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psychiatry in history

James Boswell: the Hypochondriak, his melancholy, and Dr Johnson's cognitive-behavioural remedy

Greg Wilkinson

James Boswell, 9th Laird of Auchinleck (1740–1795), advocate, essayist (*The Hypochondriak*), diarist and biographer, is best known for *The Life of Samuel Johnson* (1791), which is considered to be the greatest biography in English. Boswell suffered from recurrent depressions. He had a strict and emotionally deprived childhood. He was unhappy at school and suffered from nightmares and shyness. He was afflicted by a nervous illness in 1752 and was sent to recover at Moffat spa, in Dumfries and Galloway. Midway through his studies at the University of Edinburgh (1753–1758/9), he suffered another such episode and returned to Moffat. At 19 years of age, he studied at the University of Glasgow where, despite a Calvinist and Presbyterian upbringing, he decided to convert to Catholicism and become a monk. His father ordered him home. In 1760 he ran away to London, where he spent 3 months. Pottle said 'His greedy draughts of venal pleasure had brought him that distemper with which Venus, when cross, takes it into her head to plague her votaries (another of his own elegant euphemisms), the distemper had developed into what he calls a nervous fever, and he was ill and abashed'. He was taken back to Scotland by his father. He re-enrolled at the University of Edinburgh and was forced by his father to sign away most of his inheritance in return for an allowance of £100 per year. In 1762, he passed his oral law exam, after which his father raised his allowance to £200 per year and permitted him to return to London. On 16 May 1763, he met Johnson, and they subsequently became friends.

Boswell wrote to his friend Temple:

Again there has been a sad interval in our correspondence. But do not blame me. I have had a pretty severe return this summer of that melancholy or hypochondria, which is inherent in my constitution and from which I have suffered miserably in former years, though since my marriage I have been wonderfully free from it. Your languor and discontent are occasioned by a gentler species of the distemper. You have a slow fever, I a raging one. While gloomy and fretful, and grossly indolent, I was shocked with the recollection of my good spirits, gaiety, and activity, as a man with a headache is shocked by bright sunbeams. – But I need not describe my feelings to you. – The strange thing was that I did not write to you, a few lines, merely as firing guns of distress. Nobody here but my wife and worthy Johnson had the least notion of my being at all uneasy; for I have been remarkably busy this summer. I wrote about threescore law-papers, and got £124 in fees during last sessions two months. The court rose yesterday, and this day the clouds began to recede from my mind; I cannot tell from what cause.

And he tells us in his Journal:

I complained to Mr. Johnson that I was much afflicted with melancholy, which was hereditary in our family. He said that he himself had been greatly distressed with it, and for that reason had been obliged to fly from study and meditation to the dissipating variety of life. He advised me to have constant occupation of mind, to take a great deal of exercise, and to live moderately; especially to shun drinking at night. 'Melancholy people,' said he, 'are apt to fly to intemperance, which gives a momentary relief but sinks the soul much lower in misery.' He observed that labouring men who work much and live sparingly are seldom or never troubled with low spirits. It gave me great relief to talk of my disorder with Mr. Johnson; and when I discovered that he himself was subject to it, I felt a strange satisfaction which human nature feels at the idea of participating distress with others; and the greater person our fellow sufferer is, so much the more good does it do us.