PSYCHOTIC DEPRESSION

Psychotic depression is a distinct and acute clinical condition along the spectrum of depressive disorders. It can manifest itself in many ways and be mistaken for schizophrenia. It often induces physical deterioration, mortally dangerous acts toward self or others, or completed suicide. This book aims to help clinical practitioners and trainees describe their observations of psychotic depression, formulate treatment, and express expectations of recovery from illness. It focuses on all facets of the disorder, from clinical history to coverage of the current state-of-the-art diagnostic and treatment protocols. Medical readers of this book will come away able to diagnose and readily treat psychotic depression and thus will be able to serve their patients better. Non-physician readers will come away with the message that this is a terrible illness, but there is hope. This book fills an important gap in the realm of psychiatric literature.

Dr. Conrad M. Swartz is a board-certified psychiatry professor who has written and lectured extensively on depression, anxiety, and the use of electroconvulsive therapy for severe depression.

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Also by Edward Shorter

*A History of Psychiatry* (1997)

*Historical Dictionary of Psychiatry* (2005)
Psychotic Depression

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To Cynthia and Anne Marie
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Preface

Psychotic depression is an alloy of psychosis and depression that is not separable into psychosis and depression. Psychosis is a symptom that thought and behavior have become unrelated to reality. It is, in other words, a symptom of madness just as biological as delirium. Psychologists and psychodynamicists often understand illnesses as psychological conditions, caused by psychological conflicts and blamed on unconscious psychological mechanisms. Saying “illness” does not denote “biological” to them. We should like readers to perceive the old-time biological meaning of madness, not through the psychology of the unconscious. Depression is an illness that includes, among other symptoms, the loss of ability to think things through. Patients with psychotic depression have an illness with symptoms of disordered thought, behavior, and mood. They are both delusional and suffer a mood disorder. They are truly physically ill, and their illness represents a terrible suffering for patients and their families, worse so because they cannot describe it. This book aims to help health care professionals find
the words to describe their observations of psychotic depression, to work together with their patients to formulate treatment, and to express expectations of recovery from illness. The following pages contain the past, the present, and the future of patient-centered concerns about conventional, and some not entirely conventional, ideas concerning its diagnosis and treatment.

We are trying to reach mainly physicians here, because it is upon their shoulders that responsibility for diagnosis and treatment rests. But we have tried not to make the book so forbiddingly “medical” as to be inaccessible to those outside of medicine such as the patients themselves, their friends and families, and all others interested in or curious about psychiatric illness. It’s hard to write both for doctors and patients, for obvious reasons. The pharmaceutical armamentarium so familiar to physicians is a jumble of unfamiliar terms to everyone else. Physicians are accustomed to thinking coolly about diagnoses that patients experience as the horrors of hell and to rationally considering treatments that everyone else deeply fears. The whole alphabet soup of instruments and procedures that doctors take in with the mother’s milk of medical school is usually entirely unfamiliar to patients, except terms such as “EEG” that they have encountered in their own experience.

Thus, patients may not consume avidly every last line of the diagnosis chapter because they are mainly interested in the one illness that they have, not in the entire range of phenomena that they could conceivably have but don’t. And physicians may smile indulgently at the chapter on subjective aspects of psychotic depression – psychotic depression as the patients experience it. But they should not. Knowing your patients’ experience of illness, and being able to succor and advise them appropriately, is part of the practice of medicine. At some level doctors realize they do not feel what their patients experience until they go through the same condition themselves or with a close relative. Of course, this awareness is easily overlooked in the everyday demands of clinical practice. Doctors, please do not imagine that you know all that your patients go through, because you cannot.
Medical readers of this book will come away able to diagnose and readily treat psychotic depression, and thus be able to serve their patients better. Nonmedical readers will come away with the message that this is indeed a terrible illness, but that there is hope. This can be a precious message.

Conrad Swartz is a practicing psychiatrist and an academic scholar who has published on many subjects, and a specialist in medical treatment, electroconvulsive therapy, and psychopharmacology. Much of his research reflects his engineering PhD along with his MD. Edward Shorter specializes in the history of psychiatry and psychopharmacology, and is a PhD. Shorter comes to the story via the trail of age-old suffering; Swartz has spent a lifetime treating patients. Both perspectives are useful and offer a comprehensive picture of what one is up against in this disease called psychotic depression.

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