

Special print from: Peter Lehmann (Ed.), "[Coming off psychiatric drugs: Successful withdrawal from neuroleptics, antidepressants, lithium, carbamazepine and tranquilizers](#)", Berlin / Eugene / Shrewsbury: Peter Lehmann Publishing 2004, pp. 290-297

Erwin Redig

A Mental Struggle

How I Stopped the Use of Psychiatric Drugs

Neuroleptics

When I was in the psychiatric hospital, there was an old man who was always drawing birds with colored pencils. He did this on his own, in a corner at a table, after the hours of therapy. I believe that the therapists did not even notice this little expression of his creativity. One day I went to the man and asked him if I could buy one of his drawings. These were not perfect, but to me they were of great value. He was rather amazed, but consented and I gave him 300 BF (*about 6 US-Dollar*) for it. What I in fact did was say to this man: what you do is good, I like it, there is vital creativity in you that can develop. This little act, unnoticed by the crew of psychiatrists and their servants, gave the man a great kick of self-esteem. Now, eight years later, his drawing is still on my wall in my apartment. I did not buy it out of hypocrisy; I bought it as a sign of living hope, human creativity and a silent struggle against the suffocation of psychiatry.

How to get rid of neuroleptics might be a technical problem, with withdrawal-effects and post-neuroleptic syndromes, it is also a mental problem. I have been treated with neuroleptics against my will. These drugs left me in a condition with temporary paralysis, which was explained by the doctor to my family as a catatonia as consequence of feelings of guilt. Until now I have not been able to sue this doctor for bringing me to this dangerous condition.

I have understood that neuroleptics do not heal, only subdue the individual, his creativity and life force. It may well be that they make symptoms disappear. I believe they make mental growth impossible and the cause of suffering remains. This is my opinion and I can accept other opinions as long as they are not based on the desire to make money or ignorance. Psychiatrists now claim that it would be unethical to refuse these drugs to for instance so-called schizophrenic patients. But what about exposing people to risks such as tardive dyskinesia and malignant neuroleptic syndrome, even without warning them? This seems more unethical to me. The practice of treating people against their will with dangerous drugs that can cause death and always have a series of very unpleasant side-effects must be looked upon in a number of cases as a form of torture. This is well known by people who suffered this treatment. Officially, it is medical treatment. Because the concept of mental sanity can be used as a means to oppress people it makes me think about the heretics of the middle ages. The church formulated truth then, and whoever opposed the church were liars and a danger to society. We now learn in our schools that the persecution of people with other views on religion, the torture and death sentences were a mistake. We do not learn that the concept of mental sanity can become a kind of religion with its own inquisition.

If someone with free will accepts the propositions of his doctor about his mental state and the advice to take neuroleptics, we should respect this free will. For others, who want to get rid of the use of these drugs it is different. Some people can have lived for years using these drugs. When they stop, the same old problems might occur. Where is this mental distress coming from, what does it mean?

If you stop the use of neuroleptic drugs it means the confrontation with yourself again. You were probably asked to take these drugs to function as other people. But what if you are not exactly as other people? What about strange moods, desires, ideas, wishes? Great sensibility?

Salvador Dali was probably someone who had hallucinations. He called his method of painting the paranoid-critical method. In his work you can see forms change under the influence of the hallucinatory power. This man never went to a doctor to say: "I have hallucinations," whereupon the doctor

would have answered: “You are a paranoid schizophrenic, I will give you neuroleptics.” Instead this man with his strange gift became one of the greatest painters of our time. In this way, he turned what might be called “insanity” into power.

Signs of mental pain and distress can make sense and be useful, as long as one is not overwhelmed. What you feel is real, and must be taken seriously. Maybe it is human to be in mental pain in a society such as ours. Maybe the others are not human, only normal. You have a riddle in yourself that must be solved. You know the doctor’s solution. You are a person with a disease, a bit less than the healthy people. So you can chose as the people in Aldous Huxley’s “Brave New World” did, to take Soma, which makes the pain disappear.

To live with your particular states of mind will be difficult. But there must be a way to turn this confusion into power and balance. Strangeness and sensibility I see as a gift, one must learn how to use it. If I can find the force to say: “This is how I am, I love myself and am friend of myself,” I would have regained the autonomy that psychiatry denies me.

Neuroleptics will not give you the power to love yourself, and knowledge of your own self. Psychiatrists are partly afraid of you, because they know if there is honesty in them that the madness that you have taken on your shoulders is also in them. People live on the verge of madness. Being immortally in love is like being mad; therefore people did not like what Romeo and Juliet did, until they were dead, and then people were sorry.

When we take the example of so-called schizophrenia we see that people that have this mental state do not always experience unpleasant sensations. Their sensations are out of the common but can be benign. Experiences or sensations that bring you good can hardly be called symptoms of disease. I ask myself if the dramatic decay in persons, treated with neuroleptics, with the diagnosis of schizophrenia has not to do with the prolonged use of neuroleptics. I have found that what is called “catatonic schizophrenia” in the DSM III code is similar to a syndrome caused by neuroleptics, with muscle rigidity which leads to strange poses.

I think that I have made myself clear in saying that the altered states of mind can lead to other solutions than becoming a mental patient and taking drugs. Your personal experience might be hard to live with, it can be a rich-

ness too. As the Belgian psychiatrist Karel Ringoet puts it, we have in our cities an effect of “overcrowding.” This combined with pollution and noise creates an unhealthy atmosphere. The link with nature is lost. You are forced into an unhealthy way of life; someone is leading this game, but you do not even know who or where; your environment is becoming harsher and uglier every day; you must live in concrete cages close to each other; this is the normal insanity. Then you develop a disease, and you are punished for it with diagnosis and orders to take neuroleptics. The goal is to make you adapt to this life that has made you sick. “There must be some kind of way out of here,” as Jimi Hendrix sang, “there is too much confusion I can get no relief.”

Is the so-called disease not the resistance of your organism against circumstances that are dangerous to you but which you cannot overcome? Many of us know the theories of Ronald Laing and how he tried to estimate experiences out of the common. This is in fact what Freud did also. Instead of calling patients “neurotics” and “fools” of several kinds, Freud started to talk with his patients and he sought what was behind their madness. This resulted in his theory of the unconscious and one might say that Freud has learned a lot of his madmen, and he has made the healthy people listen.

With more or less success these two doctors have tried to learn from the experiences of their patients. In both cases, they developed a philosophy, and they have both attacked society. This kind of courage we must not expect from all psychiatrists. Neither can we expect from all people living in the psychiatric institution to take their strangeness as a gift and to resist the pressure to take neuroleptics. But there is a way to stop the use of these drugs, it may take time and patience and support. This support will not come from the people that declared you ill. This support must be sought amongst people that look upon you with other eyes that have honest appreciation and true interest; the hypocrisy and nine till five attention in psychiatry will not much help.

Honest appreciation from people that look at you with other eyes than mental health professionals can make you realize that the image they made of you in psychiatry is false or not whole. There is more in you than the doctor’s diagnosis.

You should ask yourself why you are taking neuroleptics, and part of the answer might be that you take these under pressure of others. If you do not take them, your behavior becomes embarrassing for the others. If this is the case, you must realize that you are taking these drugs for the pleasure of others, because they find you unpleasant when you do not take them. How far can the demands of the others go? They ask you to take dangerous drugs, because they feel better if you take them. Is it not your right to reject their demands? It may be that when you are not on these drugs, people find you hard to live with. There is something unclean in you, something that the others do not have, and they ask you to hide it. And you take drugs to hide it. I want to become as the others, etc. You are afraid, afraid of losing their love and attention, even if the quality of this love and attention is bad. You are afraid to become a lonely person, powerless against the devils in his own mind.

I do know for whom this article is written. It is not only written for the people who have chosen to build a career as mental patient. It is not only written for people who want to escape jail by going into psychiatry, although this might turn out bad as the film with Jack Nicholson has shown us. Particularly it is written for people that have not played games, but were only in serious mental distress, have looked for help and became trapped in diagnosis and drug taking. For these people I say that there is hope. You are not alone. There is an international survivor movement now. Some of us understand that the mental patient movement, like the homosexual movement, is an important sign in this time. In both cases people want to affirm their identity, break their fetters and emancipate.

The use of neuroleptics is not restricted to mental patients, elder; prisoners, children are treated with them as well. Even in the former USSR dissidents were treated with neuroleptics, as Amnesty International has reported. This massive use of dangerous drugs on the population is an assault on freedom. I do not want to live in a drugged democracy. And yet people are working hard to make more forced use of neuroleptics possible. Some of us realize that the real problem of a part of the psychiatric population is a social problem. When you live in certain circumstances, your behavior changes. When you live for four years on the street, for instance, and you meet people of the higher classes, they will find your behavior strange. Maybe they will find you a

dangerous person. But you have lived in poverty and misery for years, and this has changed you. This circle of poverty and isolation from society may end in psychiatry. A part of the population of the hospitals is what Victor Hugo called “*Les misérables*.” In psychiatry, they receive medical labels. It is, it seems, easier for society to say that there are many schizophrenics these days than to say that there is much poverty and misery amongst people. In this way, psychiatry hides social misery and can in future become even more important in dealing with social injustice. You can stop the poor from revolt by calling them “mentally ill” and giving them neuroleptics. Proposals of this kind have even already been made, as is reported by the American survivor movement, where a psychiatrist proposed preventive treatment for possibly dangerous (black) persons. This raised protest, but nevertheless psychiatry is already treating social problems as medical diseases. It is in that way a political instrument.

I have experienced that neuroleptics diminish the sexual potency. This “side-effect” is important. Sexual energy is vital energy. It is clear to me that if neuroleptics diminish sexual power, they diminish vitality. And it is vitality that is needed to overcome problems. As Freud has shown us, sexual power is the source of many works of high culture. I think that it is unjust to give people drugs that damage their sexual potency. I believe that the sexual power is source of creativity and imagination.

It is precisely creativity and imagination that you need to get off neuroleptics—imagination to see other possibilities, creativity to make your own world. The advice I give to people taking neuroleptics is to ask themselves if they feel whole and free with it. If not, if it seems a hindrance to freedom, one must draw conclusions.

To find balance without psychiatric drugs will take time and there will be pain. This pain will maybe last, but on the other hand there will be a raising of consciousness. I do not know a kind of life without pain and darkness. Yet I have found that there is light also, happiness is possible. Some of the people I met in psychiatric hospitals I still remember, for they were beautiful people, with rare gifts, that cannot easily be found in society. Maybe their fault was a too great openness, a kind of childishness. These people deserved a better life.

I have revived much of my balance in nature. Psychiatry is eight years behind me now; I still spent at least an hour a day in the field or in the wood. I think that I have never returned from nature's arms without force and refreshment. These hours I spend in nature are maybe the best of my life, while I sit there and do nothing, I am in fact doing very well, listening to the rhythm of the great mother. It is she that can soothe the mind of the restless.

There was reason in my madness. I have found this reason and do not see why any other shouldn't. I have nothing to do with psychiatry any more. Once in a few months I see a psychiatrist. We walk together in the fields. I discuss with him things that can be hardly spoken of with other people, like if you went to a priest. This person admires me for not taking neuroleptics. But this was only the first step in my search for identity.

All my other relationships, except for the survivors, have nothing to do with psychiatry. People do not know about this episode in my past. And they would not understand.

When I was sixteen years old, I met a few people that came out of psychiatry. I found them a bit frightening and the world where they came out was very far and sinister to me. I am 38 years old now, as I write this and I have seen in psychiatry that the people behind those walls are not better or worse than the people from the outer world.

I have in this article not given practical advice to get off neuroleptics. Instead I have given some ideas, which might be useful. It was my intention to place the problem in a broader context. To understand yourself, you need to understand the society you live in. To discover yourself, declarations of the doctor about disease can be meaningless. The invention of the disease of schizophrenia is the answer of society to large numbers of people in great mental distress. This answer includes dangerous treatments.

For those who want to hear it, I would like to say that the whole problem changes if it is looked upon with other eyes. There is no absolute truth. What the doctor tells you can be lies. The use of neuroleptics becomes senseless if you reject the idea of being ill. Maybe there is a sanity in your mind that others do not have. Neuroleptics do not heal anything; the best they can do is stabilize. It is like taking morphine when you are in great pain. The cause remains, the pain will return.

May many of us not only draw attention on the violation of human rights in psychiatry, as it is reported world-wide, but also abandon the idea of being mentally ill and as a consequence stop the use of neuroleptics. Because they might kill something of great worth in you.