

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

Keith Miller, MD

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,<sup>1-3</sup> to communicate diagnostic criteria and informed consent to patients,<sup>4,5</sup> and to help patients process their own illnesses.<sup>6,7</sup>

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.<sup>8-10</sup> 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.<sup>11</sup>

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.”<sup>12</sup> 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.<sup>13</sup>

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 1. Popular Superheroes and Potential *DSM-5* Diagnoses**

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

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,<sup>14</sup> 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.<sup>11</sup> 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.<sup>11</sup>

## 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.

### References

1. Krakow M. Graphic Narratives and Cancer Prevention: A Case Study of an American Cancer Society Comic Book. *Health Commun.* 2017;32:525-528.
2. Branscum P, Sharma M, Wang LL, Wilson BR, Rojas-Guyler L. A true challenge for any superhero: an evaluation of a comic book obesity prevention program. *Fam Community Health.* 2013;36:63-76.
3. Ingrand I, Verneau A, Silvain C, Beauchant M, Poitou-Charantes Hepatitis C Network. Prevention of viral hepatitis C: assessment of a comic strip-based information campaign targeting adolescents. *Eur J Public Health.* 2004;14:147-150.
4. Schwerdtle B, Kanis J, Kahl L, Kübler A, Schlarb AA. Children's Sleep Comic: development of a new diagnostic tool for children with sleep disorders. *Nat Sci Sleep.* 2012;4:97-102.
5. Grootens-Wiegers P, de Vries MC, van Beusekom MM, van Dijk L, van den Broek JM. Comic strips help children understand medical research: targeting the informed consent procedure to children's needs. *Patient Educ Couns.* 2015;98:518-524.
6. Small D. *Stitches: A Memoir.* New York: W.W. Norton and Company; 2010.
7. Fies B. *Mom's Cancer.* New York: Harry N. Abrams; 2009.
8. Lefrere JJ, Danic B. Transfusion and blood donation in comic strips. *Transfus Med Rev.* 2013;27:154-165.
9. McNicol S, Weaver S. "Dude! You mean you've never eaten a peanut butter and jelly sandwich?!?" Nut allergy as stigma in comic books. *Health Commun.* 2013;28:217-225.
10. Donovan RJ, Fielder L, Donovan P, Handley C. Is trivialisation of alcohol consumption a laughing matter? Alcohol incidence in a metropolitan daily newspaper's comic strips. *Drug Alcohol Rev.* 2009;28:257-262.
11. Fradkin C, Weschenfelder GV, Yunes MA. Shared adversities of children and comic superheroes as resources for promoting resilience: Comic superheroes are an untapped resource for empowering vulnerable children. *Child Abuse Negl.* 2016;51:407-415.
12. Nolan C. *Batman Begins.* [Blu-ray]. Warner Brothers; 2005.
13. Black S. *Iron Man 3.* [Blu-ray]. Walt Disney Studios Home Entertainment; 2013.
14. Andrews T. The resurgence of comics books: The industry has its best-selling month in nearly two decades. *The Washington Post.* July 12, 2016.

### 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.



### Need CME?

JAACAP offers free CME for readers. One article per month is associated with an online CME offering designated for up to 1 AMA PRA Category 1 Credit™. Up to 12 credits are available at any given time. Simply read the article, complete the short post-test and evaluation, and earn your CME credit. Available at [www.jaacap.org](http://www.jaacap.org).

If you have any questions, please contact [CME@aacap.org](mailto:CME@aacap.org).