

# CONNECT

## How Mad Are YOU?

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*The answer may not be QUITE as obvious as you think.*

- 1 How mad are you? Of course, the answer to this question on a scale of zero to ten is always zero - because we're always the sane people. It's always the *other* people who are insane - or *is* it? The truth may be a bit more complicated.

I took a whistle-stop tour through sanity, insanity and lunatic asylums, to test the assumption that WE'RE OK, it's all the others – and we can TELL who's insane – by looking at how they behave.

So, what did I find? Put it this way – it might be best to stay away from mental health doctors - just in case!

- 2 Sanity, insanity and lunatic asylums are subjects many people are interested in. So much so that, in 2009, the BBC broadcasted an extraordinary Horizon documentary called [BBC Horizon - How Mad Are You?](#) Ten volunteers spent several days together having agreed to be assessed. The assessment was to find out how easy it is to tell who has a mental health disorder and who does not.

The programme can be seen online, in two parts, from the links below. Spotlight Radio later published a written summary and audio version of the programme, also titled [How Mad Are You?](#)

- 3 The BBC weren't the first people to ask the question – how easy is it to tell who is mentally healthy and who is not? A psychologist, David L Rosenhan, had carried out the well-known "Rosenhan experiment" a long time before the Horizon programme, in 1973. In the "Rosenhan experiment," volunteers - "sane" people - were admitted secretly to mental hospitals. I assume and sincerely hope that they were allowed to leave once their research was complete.

The study aimed to find out whether the volunteers would be diagnosed as sane or insane. Rosenhan wrote and published a paper about the study - ["On Being Sane In Insane Places."](#) This account begins by asking the question:

*"How do we know precisely what constitutes "normality" or mental illness?"*

Conventional wisdom suggests that specially trained professionals have the ability to make reasonably accurate diagnoses. In this research, however, David Rosenhan provided evidence to challenge this assumption. What is - or is not - "normal" may have much to do with the labels that are applied to people in particular settings.

Rosenhan went on to ask:

*"If sanity and insanity exist, how shall we know them?"*

In short, he argues that - however much we may be personally convinced that we can tell the normal from the abnormal - the evidence is simply not compelling. As well as the psychiatrists for the defence and the prosecution holding quite different views about the defendant's sanity in murder trials, he argues that there is a great deal of conflicting data on the reliability, usefulness and meaning of terms such as "sanity," "insanity," "mental illness," and "schizophrenia." He further points out that it is well understood mental health is not a universal indicator - what one culture views as normal may be seen as aberrant by another. Thus, notions of normality and abnormality may not be as accurate as people believe they are.

Rosenhan also argued that a psychiatric diagnosis shows little about the patient - but it shows a lot more about the environment the patient is in - a mental institution. One example is that patients were not seen as human - the staff talked about them in front of them and a nurse even semi-undressed in front of a room of male patients. She wasn't being seductive - she simply didn't notice the patients.

To present an extremely short version of what he argues - I definitely recommend reading his fascinating (and distressing) article - he says that psychiatric diagnoses are in the minds of observers [doctors] and so are not valid descriptions of behaviours displayed by the observed [patients].

- 4 The lack of objective indicators to decide if someone is sane or insane is nothing new. Wikipedia's article [Lunatic asylum: Women in psychiatric institutions](#) describes some "symptoms" that had women committed to lunatic asylums in the past.

In short, these "reasons" served certain aspects of society - including the women's husbands and families - as committal to an asylum was a useful way of getting rid of "redundant" women. This strategy will have extended beyond women of course, but women were institutionalised a lot more than men. Financial benefit was often involved. After the Married Women's Property Act was passed in 1882, a wife's assets no longer belonged automatically to her husband, so a new way to get a grip on her wealth was needed. Other reasons included women having strong opinions and refusing to live under the control of the male-dominated culture. Some wives simply became inconvenient to their husbands. Committal to an asylum was a great way to silence women - even the threat must have made many women feel vulnerable and submit to control.

I take my hat off to an extremely courageous journalist, Nellie Bly, who in 1887 had herself committed to the Blackwell's Island Insane Asylum in New York City to allow her to investigate and report on the conditions there.

The Daily Mail carried a heart-breaking story in 2019 - with many photographs - about some of the women who were sent to Croydon Mental Hospital in South London between 1909 and 1912 - [The desperate face of 'insanity.'](#) The "reasons" for their committal are in line with the ones

described in the Wikipedia article.

- 5 So – what's the situation now? Surely it's improved? After all, we no longer hear of women being despatched to mental institutions in the UK, although many of them - like the one shown in the photograph – are no longer in use. In use, that is, housing "insane" people. Instead, many now house "sane people" – the buildings and grounds have been repurposed as residential complexes.

I'm not so sure that the situation is better than it used to be. I took a look at the list of symptoms of *psychosis* on the NHS website - [Symptoms - Psychosis](#). I did this for a friend, obviously – I'm sane – because I say I am!

The list has three main headings:

*Hallucinations*

*Delusions*

*Confused and disturbed thoughts.*

Firstly, *Hallucinations*. The NHS defines hallucinations as *where someone sees, hears, smells, tastes or feels things that do not exist outside their mind*. They give the following specific examples of hallucinations, one for each of the five physical senses:

Sight – seeing colours, shapes or people

Sounds – hearing voices or other sounds

Touch – feeling touched when there is nobody there

Smell – an odour that other people cannot smell

Taste – a taste when there is nothing in the mouth

Is it possible for a sane person to be diagnosed as psychotic?

I would argue that it is.

Imagine that a patient is being assessed by a psychologist or a psychiatrist. That doctor, after hearing from the patient that last night they had a dream, could form the view that the patient is seeing colours, shapes or people that are not real. The patient saw these things and people in their dream – but the NHS symptoms do not specify that the patient has to be awake.

The same principle applies to sounds.

On the other hand, if the patient were to tell the doctor that they can smell – let's say, fried onions – but nobody else can smell them, does that prove the patient is hallucinating? Or could it mean that the patient has a highly developed sense of smell and is smelling the onions that were fried in the nearby café yesterday? You know what it's like with onions – the smell goes everywhere.

There's another possibility, too. A much-declared symptom of Covid-19 is a change in the senses of smell and taste. Many people, apparently, have been plagued with tasting foods wrong – coffee tasting like rotting fish and

the like. So, to diagnose someone as psychotic – insane – on the basis of tasting something when there is nothing in their mouth is a big risk.

That just leaves touch. I'm not even going to mention the possibility of invisible people touching the patient. The point is, that a psychologist or psychiatrist has four other senses to make a diagnosis of psychosis from. We just have to hope that all these doctors are sane – but who judges *them* as sane?

Moving on to *Delusions* - where a person has an unshakeable belief in something untrue – I see a real problem here. The NHS gives some examples of hallucinations. I'll take just one:

*A person with persecutory delusions may believe an individual or organisation is making plans to hurt or kill them.*

How does the doctor *know* that the patient suffers from persecutory delusions? Symptoms, rather than being objective signs of mental disorder, are understood subjectively through the doctor's observational lens – the doctor's beliefs and assumptions. Such as, that the world is a safe place where people can be trusted. Nobody is silenced or assassinated for revealing – or threatening to reveal – a truth that is inconvenient for someone else.

How does the doctor know that someone *isn't* planning to hurt or kill the patient? To diagnose on the basis of the patient saying – for example – that someone is planning to do something bad to them, is *insane*.

If a patient isn't believed by the doctor – and is therefore assumed to be insane – the patient might well have confused and disturbed thoughts. They might well communicate with rapid and constant speech, switch from one topic to another mid-sentence and have a sudden loss in their train of thought. It's an extremely stressful situation for the patient – they might find it difficult to function normally.

- 6 I'll close by offering up a few wonderful things that have been said about sanity and insanity. These are a few of my favourite quotes from [WisefamousQuotes](#):

*We have a sane part of our minds and an insane part.*

*We negotiate between those two parts*

- Haruki Murakami

*You know what they say.*

*It's the ones who are sure they are sane that aren't*

- Allison Leigh

On reflection, I may have to think about this one!

*When you're the only sane person, you look like the only insane person*

- Criss Jami

But this last quote is my favourite:  
"You know what insane people are, Alice?" the Pillar says.  
"They are just sane people who know too much  
- Cameron Jace

### CONNECT'S Maxim and Oath

Connect is only interested in finding and sharing the TRUTH.  
In search of that TRUTH, we only pose questions – we have no answers.

By: Helen King

Source: CONNECT: [Magazine](#)

- 2 [LINK](#) BBC Horizon- How Mad Are You?
- 2 [LINK](#) Spotlight Radio: written and audio version of Horizon: How Mad Are You?
- 2 [LINK](#) BBC Horizon - How Mad Are You? - Part 1
- 2 [LINK](#) BBC Horizon - How Mad Are You? - Part 2
- 3 [LINK](#) David L Rosenhan: "On Being Sane In Insane Places"
- 4 [LINK](#) Wikipedia: Lunatic asylum: Women in psychiatric institutions
- 4 [LINK](#) The Daily Mail: The desperate face of 'insanity'
- 5 [LINK](#) NHS: Symptoms - Psychosis
- 6 [LINK](#) Wise Famous Quotes: quotes about sane and insane

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