

Don't Call Them Crazy!

Every woman on TV these days seems to have a mental health issue—and experts say we can all take some happiness lessons from them.

By Jennifer Keishin Armstrong

Oirls' Hannah Horvath, played by Lena Dunham, has obsessive-compulsive disorder. *Homeland's* CIA agent Carrie Mathison (Claire Danes) suffers from bipolar disorder, with a habit of frequently breaking down in tears. *The Bridge* and *Glee* also feature heroines with psychiatric disorders. You get the message: In the past several seasons, mental illness—once limited in its television portrayal to psycho killers and the occasional crazy aunt—has made its way into too many female-led story lines to count.

Why? In part because TV characters have gotten more complex in general over the last few years, notes Brian Dyak of the Entertainment Industries Council, a nonprofit that helps Hollywood accurately portray health issues. "We first saw psychological problems in male roles like Tony Soprano, and now female ones are following suit," he says. And while the shows do risk trivializing serious conditions (OCD, ha-ha!), the writers of *Girls* and *Homeland* are going for honest realism. "[OCD] is something that I've struggled with," Dunham has said of the character she created, "so I feel as though I am able to shed a certain kind of light on the experience. If this show could have

You can deal with mental health problems and still be badass, like the resident cool girls from *Glee* (Jayma Mays, below left), *The Bridge* (Diane Kruger, center), and *Girls* (Lena Dunham).



Carrie, in a rare moment of not sobbing

any part in making people feel like their own emotional distress was normalized a little, that would be really great."

Alison Dotson, 34, an author in Minneapolis who has OCD, was one such someone. "*Girls* felt refreshing because I hadn't ever seen a young female character with obsessive-compulsive disorder," she says. "It made it easier to talk about." That's why all the experts *Glamour* spoke to were enthusiastic about the trend of TV protagonists with mental health concerns (which, by the way, afflict nearly one in four actual women each year). Here, three things the current plot lines are teaching us:

1. Professionals: You need 'em.

Many of these characters *are* in treatment, and that's the point. After a breakdown in season one, *Homeland's* Carrie got help and returned to the top of her field with her condition under control.

Experts agree that the earlier you treat a psychiatric issue, the less it impacts your life.

2. You should lean on a friend.

Hannah's OCD reached crisis in part because her social support network had crumbled away: She was fighting with her BFF Marnie and dealing with major ex-boyfriend drama. But HBO got it right—loved ones help us get and stay well. If you're struggling, consider confiding in family and friends, says psychologist Caroline Clauss-Ehlers, Ph.D.: "Some women find that this helps them feel less isolated, less alone, and more hopeful."

3. You can have a mental illness and still win at life.

And here's the best thing about the new issue-riddled characters: They're still awesome women, with rich work and love lives. That's realistic! "It's important to see that these problems don't define who these women are," says New York City psychiatrist Julie Penzner, M.D. "People can be smart and talented and still struggle with mental illness—that shouldn't eclipse their strengths." ■

