

The City College of New York

Analyzing Major Depressive Disorder Through The Lens of Bojack Horseman

[REDACTED]
Abnormal Personality PSY 34800
Professor Griffin Thayer, MA
[REDACTED]

Introduction

Throughout the last couple decades, there has been a great change in the media's portrayal of mental disorders, where writers and producers are thoughtfully developing characters that accurately display human suffering. Of the films and shows that are part of this authentic movement, is "BoJack Horseman", an animated TV series released in 2014, that beautifully portrays mental illness in a way that does not disembod and stigmatize individuals that experience this. Through Bojack Horseman's lens, this series depicts narratives and themes surrounding various physiological disorders with considerate and introspective writing in comparison to older material in television.

Raphael Bob-Waksberg's "Bojack Horseman" is an animated comedy series about an obsolete sitcom actor Bojack Horseman, who finds himself in a series of adversities in Hollywood, usually due to poor decision making, while simultaneously struggling with a multitude of psychological disorders including childhood trauma, drug and alcohol addiction, narcissism, existentialism, anxiety and major depressive disorder. His character highlights how these disorders can manifest in various ways in an individual's life, making him relatable to his viewers, despite being an anthropomorphic animal.

The various disorders present in the protagonist intersect and equally interfere with his life. The primary focus of this case study is to delve into Bojack Horseman's battle with major depressive disorder. This includes his childhood upbringing which led to him having major depressive disorder as an adult, a disorder that is conveyed and expressed in his unhealthy relationships with women, his substance and alcohol abuse, and his narcissistic and self-sabotaging ways. It will explore his relationship with his family during his childhood, and with his peers in his adult years, and how it has contributed to his diagnosis.

Major Depressive Disorder

The concept of human suffering has been long understood even dating back to the 5th century BCE. During this era, melancholia was recognized by Greek physician Hippocrates who believed that the build-up of black bile was the etiology for this pensive sadness, so much so that it was practiced until the late 17th century. It wasn't until the 19th century when the term depression first appeared, debunking the theory of the 4 humors. The saying, "the common cold of psychiatry" emerged in the 1970s when the etiology of depression began to be heavily researched. Research conducted by the Intercontinental Medical Statistics (IMS) found that in 1975, there were about 18 million diagnoses of depression in the United States (Horwitz A.V., 2010). This is fairly a large number considering the population of America was at 216 million in 1975 (Data Commons, 2020).

In the 1980's the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, also known as the DSM, officially recognized major depressive disorder as a clinical diagnosis in the third edition, DSM-3 (Zimmermann P, Brückl T, Nocon A, et al., 2009). In this edition it states, "Individuals with a major depressive episode may complain of memory impairment, difficulty in thinking and concentrating, and an overall reduction in intellectual abilities. They may also perform poorly on mental-status examination and neuropsychological testing. These features may suggest the possible diagnosis of Dementia, and this phenomenon is sometimes known as "pseudodementia." Depression, however, is primarily a disturbance of mood" (Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (3rd ed.), 1980, p. 124). The criteria for having MDD has mostly remained the same in the newest edition, the DSM-5. It writes, "the presence of at least one major depressive disorder episode in a period lasting at least 2 weeks during which there is either depressed mood or the loss of interest or pleasure in all or nearly all activities for most of

the day nearly every day (criterion A). The individual must also experience at least four additional symptoms during the same 2-week period, drawn from a list that includes changed in appetite or weight, sleep, and psychomotor activity, decreased, energy, feelings of worthlessness or guilt, difficulty thinking, concentrating, or making decisions, or thoughts of death, suicidal ideation, a suicide attempt, or specific plan for suicidal behavior" (Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (5th ed.), 2013, p. 185).

Characterization of Bojack Horseman

Bojack Horseman, like many other characters in the TV series, is an anthropomorphic horse who rose to fame in the 1990's for starring as himself in a famous TV show titled "Horsin' Around". After several seasons, the show was canceled, marking the beginning of Bojack Horseman's descent from fame. After 20 years, he is a forgotten actor who longs for recognition, acceptance and fame, so much so that he works with ghost writer Diane Ngyuen to publish his autobiography in attempts to acquire popularity again. On the surface level, Bojack is self-destructive, difficult, pessimistic, sarcastic, narcissistic, self-absorbed, and charming. However, deep down he is insecure, guilt-ridden, bitter and oftentimes very self aware of his flaws.

Bojack's complex life stems from intergenerational trauma, starting with his grandmother Honey Sugarman who's prolonged grief from losing her son Crackerjack, resulted in her receiving a lobotomy, a decision made by her unempathetic husband Joseph Sugerman. Going from cheerful and free spirited to catatonic, as a result of the lobotomy, made a life long effect on her daughter, a young Beatrice Horseman, who would grow up to be emotionless. In addition to being raised by her misogynistic father Joseph, Beatrice inherited some of her father's toxicity, making her abusive, neglectful, critical and bitter. As a young adult, Beatrice gets pregnant by

Butterscotch Horseman and ends up marrying and moving to California with him. The birth of Bojack marked the beginning of years of family dysfunction and abuse that Bojack endured throughout his childhood including neglect, verbal abuse and lack of love.

The effects of Bojack's childhood trauma and neglect from his parents is manifested in his deep desire for stardom and public acceptance. This is depicted in numerous scenes throughout the series where he expects people, celebrity or not, to recognize him in passing despite the context of their interaction. It is also seen in season 2 where he desperately, but successfully lands a lead in the movie "Secretariat" in which he eventually becomes Oscar nominated. There are other numerous instances in which we see Bojack longing for acceptance. This is clearly rooted in Bojack's abandonment issues as a result of his absent father and his cold mother who never expressed an ounce of love for him. His desire for landing large roles also stems from never feeling like he was good enough due to his mother's overly critical commentaries since childhood. Despite Bojack acquiring success and popularity from obtaining the lead role and eventually getting nominated for an oscar, he still struggles with the same insecurities he experiences as a child including feeling worthless and lonely. As much as he tries to feel meaningfulness, he seems to find himself still feeling empty.

We also see Bojack fail to create healthy relationships over and over throughout the series. Since Bojack was raised by two parents who were emotionally and sometimes physically absent, he did not have good role models for creating sustainable relationships. This is best shown in his relationship with his ex-ghostwriter/friend Diane Nguyen and his ex-girlfriend/agent Princess Carolyn. Bojack has had professional, platonic and romantic relationships with these two women, and in all forms, has had a toxic relationship with them due to his self-sabotage ways.

Bojack's unaddressed childhood trauma led to years of drug and alcohol abuse as a coping mechanism. Because of intergenerational trauma, Bojack was not raised by caretakers that were emotionally available and therefore were not open about their feelings and troubles. Because of this, he did not grow up with the tools for coping with emotional turmoil, resulting in substance abuse, a common outlet for individuals in Bojack's predicament. His substance use is a means of escapism to avoid feeling instability. In his search of belonging, to dysfunctional relationships and substance abuse, Bojack Horseman is self-aware of his life's troubles and that is illustrated numerous times throughout the series where he is self-reflective. He understands that he has multiple problems however can't seem to free himself from his suffering.

Bojack Horseman and His Struggle With Major Depressive Disorder

Although it is clear that Bojack grapples with a multitude of psychological disorders, his storyline encapsulates Major Depressive Disorder the best. This disorder, according to the DSM-5 is characterized by the following symptoms: “ Criteria A1: depressed mood most of the day, nearly everyday by either subjective report (e.g feels sad, empty, hopelessness) or observation made by others [for at least 2-weeks]” (Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (5th ed.), 2013, p. 183). Criteria A1 is one of 5 symptoms that Bojack possesses which is seen throughout the entire series. He is in a constant state of hopelessness, emptiness and melancholy, emotions that he is aware of and is observable by other characters.

Criteria A2 is described as “markedly diminished interest or pleasure in all, or almost all activities most of the day, nearly every day (as indicated by subjective account or observation)”. Whether it was attempting to write an autobiography or starring in the lead of a film, Bojack always seems to have low energy and low efforts.

Criteria A7 states “feeling of worthlessness or excessive inappropriate guilt (which may be delusional) nearly every day”. This is followed by Criteria A8 which writes “diminished ability to think or concentrate, or indecisiveness nearly every day (either by subjective account or as observed by others). Bojack again fits both of these criteria as reflected in his struggle to make commitments to projects and relationships, which is both recognized himself and by others. Throughout his self-reflections we also see his low self-esteem and feeling of inadequacy. Lastly Bojack fits Criteria A9 which is “recurrent thoughts of death, recurrent suicidal ideation without a specific plan, or a suicide attempt or a specific plan for committing suicide”. All throughout the show there are a series subtle clues that suggests the possibility of Bojack committing suicide. It isn’t until season 6 when he finally does so.

Diagnostic criteria B states that “the symptoms cause significantly distress or impairment in social, occupational or other impairments of functioning”. It is made very clear that Bojack’s intense low feeling of self-worth eventually affects his social relationships and work-life. Lastly, criteria C states that “the [depressive] episode is not attributable to the physiological effects of a substance or another medical condition”. This applies to Bojack because he was already experiencing symptoms of MDD even prior to engaging in substances.

Treating Major Depressive Disorder

It is possible for individuals like in the case of Bojack Horseman, to live a healthy lifestyle. The gold standard of treatment of major depressive disorder involves biological and psychosocial treatment including medication and psychotherapy respectively, both of which is possible by working with a psychologist or a psychiatrist. Cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT) is a type of psychotherapy where therapists help their patients identify certain thought patterns and create a plan to unlearn/change these thoughts. Cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT) is one of the

most evidence-based psychological interventions for the treatment of depression (Gautam, M., Tripathi, A., Deshmukh, D., & Gaur, M., 2020). Alternatively, there is psychodynamic therapy (PDT), also known as “talk therapy” where the therapist explores the connection between a patient's past experiences – often from childhood – and their current mindset (Nina Chamlou, 2023). There is interpersonal psychotherapy (IPT), a time-limited form of psychotherapy that addresses current problems and relationships rather than childhood or developmental issues ([CAMH, 2024](#)).

The main biological treatment of major depressive disorder involves the use of antidepressants. The most commonly prescribed class of antidepressants are selective serotonin reuptake inhibitors (SSRIs), which work by increasing the levels of serotonin in the brain by inhibiting the brain's neurons from reabsorbing the neurotransmitter. These include drugs like citalopram, escitalopram, fluoxetine, paroxetine, sertraline, and vilazodone (Depression (Major Depressive Disorder) - Mayo Clinic, n.d.). A benefit of these drugs is that it can also treat anxiety disorder, which is comorbid with major depressive disorder. Other classes of drugs include serotonin-norepinephrine reuptake inhibitors (SNRIs), atypical antidepressants, tricyclic antidepressants, and monoamine oxidase inhibitors (MAOIs).

Conclusion

There is an oversaturation of storylines involving mental health disorders in television and yet there is an underrepresentation of characters that authentically display these disorders. In a way, Bojack's character is refreshing, despite all the suffering he endures, because he captures major depressive disorder so much so that his life can be relatable to viewers, despite being half human, half horse. Major depressive disorder (MDD) is a disease that is characterized by depressed mood, diminished interests, impaired cognitive function and vegetative symptoms,

such as disturbed sleep or appetite (Otte, C., et. al, 2016), all of which Bojack Horseman exhibits as a result of intergenerational trauma, and neglect from his parents. It is evident that he has major depressive disorder primarily because of his toxic relationship with his friends, lovers, and family. His disinterest in acting despite landing break-out roles also fits the criteria for MDD. Horseman is also very self-aware of his mental suffering and understands the impact of his upbringing and how it had led him to mental suffering throughout his adult life. Lastly, his suicide attempt in season 6 is clear evidence in support of his diagnosis. The National Comorbidity Survey in the United States found that the risk of SA [suicide attempts] in MDD was five-fold higher than in the general population (Cai, H., et. al, 2021).

Major depressive disorder is a debilitating disease that can be managed and treated. Therapy, whether it is cognitive behavioral, or psychodynamic, has been proven to be effective, especially when combined with antidepressants such as SSRs. In season 5, Bojack briefly befriended therapist Dr. Indira to trauma dump, however never ended up becoming an actual client/patient. If he would have been serious about considering talking to a therapist in a traditional way and was consistent with it, it would have been very much possible for him to manage his depressive symptoms.

Sources

Telles-Correia, D., & Marques, J. G. (2015). Melancholia before the twentieth century: fear and sorrow or partial insanity?. *Frontiers in psychology*, 6, 81.

<https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2015.00081>

Paykel E. S. (2008). Basic concepts of depression. *Dialogues in clinical neuroscience*, 10(3), 279–289. <https://doi.org/10.31887/DCNS.2008.10.3/espaykel>

Horwitz A. V. (2010). How an age of anxiety became an age of depression. *The Milbank quarterly*, 88(1), 112–138. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-0009.2010.00591.x>

CDC. (n.d). *Population in the United States of America*. Timelines Explorer - data commons.
https://datacommons.org/tools/timeline#&place=country/USA&statsVar=Count_Person

Zimmermann P, Brückl T, Nocon A, et al. Heterogeneity of DSM-IV Major Depressive Disorder as a Consequence of Subthreshold Bipolarity. *Arch Gen Psychiatry*. 2009;66(12):1341–1352. doi:10.1001/archgenpsychiatry.2009.158

Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-III). (1980). American Psychiatric Association.

Gautam, M., Tripathi, A., Deshmukh, D., & Gaur, M. (2020). Cognitive Behavioral Therapy for Depression. *Indian journal of psychiatry*, 62(Suppl 2), S223–S229.

https://doi.org/10.4103/psychiatry.IndianJPsychiatry_772_19

Chamlou, N. (2023, March 22). What Is Psychodynamic Therapy? | Psychology.org. Psychology.org | Psychology's Comprehensive Online Resource.
<https://www.psychology.org/resources/what-is-psychodynamic-therapy/>

CAMH. (2023). Interpersonal Psychotherapy IPT. CAMH.
<https://www.camh.ca/en/health-info/mental-illness-and-addiction-index/interpersonal-psychotherapy>

Depression (major depressive disorder) - Diagnosis and treatment - Mayo Clinic. (n.d.).
Www.mayoclinic.org.
[https://www.mayoclinic.org/diseases-conditions/depression/diagnosis-treatment/drc-20356013#:~:text=SSRIs%20include%20citalopram%20\(Celexa\)%2C](https://www.mayoclinic.org/diseases-conditions/depression/diagnosis-treatment/drc-20356013#:~:text=SSRIs%20include%20citalopram%20(Celexa)%2C)

Otte, C., Gold, S. M., Penninx, B. W., Pariante, C. M., Etkin, A., Fava, M., Mohr, D. C., & Schatzberg, A. F. (2016). Major depressive disorder. *Nature reviews. Disease primers*, 2, 16065.
<https://doi.org/10.1038/nrdp.2016.65>

Cai, H., Xie, X. M., Zhang, Q., Cui, X., Lin, J. X., Sim, K., Ungvari, G. S., Zhang, L., & Xiang, Y. T. (2021). Prevalence of Suicidality in Major Depressive Disorder: A Systematic Review and Meta-Analysis of Comparative Studies. *Frontiers in psychiatry*, 12, 690130.
<https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2021.690130>