


[Back to Article](#)

## Mental Health: The road to diagnosis is filled with twists and turns

Published on Tuesday May 29, 2012

**Chantaie Allick**

Staff Reporter

Chan Bak has waited three years for a clear diagnosis to explain his delusions and strange disorganized behaviour. During that time, he's had several psychotic breaks, four hospitalizations and seven psychiatrists. He has lost his job and has moved back home with his parents in Toronto.

His struggle with mental illness began on a warm night in August 2009 when police found him walking on the shoulder of Highway 85. The 27-year-old software engineer was in the midst of his first psychotic episode, deep in a delusion, walking to the home of a friend in Woodbridge 100 kilometres away.

"I remember talking gibberish to them," says Bak, "though when they asked me where I was going I told them the exact address in Woodbridge. I remember them asking me, 'You're a smart guy. How long do you think it'll take for you to walk there?' And that's the first time I actually thought about it."

The officers took him home, spoke briefly with his roommates and left.



Chan Bak, 27, has waited three years for a clear diagnosis to explain his delusions and strange disorganized behaviour. During that time, he's had several psychotic breaks, four hospitalizations and seven psychiatrists. He has lost his job and has moved back home with his parents in Toronto.

PAWEL DWULIT/TORONTO STAR

Doctors later told Bak that he had had a brief psychotic episode. They have also told him he is bipolar. Most recently, he has been diagnosed with a form of pre-schizophrenia. He has been prescribed Risperidone, an antipsychotic drug.

But he's no closer to knowing what ails him.

Bak's experience is not unusual. There are 6.7 million Canadians who suffer a mental illness. It can take months, even years, to diagnosis certain illnesses and, years later, a patient can receive another diagnosis entirely.

The difficulty in getting a diagnosis is a deep crack in the mental-health system. And it is one that is hard to fix. Unlike a biopsy to identify cancer or a glucose test to reveal diabetes, there is no diagnostic tool to detect mental illness. Conclusions are based on observation and it can take years for doctors to get it right.

The diagnostic interview is "kind of like being a Sherlock Holmes and sorting out what is the cause and then what to treat," says Dr. Thomas Ungar, head of psychiatry at North York General Hospital.

Interviews, blood and urine tests, X-rays and questionnaires, help build a patient's profile. But lacking a physical test for mental illness a degree of uncertainty always exists.

A great deal of research has focused on understanding the biochemical underpinnings of mental illness. Some researchers have begun to explore the developmental and physical causes of severe mental illness.

But for now, this crack in the system — the first that patients encounter — can delay care and healing. For patients like Bak, it can mean years living on a precipice, facing a life-altering diagnosis but with no definite answer. All Bak knows for sure is that for the past three years he has experienced severe psychotic breaks and delusions on and off.

**In the days** leading up to the highway incident, the quiet software engineer became excitable and talkative. He was sleeping at strange hours, smoking marijuana, consulting Google and developing notions on how the world works. He started a blog to express his ideas. This served only to deepen his delusions.

He took an impromptu trip to a Niagara casino with two friends but once there abandoned them and checked into a hotel. After a few hours, he decided to visit a friend in Calgary and headed to the airport, where he realized he had no money for a ticket or identification. He called his Waterloo roommate who went to the airport and persuaded him to return home, where he took sleeping pills and went to bed.



When he awoke, “the world didn’t seem real,” says Bak. It was as if he were in *The Matrix*. That was when he decided to visit his friend in Woodbridge. A few days after the police returned him home, Bak’s friends had him admitted to hospital.

He was there a week or two. The details remain hazy.

“My first hospitalization was dreadful,” Bak says. “The realization that I was actually hospitalized didn’t dawn on me until the second or third day when I was forcibly taken down to the ground by one of the nurses.” He had been trying to escape through an open door.

The hospital psychiatrist said he had experienced an acute psychotic episode but offered no real explanation of what that meant. He was prescribed Risperidone and sent home.

Since then, the 27-year-old has received several diagnoses, depending on how long the episode lasts.

If symptoms (delusions, hallucinations, disorganized speech) last for less than a month, it is called an acute psychotic episode.

If the symptoms last longer than a month, it is called schizophreniform.

If they last six months or longer, the diagnosis is schizophrenia

“I almost find it meaningless. Because psychosis, schizophrenia, schizophreniform — they’re all just duration based. There’s no real insight into what the actual experience of it is,” Bak says. “A delusion is so — it’s so visceral you actually believe it. You actually know that it’s true.”

He left the hospital feeling humiliated and unnecessarily detained. “The difficulty with my condition was that an illness for which there are no physical indications is easy to deny,” he says. (He’d had an MRI and CT scan during his hospital stay that came back normal. )

Bak is not typical, in that he is lucid when he processes and explains his experience. Even as he describes terrifying experiences, there is a calm about him.

But before the highway and long before he came to terms with being mentally ill, Bak was just a kid — an exceptional one.

“I don’t like to say this about myself, but I’ve always been told that I was very smart,” he says.

The family moved around a lot — he was born in Korea, moved to Canada, returned to Korea and also spent time in California.

In high school, he was in a specialized program studying math, science and computers. He says he got into the University of Waterloo with one of the highest entrance averages in Canada that year. He did co-op placements at some of the largest online firms and in early 2009 was offered a job in Seattle with a six-figure salary when he graduated that year. He turned it down to stay in Toronto.

But in the end, he lost his job and returned to Waterloo that summer.

**Bak knows first hand** the complexities involved in diagnosing mental illness. Psychiatrists use the ever-evolving *Diagnosics and Statistics Manual*, or DSM. As new knowledge about illnesses comes to light, the manual is updated, sometimes splitting or adding diseases. Psychiatrists match

symptom clusters to illness with little explanation of the cause. The manual is in its fourth edition and is expected to be updated in 2013.

Psychosis can be caused by any number of ailments, including Lupus, or drugs, such as anesthetic. It is also a symptom of a wide range of mental health issues. This is why Bak could be diagnosed with acute psychosis by one doctor and bipolar disorder shortly after by another, says Ungar.

Bak describes the diagnostic interview process: "How it works is that they talk to me (and) then they talk to the people who brought me in."

"It's not easy for either the practitioners or the patients," says Ungar. "It can be frustrating, but it's just the reality of how we work."

The process of diagnosis — in the case of schizophrenia, the persistence of symptoms for at least six months — has an inevitable effect on care. Research shows that early intervention in psychosis is effective in avoiding another episode.

Bak was most recently diagnosed with schizophreniform, which, if untreated, often precedes a diagnosis of schizophrenia.

He doesn't like his medication and takes the drugs only when his friends urge him to. He has found support from a friend who lets him talk through his hurtling thoughts. And he has found solace in meditation; he meditates on his balcony, perched on a pillow, three times a week for 20 minutes.

Bak came to meditation after reading *Buddha: A Story of Enlightenment* by Deepak Chopra. He thought through his experiences and realized he needed to turn his brain off, to stop thinking sometimes.

"My forays into Eastern contemplative traditions have given me tools to pursue ways to lengthen the silence of the mind, at the same time conditioning it away from negative emotions. I strongly believe that these tools are much more relevant to mental illness than any prescription drug, and that these tools should be made more available to patients of mental illness. I don't know how anyone else copes without them."

It's clear talking to Bak that his own assessment of his illness gives him greater comfort than the uncertainties and vagueness of the various medical labels.

"I believe that I understand my disease," said Bak. "My friends would say, 'No, you've said that before, but this time around I feel like I've narrowed it down.'"

*Note: This article has been edited from a previous version.*

[callick@thestar.ca](mailto:callick@thestar.ca)