“Holy Psychotherapy, Batman!” Diagnosing Mental Illness in Superheroes

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Superheroes and doctors don’t have the best history. In fact, it was psychiatrist Dr. Frederick Wertham, and not supervillain Dr. Doom, who raised significant concern that comic books were negatively impacting children in his provocative book, Seduction of the Innocent. Although Dr. Wertham nearly destroyed the comic book industry, it thankfully has recovered—as has the relationship between superheroes and the field of medicine. There has been a recent explosion of interest in graphic medicine, the intersection between comics, medical education, and patient care. Comics are now used to deliver public health education, to communicate diagnostic criteria and informed consent to patients, and to help patients process their own illnesses.

Most of these medical comic books involve the creation of new characters or stories that are designed only for specific health care purposes. Until recently, few studies focused on popular comics, and those that did seem to have focused on the ways that comic characters may perpetuate negative stereotypes related to illness and health care concerns. However, medical researchers are starting to examine the inspiring power of established popular culture superheroes such as Batman and Spider-Man, starting with these superheroes’ potential positive impacts on children’s resilience.

This article asks whether or not some of our favorite superheroes meet DSM-5 criteria for any psychiatric diagnoses and, if so, whether these superheroes might serve both as positive role models for patients with mental illnesses and as exciting examples for educating the public about mental health.

Method
I identified Marvel Comics and DC Comics superheroes who have been featured in films or television shows released within the past 15 years, under the assumption that they would be recognized by and popular with the general public. Taking into account each specific character’s appearances and portrayals in comic books, movies, video games, and television shows, I determined if he/she met DSM-5 criteria for any mental disorder.

Results
Since his first appearance in 1939 in Detective Comics #27, Batman (alias Bruce Wayne) has become one of the most popular superheroes worldwide. However, despite the fact that he keeps the streets of Gotham City safe, even Bruce Wayne himself claims that “a guy who dresses up like a bat clearly has issues.” Eccentric though he may be, does Batman meet DSM-5 criteria for any specific disorder?

Since his crusade against crime began at age 8 when he witnessed the murder of his parents during a robbery gone wrong, it would be fair to ask whether Batman suffers from posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD). After all, his trauma did negatively alter his mood and thoughts, as he blames himself for endangering his parents. He has limited interest in activities unrelated to crime-fighting, only forms close relationships with his sidekicks, and is unable to experience happiness as long as crime exists. He also has intrusive memories and flashbacks to his parents’ murders that plague him when he comes in contact with certain enemies (i.e., Scarecrow and his fear gas) or when he feels that he is failing in his mission to fight crime. However, it is unclear if Batman meets any of the other PTSD criteria. Rather than avoiding criminals, guns, and violence, he seeks them out. And his hypervigilance, aggressiveness, and recklessness actually enhance his war against crime. Lastly, Batman still runs Wayne Enterprises and leads the Justice League, proving that he can thrive despite childhood trauma and symptoms associated with PTSD.
While Batman does not meet full DSM-5 criteria for PTSD, a different picture emerges when we examine Iron Man (alias Tony Stark) of the Marvel Cinematic Universe. After nearly dying while battling space aliens in The Avengers, he is portrayed in the film Iron Man 3 as having recurrent intrusive dreams and dissociative flashbacks of the attack, refusing to even mention “the events of New York,” experiencing persistent negative emotions, and isolating himself in his robotics laboratory away from his girlfriend. He also becomes a hyper-vigilant, irritable insomniac. He eventually leaves control of Stark Industries to his girlfriend and struggles to fight crime as Iron Man as a direct consequence of these symptoms, proving that they are quite impairing.13

However, these are far from the only popular culture heroes who struggle with psychiatric symptomatology (Table 1). Characters from both DC and Marvel Comics seemingly demonstrate symptomatology that suggests potential diagnoses as varied as mood disorders, anxiety disorders, substance use disorders, personality disorders, and psychotic disorders. Of note, many of them experienced significantly traumatic upbringings.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>SUPERHERO</th>
<th>MISSION</th>
<th>POTENTIAL DSM-5 DIAGNOSES</th>
<th>SYMPTOMS</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ant-Man</td>
<td>Scientist Hank Pym shrinks to a microscopic level and controls ants to fight crime</td>
<td>Bipolar disorder</td>
<td>Manic episodes with decreased sleep, grandiosity, increased crime fighting, distractibility, and more experiments than normal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Batman</td>
<td>Billionaire Bruce Wayne strikes fear into criminals and solves mysteries by night</td>
<td>PTSD</td>
<td>See above</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Daredevil</td>
<td>Blind defense attorney Matt Murdock uses circus acrobatics to prove that “justice is blind”</td>
<td>Major depressive disorder</td>
<td>Anhedonia, depressed mood, excessive (Catholic) guilt, fatigue, and thoughts of self-harm by placing self in harm’s way</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Hulk</td>
<td>Mild-mannered scientist Bruce Banner mutates into a giant green beast when he gets angry</td>
<td>Dissociative identity disorder, intermittent explosive disorder</td>
<td>Dissociation with an inability to remember actions of the Hulk. Numerous behavioral outbursts that result in extreme destruction when angered</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Iron Man</td>
<td>Billionaire Tony Stark fights crime in a weaponized mechanical suit of armor</td>
<td>PTSD, alcohol use disorder, narcissistic personality disorder</td>
<td>See above. Severe alcohol use led to his loss of the Iron Man suit, and becoming homeless. Grandiose, arrogant, preoccupied by his own success</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jessica Jones</td>
<td>Jessica Jones works as a private investigator after retiring from the superhero life</td>
<td>PTSD</td>
<td>Recurrent flashbacks to sexual assault by a supervillain; avoidance of memories of him, self-blame, and placement of self in deliberate danger when fighting crime</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Moon Knight</td>
<td>Marc Spector is the embodiment of an Egyptian god of the night</td>
<td>Schizophrenia</td>
<td>Hallucinations of other superheroes, incoherent speech</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Punisher</td>
<td>Frank Castle embarks on a violent war on crime after his family is killed by mobsters</td>
<td>PTSD</td>
<td>Recurrent flashbacks and self-blame for the death of his family; social isolation with abandonment of friends if they do not follow his murderous fight against criminals</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spider-Man</td>
<td>Peter Parker fights crime with the strength and web-spinning abilities of a spider</td>
<td>Generalized anxiety disorder</td>
<td>Spider-sense normally alerts him to real danger, but can become hypervigilant and excessive</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: PTSD = posttraumatic stress disorder.
Discussion

Even though Batman does not meet every DSM-5 criterion for PTSD, Iron Man certainly seems to. In addition, there are a number of other superheroes who might provide novel opportunities by which to introduce and discuss particular mental illnesses, life circumstances, or psychosocial stressors with patients, colleagues, and the public. Comic books recently reached their highest circulation in almost 20 years, and superheroes star in some of the most popular films, TV shows, and video games. Given their recent popular resurgence, these imaginary characters have the opportunity to transcend page and screen and improve the lives of real-world populations.

Comic superheroes with mental illnesses can serve as positive role models for patients and the public. The stigma of mental illness is well documented, and the comic book industry unfortunately has long contributed to the negative perception of the mentally ill. Batman’s and Spider-Man’s foes are incarcerated in Arkham Asylum and the Ravencroft Institute for the Criminally Insane, respectively, and a number of villains, including The Joker (arguably the most famous comic book villain of all time), are described as psychotic despite never demonstrating delusions, hallucinations, or disorganized speech or behavior. However, as highlighted in this review, those with psychiatric symptoms and mental illness do not have to be the villain, but can be heroes and save the world.

Superheroes also can serve as accessible and familiar “safe spaces” for individuals to use in processing their troubles. For example, while it may be difficult for a patient to discuss the deaths of his or her own parents, he or she might more easily talk about the grief that Batman might feel every day. In this way, superheroes and their narratives would act as scaffolds upon which children and adolescents could build their own stories and through which they could explore their own relationships with psychiatric symptoms and illness. Youth could hold the heroes up as perfect examples of how to respond to trauma or manage mental illness or could critique them and offer alternative opinions and perspectives. For example, some may think that Batman is coping with the loss of his parents in a healthy way by devoting his life to fighting crime, while others may think that his constant anger is a sign that he hasn’t yet fully processed his grief. Comic superheroes provide comfortable characters and stories for patients to explore their own thoughts and emotions.

The use of comic superheroes for therapeutic or clinical benefit has been explored by some. One research group asked if heroes experienced fictional troubles similar to the real-life adversities faced by vulnerable children. Of the 20 film superheroes that they profiled, a vast majority had experienced significant trauma prior to becoming a hero, with most (86%, actually) being orphaned or abandoned. From this finding, the authors extrapolated that children might not feel alone upon learning that they share a common history with a certain hero. This group also suggested that shared aspects of superheroes’ and patients’ histories could be used by providers to build rapport with younger patients.

Conclusion

While most current graphic medicine has focused on specially created “medical comics,” our hope is that popular superheroes can provide positive depictions for individuals with mental illnesses and help patients discuss their own struggles. I have identified a number of heroes with mental illnesses at this time, but to see the results of the rest of this research, you will have to check back. Same Bat-time. Same Bat-channel.

Take Home Summary

- Graphic Medicine is a rapidly expanding field, but most of its research has focused on specially created “medical comics,” with few studies focusing on popular superheroes (Batman, Superman, Spider-Man, the Avengers, etc.).
- There are a number of superheroes who provide novel opportunities by which to introduce and discuss with young patients particular mental illnesses or psychosocial stressors.
- These heroes could provide positive depictions for individuals with mental illnesses and help patients discuss their own struggles.
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References


About the Author

Keith Miller, MD, is currently a second-year general psychiatry resident at the Mayo Clinic. He fell in love with superheroes when he first picked up a comic book in his neighborhood grocery store at 6 years old. His favorite superhero is Spider-Man.

Disclosure: Dr. Miller reports no biomedical financial interests or potential conflicts of interest.