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COMMENTARY

## **Mental illness is no crime**

American astronaut Lisa Nowak deserved better treatment, says writer and mental-health advocate SANDY NAIMAN

**SANDY NAIMAN**

From Monday's Globe and Mail

Why did no one think to have former U.S. astronaut Lisa Nowak assessed by forensic psychiatrists before throwing her into handcuffs, beaming her frightened face all over the world and turning her into a public joke? Obviously she's not well. She's fragile. Sleep-deprived. Probably delusional. But NASA only plans to reassess its screening process and weed out applicants with mental illnesses.

What a cruel commentary on a woman once considered a hero? This 43-year-old, recently separated, working mother-of-three deserved more humane treatment. She didn't hurt anybody and who knows what was playing in her mind or what her intentions were.

Captain Nowak should have been sequestered in a forensic psychiatry ward for a few days, carefully assessed and examined, allowed to rest and begin to heal. Instead, the media flayed her and she'll never be able to recover from that. Ever. Her children, husband and family are all scarred now, too.

I feel for her because I've been there. I've lived with a mental illness -- bipolar disorder -- most of my life. I've been hospitalized many times for mania, another word for insanity or psychosis. I've done humiliating, demoralizing things, in public. Things, I wish I could undo. Or forget.

Once, I confessed to a happily married Toronto Sun colleague that I was in love with him. Convinced he felt the same way about me, I suggested we get together.

What I believed was true in fact was a delusion, but no one could ever convince me I was crazy. Logic doesn't exist in the manic mind. Everyone else was crazy. I was fine.

When I returned to work after a lengthy psychiatric hospital stay I heard this man had a field day regaling the entire office with tales of my romantic advances. I was mortified, but for the next 20 years, I worked in that office with him.

Another night, I believed a friend was madly in love with me. Thinking he wanted to meet me at a party at the Royal Ontario Museum, I threw on a blazer, and wearing underwear and no trousers, I grabbed my little dog Murphy and drove downtown. After illegally parking out front, I tried cajoling the guards into opening the museum.

But there was no party, they said, so I went next door to the planetarium. There, I was able to talk my way in, and with my dog trailing behind me, I ran frantically around calling out this man's name. Again I ended up in a psychiatric ward.

I was never arrested or handcuffed, but I spent 24 hours shackled to a hospital bed, in wrist and ankle restraints, needing a bedpan instead of a diaper.

Yet at the same time, I've spent my professional life as a journalist in a fast-paced competitive daily newspaper market. The difference between me and Capt. Nowak is that I lived and worked in a relatively enlightened, caring community. My psychotic behaviour, though inappropriate and sometimes violent, was never criminalized. Hers was.

A UCLA English professor once explained a 16th century condition in women known as "lovesickness." Their mania was not dissimilar to Capt. Nowak's but, back then, people sometimes treated mentally vulnerable, volatile women with more compassion. Or sometimes they treated them as witches, stuffing their pockets with stones and tossing them in ponds.

Society still doesn't understand the nature of mental illness.

And that is manifest in the behaviour of the police and the media. Capt. Nowak was treated as if her actions were entirely willful and within her control, not signs of an illness as real as cancer.

It's a travesty. Yet it happens everywhere, all the time, and for the same reasons. At NASA, asking for help through psychological services, though they're available, is clearly not "the right stuff."

And look at the response of our caring society.

After police threw Capt. Nowak into the criminal justice system -- when they should first have placed her in the health-care system -- the media pounced on her. Assuming her actions were motivated by jealousy, they turned her sad story into a sensational saga about an imaginary love-triangle.

Too many people are shot, sometimes killed by police unable to distinguish between a criminal act and delusional acting out. People are thrown into jail for misdemeanours while hallucinating, and are often victimized there.

This doesn't have to happen. Better models exist.

For the past seven years, Toronto's St. Michael's Hospital has operated a Mobile Crisis Intervention Team. By partnering psychiatric emergency nurses with police, they serve to decriminalize mental health issues and de-escalate crises in the community to avoid unnecessary arrests.

Ontario's Ministry of Health declared the service a model program and funding has flowed all over the city to replicate it.

Since 2005, York Support Services Network, outside Toronto, has also sent members of its Mental Health Support Team out with police to help them differentiate between criminal and delusional acts; a similar program has been equally successful in Hamilton.

Still, ill-informed media continue to perpetuate the myth that people with mental illnesses commit most violent crimes. It's easy to scapegoat people with mental illnesses who can't speak out for themselves. Or better, disguise it. Calling mental illness "a mental health issue," makes it more palatable, but this language masks the truth.

That's changing. Next month, the Ontario division of the Canadian Mental Health Association is convening a panel of journalists and launching a website to educate the media about mental illness. Others should do the same.

But it will be too late for poor Lisa Nowak.

*Sandy Naiman, a Toronto writer, recently received the "Deloitte Hero Award" from the Mood Disorders Association of Ontario for her mental health advocacy.*

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