number of negative stereotypes of the mentally ill, arising perhaps from the unusual behaviour of some people when they are unwell, and from horror-movie portrayals of old-fashioned 'asylums', when there was little understanding of mental health problems. Today, with greater knowledge of mental illness, we have a range of treatment and support options. Most people remain at home or have only short hospital stays. While they may need some time off from work or school occasionally, their illness can often be managed, and they can lead fulfilling and productive lives.

People with mental illness may be viewed as unpredictable or dangerous, because their behaviour does not conform to social expectations. Understanding the reasons behind this behaviour may help people to be more tolerant. Some people who are ill may experience mania, in which they appear to be magnanimous, impulsive, larger than life. They sometimes make unwise decisions and may become irritable if challenged by others about their behaviour. Others, such as those with a psychotic illness, may have delusions or hallucinations. For example, they may hear voices, and carry on conversations with people who are not there. Because the voices are frequently persecutory, the mentally ill person may be responding angrily, leading others to fear that they could become violent.

Most people with a mental illness are more likely to harm themselves or be the victims of violence, than to harm others. There is a slightly increased risk of violence only in certain circumstances - for example, when there is an untreated psychotic illness, particularly with substance abuse. The majority of those with a mental illness, however, do not represent a risk to others, even if their behaviour is somewhat unusual or disturbing.

### What are the signs and symptoms of clinical depression? Which of these are evident in the play?

A number of signs and symptoms may occur when someone is depressed, but a number of symptoms of certain severity must be present over time, to warrant a diagnosis of clinical depression. Anyone who suffers a range of these symptoms to a degree which seems to interfere with their daily life and functioning should consider talking with their GP.

- ◆ feeling miserable much of the time, perhaps crying frequently
- ◆ loss of interest or pleasure in usual activities, loss of sexual interest
- ◆ changes in weight or appetite - eg loss of appetite, weight loss or gain
- ◆ loss of energy, slowed activity and speech
- ◆ changes in sleeping habits - eg difficulty sleeping, restless or unsatisfying sleep, early morning wakening, wanting to sleep all the time
- ◆ inability to think clearly - eg slow or inefficient thinking, poor concentration, difficulty in making plans or decisions
- ◆ recurring unpleasant thoughts - eg feeling guilty or unworthy, wanting to die
- ◆ fearfulness - eg being fearful about people or situations, becoming withdrawn
- ◆ persistent worry about unimportant things

The play captures several of these elements in the portrayal of the young person who is depressed. She is clearly miserable, and in some scenes seems on the verge of tears. Her loss of energy and interest in other elements of her life is plain, and her speech and movements are slowed, compared with the other young people around her. She also seems unable to think clearly about her situation, or to develop a plan for seeking help ... leading perhaps to her thoughts about wanting to die.

Not all young people who become depressed will show these signs; in some young people, depression manifests as irritability, aggressive behaviour, risk taking or substance use. Similarly, a young person showing some of the signs suggested above is not necessarily depressed. However, if negative thoughts or feelings seem to be *severe* or *persistent*, a young person may be in need of support and professional advice.

### What causes depression? Has the play portrayed these causes accurately?

No-one knows precisely what causes depression but research suggests an interplay between genetic factors, brain chemistry, personality traits and stressful experiences. One scene in the play highlights the links between biology and life events, using a 'tour' of the brain of the depressed person, looking at both brain structure and the young person's experiences. This is a creative way of portraying the interplay between some of the factors which may contribute to the disorder. The young person also describes how the demands of her life gradually became sources of stress rather than areas of achievement or satisfaction, as her depression progressed.

### What would you do, if you were this young person's teacher, and you suspected she might be depressed?

Use the GRIP framework from *Risk and Resilience: A Teacher's Guide to Mental Health*. **Gather** information about the young person and their situation, looking for any other signs or risk factors which might suggest depression. **Respond** with understanding to the young person, asking if they are okay and giving them an opportunity to talk. Avoid taking on the role of counsellor, just listen to their story. **Involve** others in responding to the young person, if needed, by referring them to the school counsellor, and perhaps liaising with other staff, students, or the person's family. Stay in touch, even if someone else has taken on the main role of helping the person. **Promote** positive mental health in your school, by supporting helpful school policies, maintaining a caring relationship with others in your school community, and adopting a supportive teaching style.

### This play suggests a link between adolescent depression and youth suicide. Is this accurate: does depression increase the risk of suicide?

Yes, mental health problems (particularly depression) are implicated in many cases of suicide or attempted suicide. Not all young people who exhibit suicidal behaviour, however, will have shown clear signs of mental health problems. Any suggestion of suicidal thoughts or behaviour - such as the story told by a friend of the young person in the play - should be taken seriously, whether or not the young person is known to have other problems.

### A young person who talks about suicide like this - especially a girl - is unlikely to take her own life ... this is just a cry for help or attention. True or False?

False. Anything that suggests a risk of suicide should be taken seriously. There is a myth that people who talk about suicide will not attempt it. However, research shows that people who die by suicide often talk about it or have given other signs of their feelings and thoughts. Actual suicide rates are higher in males, but suicide *attempts* are higher in females. This leads some people to think that girls are not serious about their intent to take their own life. However, the difference may be due to the methods preferred by different people - males are attracted to more violent and lethal methods than females, so their attempts are more often fatal. Any suggestion of suicidal thought or behaviour - in a poem, or a song, or something said to a friend - should always be taken seriously.