

# Dynamic psychiatry and the psychodynamic formulation

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**Abstract:** This article aims to describe the difference between descriptive and dynamic psychiatry. As part of the latter every psychiatrist should be able to construct a psychodynamic formulation. A psychodynamic formulation, an indication of psychological mindedness, helps the psychiatrist to recognize the unique, personal aspects of the illness and the life of the patient. The formulation furthermore helps with the initial orientation towards the patient: it anticipates and predicts how the patient might interact with the psychiatrist and how defenses and underlying conflicts will manifest themselves in treatment. The formulation can therefore be very useful in the treatment of any patient, since it can help to understand and manage the patient's attitude towards being prescribed medication, as well as compliance and prognosis and serve as an initial guide in the psychotherapy. The psychodynamic formulation is unfortunately seldom incorporated in the psychiatric presentation of patients; guidelines are therefore given to especially help psychiatric trainees with the construction of such a formulation.

**Keywords:** Dynamic psychiatry; Psychodynamic formulation; Psychiatric training

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## Introduction

In her book 'An Unquiet Mind' the psychologist Kay Jamison gives a moving account of her suffering from a bipolar mood disorder.<sup>1</sup> About her treatment she writes: "At this point in my existence, I cannot imagine leading a normal life without both taking lithium and having had the benefits of psychotherapy. Lithium prevents my seductive but disastrous highs, diminishes my depressions, clears out the wool and webbing from my disordered thinking, slows me down, gentles me out, keeps me from ruining my career and relationships, keeps me out of a hospital, alive, and makes psychotherapy possible. But, ineffably, psychotherapy heals. It makes some sense of the confusion, reins in the terrifying thoughts and feelings, returns some control and hope and possibility of learning from it all."

For Jamison it is not to be questioned that medication and psychotherapy go hand in hand: mind and brain cannot be separated. In her regular, at least once a week sessions with her psychiatrist, the despair that at times threatened to overwhelm her was contained. Her psychiatrist, in his integrative approach of prescribing medication and providing psychotherapy, helped her to live a productive and meaningful life.

Cartesian dualism has been very influential and potentially pernicious in the field of psychiatry.<sup>2</sup> Kendler states that we need to reject the belief that mind and brain reflect two fundamentally different entities. Although both mental processes and psychiatric disorders are biological, the range of causal processes that are operative in psychiatric illness cannot be explained by biological reductionism, which could be seen as a logical consequence of this line of thinking.<sup>3</sup> Life events, cultural processes and other factors influence and modify gene expression, brain anatomy and functioning.<sup>4,5</sup> Changes in the brain affect the mind, but what happens in the mind also affects the brain. Pharmacotherapy and psychotherapy may both lead to changes in the brain.<sup>6</sup>

Kandel, the eminent psychiatrist and recipient of the Nobel Prize in 2000 for his neuro-scientific research, writes that psychoanalysis has revolutionized our understanding of mental life. It has provided remarkable insights about the functioning of the psyche and "still represents the most coherent and intellectually satisfying view of the mind".<sup>7,8</sup> He also writes that psychoanalysis has unfortunately not evolved scientifically and has not integrated and incorporated into its view of the mind "the rich harvest of knowledge about the biology of the brain and its control over behavior that has emerged in the last 50 years".<sup>9</sup> Kandel pleads, following Freud, for a psychiatry in which biology is integrated with the rich insights that have come from psychoanalysis, in which mind and brain are each given their appropriate place. Psychoanalytic psychiatry, because of "the deep concern of psychoanalysis for the

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# Dynamic Psychiatry

**G. Johnson**



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