A World Without: The Fantastic Five

By Alastair Campbell and Nigel Jones on behalf of Time to Change.

time to change
let's end mental health discrimination
Introduction

Winston Churchill, Abraham Lincoln, Florence Nightingale, Charles Darwin, and Marie Curie: What do these men and woman have in common? They were all, of course, abnormally successful high-achievers. They all left the world a significantly different and better place than they found it. Yet they also shared something else – each one had a mental health problem which impacted on their lives.

That might seem surprising, but actually mental health problems affect around one in four people at some stage in their lives, and there’s no reason why these historical giants should be immune.

But in the 21st century mental health problems are a big taboo – and many of those affected find themselves sidelined, kept out of the top jobs and treated as incapable. Today, more than 60% of employers say they wouldn’t consider employing someone with a history of mental illness. Perhaps they don’t realise what talent they are missing out on.

Had this discrimination applied to Churchill, Lincoln, and Nightingale we can safely say that today’s world would be a very different place.

Let’s look at how this ‘fantastic five’ shaped today’s world as we know it. Let’s ask ourselves how life would be if they had been subject to discrimination and been prevented from making their contributions to public life.

Nigel Jones

Nigel Jones is a historian, author and broadcaster. He is former Assistant Editor of History Today and BBC History and co-author of ‘A World Without’ on behalf of Time to Change.
Voted the greatest Briton of all time, the inspirational Second World War Prime Minister, with his trademark cigar, bow tie and ‘V’ for victory sign, is one of history’s most familiar figures. Soldier, statesman, historian, orator, author and artist – there was seemingly nothing that Churchill could not do.

Yet his phenomenal, driving energy was only one side of the story. At the same time as leading Britain, Churchill lived with a mental health problem. He had dark bouts of depression, which he openly described as his ‘black dog’.

Churchill entered Downing Street as Premier at the most dangerous moment in Britain’s long history. Nazi armies had swept through Europe and stood on the French coast, threatening a Cross-Channel invasion. At that time of extreme peril in the spring and summer of 1940, it was Churchill who saved the day. His ruthless determination to win; his stubborn refusal to admit defeat against apparently overwhelming odds; above all the ringing phrases he broadcast, in which he growled out a message of defiance and hope, inspired the nation – and the world. He, more than any other person, stiffened the sinews and summoned up the blood. No wonder, that when he died in 1965, a grateful nation mourned his passing in a huge outburst of grief and pride.

A World Without Churchill...

Depression didn’t stop Churchill becoming the most admired political leader the country has had. But it is worth asking whether, had he lived in today’s world, with its more aggressive, intrusive 24 hour media culture, and society’s obsession with the weakness and failings of public figures, a man with his mental health problems could ever have become Prime Minister at all. And if his depressive illness had indeed barred him from power, who knows how Britain’s history might have been different.

It is surely possible that Britain would have made a compromise peace with Hitler’s Germany in May 1940. And equally possible that this would have led to a Nazi-dominated Europe; the extermination of the continent’s entire Jewish community; and a regime ruling by terror, violence, arbitrary arrests and mass executions. Britain’s cherished laws and liberties, even our language, could have become history. Churchill’s leadership ensured the survival of freedom and democracy – it is as awesomely simple as that.

Britain could not have afforded to write off such an important leader. But how many other potential great politicians with mental health problems have been sidelined and stunted because of social stigma, or stay out of the frontline because of their fears of how their so-called weaknesses will be exposed and attacked? Could the next Churchill be missed?
Entirely coincidentally, two giants of the 19th century, Charles Darwin, and the man who is arguably America’s greatest president, Abraham Lincoln, were born on the same day – February 12th 1809. Although they never met, both men would have profound effects on the course of human history. Lincoln was famously born in a primitive one-room log cabin in rural Kentucky, to an obscure family. He made his own way in the world entirely due to his own efforts. Virtually self-taught (his home was without light and he read by the light of a log fire) – he became a small-town lawyer in Illinois and won a reputation for firm principles, straight talking, and homespun, pragmatic wisdom. As an accomplished lawyer he entered local politics as a moderate – but firmly opposed to the expansion of slavery from the southern states to the rest of the US.

When a new party, the Republicans, was formed, dedicated to preserving the Union against the threat of southern secession over the slavery issue, Lincoln became one of its leading lights – and won the Presidential election of 1861. Ignoring his pleas for unity, the south split away and the American Civil war – the bloodiest conflict in the country’s history – began. Through four long and bloody years of war, Lincoln held his country, his party and (not least) the fractious factions in his own cabinet together. Always a moderate, seeking consensus and unity, he eventually authorised the historic Proclamation of the Emancipation of Slaves – freeing all slaves on US territory: the first step in the long struggle of African Americans to be treated as equal human beings that only culminated in the recent election of Barack Obama – who idolises Lincoln – as the country’s first black President.

Lincoln performed his public duties despite a lifelong condition termed ‘melancholy’ by his contemporaries, which today would be defined as clinical depression. His life was tragic enough – his mother died when he was only nine; three of his four children died before reaching adulthood, and his wife Mary Todd Lincoln also had depression.

Middle age and increasing political power and responsibility only served to deepen Lincoln’s depressive tendencies. ‘Melancholy seemed to drip from him as he walked’ observed his law partner William Herndon. But Lincoln had a resilient inner core, as tough and gnarled as seasoned hickory wood, and the increasing hostility that his outspoken politics provoked as the country drifted into war, seemed to bounce off him like peas from a peashooter against a wall.

The tragedies of the Civil War naturally deepened his depressions yet further. He would often stare out of the window, remaining silent for long periods, lost in gloomy thoughts. At one particularly low point, following a series of defeats, he confessed to his Attorney General that he felt ready to hang himself, though his customary steely determination soon re-asserted itself and saw him – and his country through.

**A World Without Lincoln…**

So one of the greatest presidents the United States has ever known was a man who battled depression all his adult life. If he’d have been kept from office as a result, the world we know today would be a very different place.

Lincoln was instrumental in the abolition of slavery in the US – starting the long hard battle for equality fought by black people ever since. Just this month we have seen that fight climax in an enormous victory, as the first ever black president was sworn into office. President Barack Obama, already acknowledged as one of the most inspirational figures of this generation is clear about who inspired him – Abraham Lincoln. Put simply, a world without Lincoln would be a world without President Obama.

The country Obama now governs would be unrecognisable without Lincoln. Without his inspiring, steady and uniting leadership throughout the tumultuous civil war, the nation would have split into two countries; the United States would not be united. If those around him had viewed his mental health problems as a bar to him leading, the US would not have risen to become a great beacon of freedom and hope. Without Lincoln, the democratic ideals of liberty, equality and justice might even have disappeared from the world.
Florence Nightingale
(1820–1910)

Like her great contemporary, Darwin, Florence Nightingale, had an immense and lasting effect on the world in her long life, leaving it an immeasurably better place. Born to wealthy English parents in the eponymous Italian city which gave her her name, Nightingale grew up determined to be her own woman. Rejecting the conventional Victorian path of marriage and motherhood pressed on her by her parents, she became increasingly determined to forge her own career and an independent path through life. She effected most of her changes through her influence on male power brokers – she became convinced that caring for others, and in particular improving the woefully low standards of Victorian public health, was her true vocation. But her chosen way was not to be an easy one. In 1847, she had what was then described as a ‘nervous collapse’ – what we might nowadays describe as a breakdown, or depressive episode. While recuperating in Italy, Nightingale felt a call from God to devote her life to caring for the ill. Rejecting a suitor’s proposal of marriage, she travelled through Europe, observing and writing about the care of the sick. It was then that Nightingale met a powerful male mentor, the politician Sidney Herbert.

Herbert became the Government’s Secretary for War when the Crimean War broke out between Britain and Russia. Appalled by reports that British troops were dying in hundreds because of inadequate medical care, in October 1854, Nightingale persuaded Herbert to send her – leading 38 other nurses – to care for the casualties of war. She arrived in the hospital in Scutari, a suburb of Istanbul, where the war wounded were being ‘treated’ alongside sufferers of cholera, typhoid, typhus and dysentery. Florence blew through the dirty, stinking rooms like a cold wind. Conditions at the old-fashioned and overcrowded hospital were appalling. More than 4,000 soldiers had died there before Nightingale arrived, largely through diseases directly attributable to blocked drains and other poor hygienic conditions. Within six months, after flushing out the drains, and instituting a regime of basic hygiene, Nightingale had reduced the death rate among Scutari’s casualties from 42 percent to two percent. Not for nothing did grateful soldiers dub the woman patrolling their wards ‘the lady with the lamp’.

On her return to Britain in 1857, Nightingale found herself a national heroine. She used her fame to extend her nursing work, setting up the Florence Nightingale School to train nurses in London, and, with the help of Herbert and other influential men friends, establishing nursing as a respectable, properly qualified profession for women. But throughout this period Nightingale was often unwell, having difficulties with chronic fatigue and depression. In March 2008 Kathy Wisner, Professor of Psychiatry at the University of Pittsburgh, suggested that Bi-polar disorder (or Manic depression as it used to be known) was the source of Nightingale’s illness. Professor Wisner described Nightingale as a ‘classic case’ of the disorder; having experienced ‘voices in her head’ from her teens, and displaying other familiar symptoms including dark depressions and delusions.

Florence Nightingale’s influence on nursing throughout the world is felt to this day.

At a time when medicine was dominated by a male elite, she single-handedly turned the concept of healthcare inside out and challenged the idea that women could not be medical professionals. As a consequence she is a modern day icon. Her achievements are all the more extraordinary given her own severe mental health problems.

Nightingale had a massive impact – she was one of the first to recognise the importance of cleanliness and hygiene within hospitals, saving not only hundreds of lives during her lifetime but also millions ever since.

Those whose lives she saved certainly didn’t hold her mental health problem against her, and her condition didn’t stop her influencing rigid institutions. She badgered bureaucrats, chivvied male chauvinists, and relentlessly pressured authority with the awesome power of her personality, becoming an adept politician. This was a woman who was strong enough to persuade a male-dominated establishment to rethink its entire approach to healthcare – and all in the cause of a healthier, happier world.
One of the world’s most famous and influential scientists, Marie Curie’s contribution to science and medicine cannot be overestimated. Her pioneering work on radioactivity led to the development of radiotherapy treatment for cancer – quite simply, her work has saved millions of lives.

The first woman to receive the Nobel Prize and the only person to have been honoured with two Nobel Prizes in two different sciences, Curie was a true trailblazer.

And her impact was social as well as scientific – a pre-cursor to the feminist movement, Curie battled entrenched prejudice against women in the academic and public realms. Despite her unquestionably superior intellect and ability she fought hard to be taken seriously by the male scientific elite and was frequently attacked by sexist detractors. It was only after being barred from higher education in her native Poland because she was a woman that Curie moved to France – there becoming the first ever female professor at the University of Paris.

Yet she also lived with recurrent episodes of severe depression; the first occurring when she was just ten years old. Her mother died and the event, according to Curie; “threw her into a profound depression”. The young Curie did recover, but again at age 15, the problems returned. Experiencing what doctors then described as a ‘nervous collapse’ the young scientist had what we might describe as a ‘breakdown’. Her mental health problems did not finish there – but neither did they impede her academic success.

In 1906 Curie’s husband, collaborator and closest intimate, Pierre Curie was tragically killed in a road accident. The incident had a profound impact on Curie and caused her to become, in her own words “an incurably and wretchedly lonely person”. Five years later, just one month after receiving her second Nobel Prize in 1911, for outstanding services in Chemistry, Curie was admitted to hospital with depression. She spent most of January 1912 in hospital and many months recuperating.

Curie’s academic success was not won without struggle. Both of her parents were left penniless after their involvement in Polish political activism and Marie had a difficult time trying to gain access to elite institutions. Yet Curie’s commitment was strong enough to overcome financial constraints.

And she didn’t forget those humble beginnings. She was known in her time as a remarkably modest person, indeed Albert Einstein is said to have remarked that Curie was one of “the very few who was never corrupted by the fame she won”. Ever the philanthropist, Curie shared the proceeds from her first Nobel Prize with those needier than herself, including science students needing support to continue their studies. In a further gesture of generosity to others, she gave away her Nobel Gold medals to help fund the First World War effort.

A World Without Marie Curie...

All of those battling cancer today and those caring for loved ones fighting the disease will be grateful that prejudice about Marie Curie’s mental health problems didn’t prevent her pursuing brilliant innovations in cancer care. And we might ask ourselves, if social stigma had kept her from her work, would cancer treatment have advanced as far as it has?

Curie’s bold character and maverick mind helped advance physics, chemistry and cancer care immeasurably – and she demonstrated that it is perfectly possible to lead an immensely productive life, whilst living with recurring severe depression.
Charles Darwin (1809–1882)

Britain’s greatest scientist, Charles Darwin laid the foundations for the theory of evolution and transformed the way people think about the world around them. We are going to hear a lot about Darwin in 2009 because it is not only the bi-centenary of his birth, but also the 150th anniversary of the publication of his great work ‘The Origin of Species’ in which he set out his earth-shattering theory of evolution; the result of half a lifetime’s careful observation and study of the natural world. Evolution, or ‘natural selection’, demonstrated that all forms of life were and are in a continual state of change – passing through cycles of growth and decay; and forever adapting to constantly changing circumstances. Crudely understood, Darwin’s theories are harsh and relentless: the ‘survival of the fittest’ means that only those species able to adapt and change will survive. The rest are doomed.

Although it challenged traditional religious beliefs that the world had been made in seven days, and that all creatures great and small had arrived on earth in finished form, evolution also had a liberating effect on human thought and paved the way for the enormous advances made in evolutionary biology over the last century, from transplant surgery to the discovery of DNA.

But Darwin’s great mind also had to contend with a mental health problem. He experienced anxiety, panic attacks and mental torment that often left him in floods of tears. In modern parlance Darwin had a ‘panic disorder’ or severe anxiety. In stressful situations he’d experience palpitations, skin inflammation, agoraphobia, blinding headaches and agonising stomach cramps.

Unsure what was wrong with him, he spent 25 years consulting more than 20 doctors in a vain bid to find a cure. He visited spas such as Malvern and Ilkley, subjecting himself to ‘water cures’ and the treatment of quack physicians in a – largely fruitless – attempt to cure his condition.

Darwin’s illnesses, however, served a purpose. They enabled this cautious, shy man to escape his own celebrity and the storm of publicity that his controversial theories aroused. His worst symptoms coincided with crucial crises in his life, – such as his discovery that rival biologist Alfred Wallace had independently reached conclusions about evolution remarkably similar to those of Darwin. An increasingly reclusive Darwin welcomed the help of his disciple, the combative Thomas Huxley, nicknamed ‘Darwin’s bulldog’, in propagating and defending his case against critics of evolution in public debates. Meanwhile, Darwin sheltered in the bosom of his family at his country home in Kent, Downe House.

Modern psychiatric experts who have studied Darwin believe the causes of his physical illness were rooted in mental illness.

A World Without Darwin...

Like the US President born on the same day, Darwin’s image graces a bank note. He stares across a ten pound note, whilst Abraham Lincoln looks out from a five dollar bill. Just one more way in which the greatness of these men is recognised. In 1992, Darwin was ranked 16th on Michael H. Hart’s list of the most influential figures in history. And his mental health problems didn’t hinder this brilliant mind. Thankfully for us all, nor did prejudice about his condition get in his way. For his impact is felt by all of us.

Before he presented his theory of evolution, scientists had struggled in a fog of ignorance and superstition to reach the truth about the fundamental facts of life. But Darwin’s discoveries pushed the world into a new age of science, reason and understanding of our complex and infinitely rich universe. Darwin presented a convincing picture of life-forms of almost unimaginable abundance and richness, inhabiting and sharing the earth around us, and laid the way for our modern understanding of genetics. Without Darwin’s work, it is entirely possible we would have entered the 21st century without having mapped the human genome, without developed techniques for understanding genetic conditions, nor been in a position accurately to pinpoint criminals on the basis of DNA evidence.
Conclusion

These five giants of history all made an enormous contribution to public life and helped to shape the world as we know it; and they did so whilst living with mental health conditions.

They are proof that people can experience mental health problems and still lead immensely productive lives. Thankfully for all of us, prejudice about their mental health did not prevent this Fantastic Five from getting on with their important work. Yet there’s no doubt, stigma around mental health problems is real, and so is the discrimination.

We might well ask, if these five people had been living and working today, would we have accepted them, or would we hold their mental health problems against them? We’ll never know. But when more than forty percent of employers say they wouldn’t feel able to employ someone with a history of mental health problems it seems a real possibility that very capable individuals are being overlooked. Perhaps employers, and we in wider society, don’t realise what talent we’re missing out on. It’s Time to Change that.

About Time to Change

Time to Change is England’s most ambitious programme to end the discrimination faced by people who experience mental health problems, as well as improve the nation’s wellbeing.

Mental Health Media, Mind, and Rethink are leading this programme of 35 projects, funded with £16m from the Big Lottery Fund and £2m from Comic Relief, and evaluated by the Institute of Psychiatry at King’s College, London.

The programme is founded on an international evidence base, and has people with direct experience of mental health problems at its heart. Local community projects work alongside a national high-profile campaign, a mass participation physical activity week, legal test cases, training for student doctors and teachers, and a network of grassroots activists combating discrimination.

We aim to work in partnership with all sectors and communities in order to tackle a long lingering taboo and one of the greatest social injustices.

To find out more about Time to Change visit www.time-to-change.org.uk
What would life be like without them?