

Mental Illness in the Time of OASIS

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Ernest Cline, in his novel *Ready Player One*, depicts a future world that is deteriorating rapidly. War, poverty, and overpopulation are only just a few of the problems this society is facing. In a setting such as this, a rise in mental illness would be expected. Societal stressors, as well as other factors like genetic predisposition, aid in the development of a variety of mental illnesses. There is an escape from the deterioration and stress, which comes in the form of a video game called OASIS. However, what once was a game became a way of life for the characters. The refuge of OASIS may only be adding to the increase in mental illness. Cline's future world, during this time of OASIS, is faced with the challenge of the increasing prevalence of mental illness. *Ready Player One* shows how a world in chaos correlates to a rise in mental disorders, which is made evident by the characters in the novel, specifically Wade and James Halliday.

The world in 2044, as depicted in Cline's novel, is in a period of decline and recession, which inversely relates to a rise in mental illness. History has shown time after time that certain world events correlate with an increased prevalence of mental illness. War, poverty, and unemployment give rise to suicides, depression, and

drug abuse. These events cause feelings of fear, worthlessness, and hopelessness that may be at the heart of diseases like depression and addiction (Kleinman and Patal 609). Another factor that plays a role in increased rate of mental illness is that with lack of economic stability there are fewer available resources to treat mental diseases. Without these resources the plague of these diseases continues to spread and torment individuals. “The direct and indirect costs of mental ill-health worsen the economic condition, setting up a vicious cycle of poverty and mental disorder” (Kleinman and Patel 609).

Another aspect to consider is the influence OASIS will have on diseases like attention deficit disorder, or ADD. OASIS is a video game providing a virtual reality with constant stimulation and action. No definitive link has yet to be made of video games causing ADD, but it has been shown to make the symptoms of ADD worse. “Viewing television and playing video games each are associated with increased subsequent attention problems in childhood, adolescence, and early adulthood” (Anderson et al. 214).

The character Wade is part of a generation that knows no way of life without OASIS, and like most of that generation Wade is at risk for suffering from mental illness. School, work, and play are taking place in a virtual reality for these individuals. It has come to the point that a person needs to use OASIS to be successful. Better schools, better jobs, and social gatherings are

taking place in this alternative life. Wade describes this by saying, “It had been an integral part of our lives for as far back as we could remember. We’d been born into an ugly world, and the OASIS was our happy refuge” (34). Having a happy refuge during a time of chaos may seem beneficial to having mental stability, however, the use of this refuge has gone to the extreme. Like most things, OASIS can be good if used in moderation.

In reality Wade is an orphaned, socially isolated, and anxious teenage boy. This young man is dealing with poverty, mal-nutrition, lack of physical activity, neglect, and violence, which are all enormous stressors on a person's mind. He uses OASIS to mask these stressors. His avatar, Parzival, doesn't have to deal with these stressors or even acknowledge they exist. Unfortunately, Wade cannot be Parzival forever. Once he takes off his visor and gloves he is back to his sad reality, which he is ill prepared for. Without skills and support, Wade will crash eventually. This is evident by looking at his anxiety levels throughout the novel. As Parzival, he never seems to be struck with the physical and mental symptoms associated with anxiety that he faces as Wade. The moments in the book where Wade is not inside the OASIS there is the theme of him being anxious and depressed. At one point when Wade is outside of the OASIS it is described, “I suddenly felt ill, and I was also having a difficult time breathing. I realized I must be having some sort of panic attack” (Cline 237). Wade's generation is ill prepared to handle

life stressor, which unfortunately is high in their world. OASIS is being used as an unsustainable coping mechanism. Like coke for an addict, alcohol for an alcoholic, or even purging for a bulimic these coping mechanisms will ultimately cause harm.

Poverty and world suffering are not the only factors to play into the rise of mental illness during the time of OASIS, as made evident by the character, James Halliday. Halliday is perhaps the wealthiest character in Cline's book, but throughout the novel there are details that have readers questioning his mental stability. There is no doubt that Halliday is an incredibly intelligent man; however, intelligence and genius do not reflex an individual's mental health. Throughout history there are example of great minds suffering from suspected mental illnesses, including Abraham Lincoln, Charles Dickens, Sir Isaac Newton, and Vincent van Gogh (McGrath 1). When referencing Halliday at one point it is said, "he'd gone completely insane" (Cline 2). Insanity and mental illness are often confused. Insanity implies a break with reality or psychosis, which is only one aspect of a certain few mental diseases (Howes 3). There is no significant evidence to support that Halliday was suffering from insanity, however there is evidence that he was suffering from mental illness. When Halliday is first introduced it is learned that he is the creator of OASIS, extremely wealthy, and he died after fifteen years in self-imposed isolation. Social isolation, although not diagnosis criteria by itself for any one specific mental illness, is a

significant part of diseases including depression, anxiety disorders, bipolar disorder, eating disorders, and schizophrenia.

Other clues later on in the novel help support a more definitive diagnosis for Halliday's mental illness. The creation of his Easter egg hunt took a great deal of time, thought, and energy, as well as a preoccupation with his death. The whole game is an effort to establish an heir to his fortune and a life legacy, both aspects dependent upon his death. It is normal for individuals to write wills, but it takes an intense preoccupation with one's death to create such an intricate contest. Preoccupation with death is often seen in depression. Halliday also had a genetic predisposition to mental illness. Both of his parents suffered from diseases of the mind. Describing a picture of Halliday's family it is said, "the stoic man in the brown leisure suit was an abusive alcoholic, that the smiling woman in the floral pantsuit was bipolar," (103). Alcoholism and bipolar are both diseases that tend to run in families, and Halliday had a mother and father with these diseases. Although, there is no evidence that Halliday had problems with alcohol, there is evidence that he had manic behaviors. He is said to have periods where he was "hyperkinetic," "speaking so rapidly that his words were often unintelligible," and "often going without food, sleep, or human contact for days or even weeks." (Cline 55). With these manic episodes and suspected depression it appears James Halliday was suffering from bipolar disorder.

Mental illness is a trend throughout Ernest Cline's novel *Ready Player One*. Cline creates a future riddled with war, poverty, unemployment, and overpopulation, which is a breeding ground for mental illness. Even the main characters like Halliday and Wade are shown to have possible mental illnesses. OASIS was created to be the perfect escape from the real world, but there is no escaping one's mind whether it be healthy or diseased.

Works Cited

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