

Making sense

It can be fascinating to look at the pattern of your fingerprints and consider the fact that they are completely unique. Out of the approximately seven billion people currently living on this planet today, not one will have the exact same fingerprints as you.

This difference is more than skin deep; there are also many differences underneath, from body and blood type right down to the composition of your cells on a genetic level.

From what can be seen in the mirror, to the magnifying glass, down to the microscope, none of us are exactly the same.

Probably the way one person differs most from another is in something that cannot be seen, and something that science is yet to fully understand: the realm of the mind.

Each person, each mind, perceives the world in a different way from any other. From time to time we get to see the world from another person's perspective, through such things as works of art or pieces of literature.

In some ways, the arts provide a more telling picture of the human mind than medicine is currently able to.

So we've got billions of different minds, all seeing and making sense of the world in their own individual way. Then, we have publications such as the DSM IV (Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders,

fourth edition.) This is the main tool the medical profession uses to isolate your particular unique mind from the billions of others out there, and attempt classify it using a comparatively tiny number of categories.

The phrase "herding kittens" comes to mind here.



Modern medicine is at an exciting point, but perhaps also an unsettling one. We now have drugs which are able to help alleviate the symptoms of many recognized mental illnesses; as yet we don't really understand how most of these medications, or the human organism they are administered to, actually function.

Perhaps a bit less exciting - and more than a little unsettling - is the prospect of living with the side effects of many medications. Sometimes the pills you are taking can reduce or eliminate the troubling symptoms you were experiencing, only to replace them with other troubling symptoms as a tradeoff.

In the case of Olanzapine for instance, a commonly prescribed medicine for schizophrenia and bipolar disorder, one of the most notable side effects is weight gain. Even though your mental health problems may be brought under control while taking it, you

may find yourself facing *physical* health problems due to this side effect and the increased risk of diabetes that comes with it.

Having mental health problems is something that really must be experienced to be fully understood. Even though clinicians spend a large part of their lives studying these conditions and how to treat them, the difference between academic study and lived experience is like the difference between reading the script of a movie, and actually watching it at the cinema.

Patience is important—your doctor can't read minds, and you didn't come with an instruction manual, so it may take a while to receive treatment that is personalized to meet your unique needs. Mental illnesses are difficult to treat, and difficult to live with, but thankfully it's getting easier to do both and things can only improve in the future.

Tangata whaiora is a Maori term for people with experience of mental illness, meaning "people seeking wellness." In addition to this, many of us are seeking ways to make our experience make sense.

If you wish to share your own personal journey and learn from the experience of others, there are groups which exist to let you do just that. One such group is held at the Like Minds Taranaki office, 3rd floor of the old BNZ building, on the **2nd and 4th Wednesday of each month, from 10:30am to 12pm.** For further information, please call (06) 7590966.

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