

This Week's Citation Classic

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Szasz T S. The myth of mental illness. *Amer. Psychol.* 15:113-18, 1960.
[State Univ. New York, Upstate Medical Center, Syracuse, NY]

Strictly speaking, the term 'disease' denotes a pathoanatomical or pathophysiological lesion. Because the mind is not a bodily organ or tissue, it can be diseased only in a metaphoric sense. This paper calls attention to the false, but widely accepted, belief that 'mental illness is like any other illness' and to the practical implications of that belief. [The *Science Citation Index*® (SCI®) and the *Social Sciences Citation Index*® (SSCI®) indicate that this paper has been cited in over 190 publications since 1961.]

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"As far back as I can remember, I was intrigued, puzzled, and disturbed by what is now conventionally called mentally ill behavior. Why do some people act in such strange, repellent, and frightening ways? And why does everyone say that these people are 'mentally sick' even though they do not claim or seem to be sick?

"I certainly did not know the answers to these questions when I was a child. But one thing was clear to me, even before I reached my teens: namely, that neither so-called mental patients nor psychiatrists behaved like ordinary patients and doctors. This insight has always struck me as similar to the classic Hans Christian Andersen story about the emperor's clothes. Everyone knows that mental illness is not 'really' an illness, that psychiatrists are not 'real' doctors, that mental hospitals are not 'real' hospitals. But when one is a grown-up person, one is not supposed to know this, and surely one is not supposed to say it.

"Sometime during my high school years I decided that I was going to say something about this subject. That is what I did in my

1960 paper in the *American Psychologist* (and in my book, *The Myth of Mental Illness*,¹ published a year later). Strictly speaking, then, this paper was not the product of any research. Rather, it was an attempt to tell a truth which, I was certain, everyone knew, but which they were too polite, too timid, too opportunistic, or too uncareful to articulate.

"I wrote 'The myth of mental illness' in 1957, soon after settling in Syracuse. For the next two years it made the rounds of psychiatric journals, from the *American Journal of Psychiatry* down. I must have submitted it to at least a half dozen psychiatric journals—and they all rejected it. That is how this paper ended up in the pages of a nonpsychiatric journal.

"After this paper was published, two things happened rather quickly. First, it was reprinted in a score of anthologies, and the phrase 'myth of mental illness' became both the stimulus for serious criticism of accepted psychiatric principles and practices and the banner under which many of its critics rallied. Second, academic and professional authorities—in my medical school and elsewhere—accused me of 'not believing in mental illness,' and did their best to harass me for this heresy in the ways available to such officials.

"During the more than two decades since the publication of 'The myth of mental illness,' I have written many papers and books elaborating on the implications of its thesis for mental health practices and for activities in related fields.²⁻⁵ There has ensued a lively debate on the medicalization of life—some supporting and others opposing the 'medical model' of mental illness and the psychiatric coercions it justifies.⁶ It is encouraging to note that, with the passing of years, the ideas expressed in 'The myth of mental illness' have become more widely accepted, especially outside of psychiatric circles."

1. Szasz T S. *The myth of mental illness: foundations of a theory of personal conduct.* New York: Hoeber-Harper, 1961. 337 p.
2. -----, *Law, liberty, and psychiatry: an inquiry into the social uses of mental health practices.* New York: Macmillan, 1963. 281 p.
3. -----, *The manufacture of madness: a comparative study of the Inquisition and the mental health movement.* New York: Harper & Row, 1970. 383 p.
4. -----, *The myth of psychotherapy: mental healing as religion, rhetoric, and repression.* Garden City, NY: Anchor Press/Doubleday, 1978. 236 p.
5. -----, *Sex by prescription.* Garden City, NY: Anchor Press/Doubleday, 1980. 198 p.
6. Vatz R E & Weinberg L S, eds. *Thomas Szasz: primary values and major contentions.* Buffalo, NY: Prometheus Books, 1983. 253 p.