

study guide

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next to normal

Now Playing in Crystal City
November 21, 2008 - January 18, 2009
music by Tom Kitt
book & lyrics by Brian Yorkey
directed by Michael Greif

the play

As the musical *Next to Normal* opens, middle-aged mother **Diana** seems to have it all: a handsome, loving husband and two talented, teenage children. It is soon obvious, however, that life for Diana is far more difficult than it seems. She has been dealing with severe depression and delusions since tragedy struck her marriage nearly 16 years earlier. As she continues to seek countless treatments, medications and therapies to help her return to a normal life, her family begins to unravel around her, finding their own desperate ways to deal with her illness and their own loss.



"Do you know what it's like to die alive?"
-Diana, *Next to Normal*

meet the writers

Brian Yorkey & Tom Kitt



Collaborators Brian Yorkey (bookwriter and lyricist – writes the words) & Tom Kitt (composer – writes the music) met when they were students at Columbia University in the 1990s.

Kitt began playing piano at age 3 and writing music at age 8. He became involved in musicals at age 19 in college. Yorkey also started young, penning mystery plays for his fourth grade class. He was actively involved in his hometown's theater from a young age and became its associate artistic director.

After graduation, Kitt and Yorkey were invited to attend the BMI Lehman Engel Musical Theatre Workshop. In 1998, a 10-minute musical about shock therapy, *Feeling Electric*, was their final project at BMI. In 2006/2007, after workshops, readings and revisions, the now full-length musical was renamed *Next to Normal*. It opened Off-Broadway in January 2008.

Independent of their rich collaboration, Yorkey is a playwright, director and screenwriter on the East and West coasts; Kitt is a Broadway music director and composer. ●

characters at a glance

Diana is a middle-aged wife and mother, afflicted with bipolar depression and delusions for nearly 16 years.

Dan is Diana's husband, who tries to be supportive and optimistic despite his wife's crippling and seemingly permanent illness.

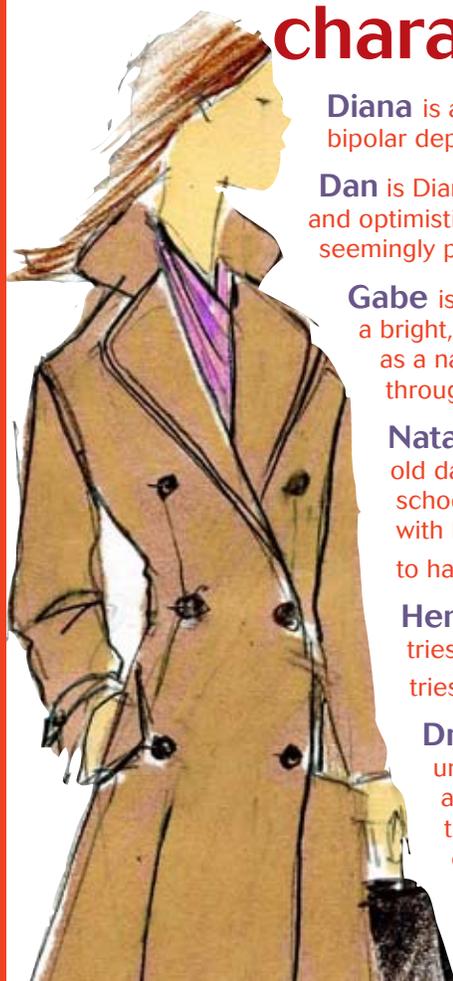
Gabe is Dan and Diana's 18-year-old son; a bright, talented young man who serves as a narrator of his mother's problems throughout the play.

Natalie, Dan and Diana's 16-year-old daughter, tries to do well in school, but finds the stress of dealing with her mother's illness is too much to handle.

Henry, Natalie's musician boyfriend, tries to be supportive as Natalie tries to cope with her family.

Dr. Madden, Diana's unconventional new doctor, attempts a number of unusual treatments to alleviate Diana's depression.

some renderings or drawings of Diana's costumes by designer Jeff Mahshie.



break into song

"What has always attracted me to Next to Normal was how I felt the music—and how each character's individual musicality—perfectly expressed their emotional state."

— Michael Greif, director



meet the director

— **Michael Greif**, director of *Next to Normal*, is best known for directing the original Broadway production of *Rent*.

Why do people suddenly start singing in musicals? Characters feel an emotion so deeply that it can only be expressed in song and, when it grows beyond song, the emotion is compelled to become dance. While heightening emotion and propelling the plot, music can have a powerful, bodily affect on the audience. Toes tap; lines of music get stuck in people's head; people leave the theater singing. ●



Activity: Music allows us to feel deeply and express ourselves when words are not enough. What is an issue you have a hard time talking about? If the issue were a music genre, what would it be? Write lyrics for a song about this issue and imagine the music behind the lyrics.

female hysteria

Female hysteria – the idea that mental instability in a woman is connected to her gender – dates back to ancient Greece.

Hysteria derives from the Greek word *hystera*, meaning literally “wandering of the womb.” Ancient Greek physician Hippocrates (the father of medicine) defined the condition, claiming that a woman’s womb traveled through her body and strangled her as it reached her chest.

Female hysteria has appeared in works of drama for thousands of years. In the ancient Greek play *Medea*, the title character murders her own children in a fit of rage after being betrayed by their father. Shakespeare incorporated the idea into *Hamlet* through Ophelia, who goes mad after all the men in her life attempt to use and control her in different ways. Modern playwright Edward Albee took the concept further in his play *Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* His leading female character, Martha, deludes herself into believing that she has a son when she has never given birth, connecting her insanity directly to her gender and her womb.

In *Next to Normal*, Diana’s mental problems are strongly associated with her identity as a wife and a mother. ●



The idea of hysteria became popular in the Victorian era. Physicians did not define its cause, vaguely claiming it was a ‘womb disease’ having to do with pent-up fluids in the female body. In 1859, it was claimed that 25 percent of women suffered from hysteria, undoubtedly due to the 75-page catalog of symptoms, which was seen as incomplete. These

symptoms included faintness, nervousness, insomnia, heaviness in the abdomen, muscle spasms, shortness of breath, irritability and a loss of appetite. Since hysteria was a chronic condition that could only be treated but not cured, it was suspected that doctors diagnosed women merely to make money from the continued treatment.

bipolar disorder

In *Next to Normal* Diana is a seemingly normal wife and mother, but she is privately battling bipolar disorder, a disease that affects between 2 to 3 percent of the population. Bipolar disorder – also known as manic depression – is a mental illness characterized by serious, even disabling, mood instability.

People who suffer from the disorder swing back and forth between two extreme and opposite phases of moods: mania and depression. Mania can be identified by extreme optimism, rapid speech and activity, risky behavior and inability to concentrate. Its opposite, depression, is marked by sadness, hopelessness, suicidal thoughts, fatigue and chronic pain. The mood swings may last for weeks or months, and sometimes a patient will swing back and forth between the two moods several times in an hour.

Severe episodes of either mania or depression may result in psychosis (sigh-co-sis), or a detachment from reality. Symptoms of psychosis may include hearing or seeing things that aren’t there (hallucinations) and false but strongly held beliefs (delusions).

The cause of bipolar disorder is unknown, but connections have been made to biochemical factors and genetics. While there is no cure for bipolar disorder, a combination of medication and therapy can often control the disease enough for the patient to lead a normal life. Mood stabilizers, like lithium, can regulate mood and keep the swings from occurring, while therapy can help the patient recognize and control their mood swings. ●



ECT

While medication and therapy are most commonly used to treat bipolar disorder, some cases are so severe that such treatments make no difference. In these cases, electroconvulsive therapy (ECT) is sometimes used. ECT is a procedure in which electric currents are passed through the patient’s brain, deliberately triggering a brief seizure. The treatment is usually given three times a week and for up to 15 sessions. According to the American Psychiatric Association, its success rate is 80 percent, considerably higher than the 50 – 60 percent success rate of most antidepressant medications. Doctors are unsure why ECT works, though it is known that many chemical aspects of brain function are altered during and after seizure activity. Researchers theorize that when ECT is administered on a regular basis, these chemical changes build upon one another, somehow reducing symptoms of bipolar disorder. ●

Despite its effectiveness, electroconvulsive therapy remains controversial. This is likely due to early, brutal treatments, in which high doses of electricity were administered without anesthesia, leading to memory loss and death. Today, ECT can still cause side effects, like memory loss, but uses precisely calculated electrical currents given in a controlled setting to achieve the most benefit with the fewest possible risks.

two sides to prescription medication



*"Who's crazy?
The one who's half-gone?
Or maybe
The one who holds on?"*

-Dan, *Next to Normal*

Next to Normal tells the stories of two very different battles with prescription medication. While Diana struggles with how her prescribed medication makes her feel, her daughter Natalie begins taking pills recreationally.

(Not) Adjusting Addiction

Many patients find it difficult to stay on medication for psychological conditions. While medication may help lessen depression or stabilize mood, it also can cause side effects that many find unpleasant. Some patients feel that their personalities are clouded over or their creativity is dulled. As one patient described it, "There was a perpetual mental fog...The emotional blunting left me without real passion for much of anything, while deep inside the real me was screaming nonstop." Twenty-eight percent of patients taking antidepressants go off the drug within the first month of use. Patients should not go off medication without speaking to their doctor. Often medication takes getting used to, and patients will eventually be able to function better than they would otherwise.

More teens are beginning to take prescription drugs recreationally. In 2006, nearly one in five teenagers reported abusing prescription drugs not prescribed to them, and more than 29 percent of teens in treatment for this abuse were dependent on the drugs. Legal medication can be easier to get than illegal drugs – half of teens using these drugs got them for free from family or friends – but it is no less dangerous. In the past 10 years the number of teens going into treatment for addiction to prescription medication increased 300 percent, and emergency room visits have increased 21 percent. ●



Activity: Life confronts people with a measure of loss and sadness. How do different people deal with the pain?

Research techniques and resources available to people living through difficult emotional situations.

Additional Resources

Books/Plays: *Mind Race: Young, Bipolar and Thriving - A Personal Memoir* by Patrick Jamieson, Ph.D. and Moira Rynn, M.D.

"The Yellow Wallpaper" by Charlotte Perkins Gilman

On the Web: National Institute of Mental Health: www.nimh.nih.gov/

Musicals 101: www.musicals101.com

Broadway: The American Musical: www.pbs.org/wnet/broadway/

Film: *Broadway: The American Musical* – PBS
Rent – Sony Pictures

Sub/Text

For links and research related to Arena Stage productions, compiled by Arena Stage **dramaturgs**, please visit **Sub/Text: Your Virtual Dramaturg** at www.arenastage.org/season/08-09/sub-text/.

dramaturg– a theater specialist who does research for productions and represents the intentions of the playwright

Helpful Hints for Theater Audiences

As an audience member at the theater, YOU are part of the show! Just as you see and hear the actors onstage, they can see and hear you in the audience. To help the performers do their best, please remember the following:

Arrive at least 30 minutes early.

Visit the restroom before the show starts.

Before the show begins, turn off your cell phone, watch alarms, pagers, and other electronic devices. If anything rings by accident, shut it off immediately.

Save food and drinks for the lobby. There is no eating or drinking inside the theater.

Walk to and from your seat - no running in the theater!

Do not talk, whisper, sing, or hum.

Keep your feet on the floor, not on the seat in front of you.

Avoid getting up during a show because it distracts your neighbors and the performers. If you must leave, wait for a scene change, then exit quietly and quickly.

Performers appreciate enthusiastic applause rather than whistling or shouting.

Cameras and videotape are prohibited because they are distracting to the performers.

Enjoy the show!



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Visit www.arenastage.org for more information on Arena Stage productions and educational opportunities.