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“Living in the After”: Examining How *Grey’s Anatomy* Portrays Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder

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## “Living in the After”: Examining How Grey’s Anatomy Portrays Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder

**ABSTRACT:** *Over seventeen seasons, Grey’s Anatomy (2005–) has tackled rare physical conditions, medical miracles, and mental illness, including PTSD. Previous research on mental illness representation in television suggests that oftentimes, through pejorative or romanticized stereotypes, portrayals enhance stigma and have detrimental effects on viewers. Using inductive research, focused on PTSD-centric episodes regarding two main characters, this study revealed that Grey’s Anatomy emphasizes a mostly empowering portrayal of PTSD. These findings suggest that future representations of mental illness like those in Grey’s can eradicate stereotypes and stigmas as the norm and replace them with representations that encourage acceptance, openness, and communication.*

### Introduction

Dr. Owen Hunt, a veteran and trauma surgeon introduced in the fifth season of ABC’s *Grey’s Anatomy* (2005–), stands beside Dr. Cristina Yang, a colleague, in a hallway of the hospital where he now works. Cristina is frustrated with him; the last time he was there, in the hospital, they kissed. He knew her name. Now, he appears not to remember her at all. Owen turns to her and tells her the story of how his unit of 20 people, including himself, was attacked when he returned to Iraq from his brief leave of absence. He tells her that 19 of them died, and then he was discharged. With difficulty, Owen tells Cristina, “I’m not there anymore, in the before. I knew your name in the before. But now I’m living in the after” (“Life During Wartime”).

The American prime-time medical drama, which “follows the personal and professional lives of doctors” at the fictional Grey Sloan Memorial (formerly known as Seattle Grace Hospital) in Seattle, Washington, has tackled everything from physical illnesses to rare conditions to medical miracles, including mental illness in many of its story lines and characters (“Grey’s Anatomy”). The show, created by Shonda Rhimes, first aired in March of 2005 and continues today in its 17<sup>th</sup> season, making it the “longest-running primetime scripted medical drama series ever,” with at least 375 episodes (Goldberg). Its popularity with audiences has

continued over the course of 16 years, acquiring millions of views in the United States when episodes originally aired; its most watched episode occurred during season 2 in 2006, garnering 38.1 million viewers on its original air date (“It’s the End of the World”). Most of the episodes are centered around the doctors and their lives as surgeons, but their personal lives and struggles are emphasized as well. While most of the medically related storylines revolve around the patients in the show, some main characters have been shown to have certain mental health conditions ranging from depression to anxiety to addiction on various occasions. In the above scene with Owen and Cristina, we get our first taste of a main character in *Grey’s Anatomy* who has Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD).

Due to *Grey’s Anatomy*’s influence and status as a cultural phenomenon, the way in which the show portrays PTSD in its main characters, and how often it does so, is important in the world of media as it pertains to an increase in representations of mental illness in television. Television has the power to convey to its audiences positive and negative messages that can extend past the point time a person is watching a certain representation of something. When a show chooses to portray mental illnesses, such as PTSD, there comes the risk of depicting scenarios and characters in a manner that can be perceived as stigmatizing and artificial. With *Grey’s Anatomy*’s large following, negative portrayals it may include of a mental illness like PTSD can have adverse effects on viewers of the show. This can lead to harmful assumptions or beliefs about what having PTSD is like and lead to the spread of harmful ideologies about people who have PTSD, including, for example, beliefs that those with PTSD are always violent or that all PTSD is caused by the same type of event. Therefore, it’s important for a show, when tackling mental illness, to do it as authentically as possible so that stereotypes and stigmas are

closer to being eradicated as the norm and replaced with empowering and natural representations that encourage acceptance, openness, and communication.

In this paper, I will show how *Grey's Anatomy* appears to push back against past research that suggests representations of mental illness in television are largely negative or harmful, as well as what that ultimately means for viewers of the show and the way PTSD may be thought about in the future.

## Literature Review

While researching how mental illness in fictional television is represented, I found articles that provided analyses for various mental illness representations in both fictional and factual television, as well as articles that showed how negative and positive representations can affect viewers and the increase or decrease of stigma around mental illness. I also utilized an article that explored the concept of framing in media and its role in how mental illness is perceived, as well as an article that analyzed the way media messages are programmed and how those messages may be received. These sources helped me examine the ways in which *Grey's Anatomy* specifically has handled Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) within the subject of mental illness representation and ultimately determine how positively and naturally the show has done so.

When it comes to how mental illness is represented in the media, and specifically television, inaccurate depictions can have negative consequences that extend past the show itself. In her article on the way media portrays mental illness and related treatments, Stuart argues that negative representations and associated images of mental illness in various forms of media, such as film, television, and news outlets, are detrimental to people who have a mental illness. These representations range from showing mentally ill people as being dangerous and unpredictable

criminals to emphasizing reactions of fear, rejection, and ridicule from others. According to Stuart, the stigma that may then come from these inaccurate, harmful depictions that leads to negative reactions can affect those who have a mental illness in their social and work lives. Stuart says that mental health professionals can be affected as well when patients deny symptoms or fail to follow through with treatment options. However, Stuart also suggests that the problem of inaccurate portrayals and their consequences can be improved through media and education training programs that will enhance efforts to proactively and effectively get intended messages across. This article was beneficial to my analysis of *Grey's Anatomy* in that it explains some of the ways television gets mental illness incorrect and the possible resulting consequences, and it helped me determine whether or not *Grey's Anatomy* depicts its mentally ill characters as violent and unstable (or vice versa) as well as determine if its depictions could lead to detrimental or beneficial effects for viewers and social stigmas.

In line with Stuart's argument on the negative consequences of inaccurate or harmful representations of mental illness, Quintero Johnson and Miller analyze how violent acts are contextualized through mental illness and whether or not media representations of mental illness frame mental illness as one of the causes of violent acts, specifically those committed by women. Quintero Johnson and Miller emphasize media frames in particular, which can be understood as "the conventions media producers use to organize, make sense of, and give meaning to social phenomena... [which] have symbolic power to assert the narratives of certain privileged and dominant perspectives in ways that ultimately lead to widespread...perceptions" (212). This means that mental illness depiction through media frames has the potential to influence audiences and form their beliefs about what is being portrayed. The authors examine three forms of media (news stories, film, and television) in order to form their argument, and come to the

conclusion that television, specifically the soap opera, is best equipped to tackle mental illness representations in the most “humane and sympathetic” way, since the format allows for character backgrounds and influences to be well-developed over time (Quintero Johnson and Miller 224). Although the article mainly focuses on women and the way media contextualizes violent acts committed by women in the frame of mental illness, it also includes an analysis of male characters whose violent acts are associated with psychopathy or mental illness; this is relevant to the way *Grey’s Anatomy* portrays male characters with mental illnesses. Additionally, although *Grey’s Anatomy* is not technically defined as a soap opera, it is a long-running television drama with many qualities of that kind of television show as well as the capability to develop its characters and their stories over a period of time. This idea, plus Quintero Johnson and Miller’s proposal of the irredeemable, mentally ill male character, helped me analyze and determine that *Grey’s Anatomy*’s portrayal of PTSD in a male main character, Dr. Owen Hunt, is as naturalistic as it can be within the confines of televised fictional storytelling, which in turn suggests that the show’s portrayal is beneficial in reducing stigmas around PTSD.

In line with the concept and effects of negative portrayals is the idea that when representing mental illness in fictional television shows, there is a risk of romanticizing mental illnesses or using them as plot devices, which can lead to further stigmatization or negative perceptions. In a chapter from *Mental Illness in Popular Culture*, Lisa Spieker analyzes the ways in which four television shows (*Monk*, *House M.D.*, *Hannibal*, and *Dexter*) turn their mentally ill main characters into “superheroes” for the purpose of storytelling. This ultimately harmful characterization puts forth a romanticized version of mental illness that simultaneously stresses isolation, unhappiness, and failure to be a “full human being.” It suggests that people with mental illnesses are “magical,” and that the mental illness they have is sometimes desirable while also

degrading them by suggesting that a person cannot be fully human because of their illness. This chapter was beneficial in showing how *Grey's Anatomy* does not implement this kind of representation with anxiety disorders in their main cast, how it does not portray characters as able to “shut off” their illness when it’s convenient, either for themselves or for the plot, and how the characters do not participate in or get away with outlandish and unethical things related to their work because of their mental illness.

On the opposite end of things, empowering and naturalistic depictions of mental illness have the ability to not only positively affect viewers, but also positively affect social norms and work to decrease stigma. When looking specifically at *Monk*, a television show centered around a man with Obsessive Compulsive Disorder (OCD) who helps solve crimes, Hoffner and Cohen discuss the positive ways in which an accurate representation of a mental illness can affect people, including an increase in willingness to seek treatment, people feeling that they can speak about their illness more openly without ridicule, and breaking down social norms and stereotypes to create a more understanding and receptive environment. Hoffner and Cohen emphasize the idea of parasocial relationships (PSR) with fictional characters, which “reflect the sense of a real social bond in that the relationship is deeply felt and has many of the characteristics of ‘real’ relationships” (1047). The parasocial relationships between viewers of the show who had a mental illness and the character of Adrian Monk aided the positive responses to the portrayal of OCD in *Monk*. Following this article, any accurate representations of PTSD in *Grey's Anatomy* could lead to positive responses from audiences, including a willingness to accept a diagnosis after witnessing positive representation.

Media frames, discussed earlier in the Quintero Johnson and Miller article, can influence the process of encoding and decoding with television audiences, which is important in the



discussion of negative versus positive representations of mental illness. In her article on how negative media frames of mental illness can influence the way mental illnesses are perceived, Sieff breaks down the concepts of framing, framing analysis, and media versus individual frames, as well as how the media, including news coverage, entertainment, and advertising, has covered mental illness in the past. Sieff explains that many early depictions of mental illness were extremely negative, either insinuating or explicitly stating that people with mental illnesses lacked any characteristics or accomplishments that fell outside the parameters of their illness, and she emphasizes the idea that “the repetitive nature of the frame serves to reinforce the media image” of what is being depicted (266). This means that the more something is framed in a certain way (i.e. mental illness is framed negatively), the more people will see that image and believe that image is true, which is detrimental in the case of proper mental illness representation. Sieff also briefly touches on the idea that even positive depictions of certain mental illnesses contribute to negative perceptions, since conditions like anxiety and depression are not deemed as “dangerous” as other illnesses. While this article focuses much of its attention on news-based stories about mental illness and the potential for negative consequences depending on how the stories are told, some of its arguments and explanations about framing can be applied to the conversation about mental illness representation in fictional television, specifically the way in which *Grey’s Anatomy* frames its characters with PTSD.

The responses from audiences following either a negative or positive representation of mental illness correlate with the idea of encoding and decoding messages in media formats, introduced by cultural theorist Stuart Hall. Encoding involves the specific medium, in this case television, giving a message to its audience, while decoding is the audiences making meaning out of the given message. In his article, Hall considers audiences to be an important factor in the

encoding and decoding process, placing autonomy in the hands of receivers (decoders). He gives them the ability to decide what a message means, as well as what they think and how they feel about that message, rather than just accepting a given interpretation or meaning. In this way, Hall's theory would work alongside the idea that accurate and inaccurate depictions of mental health conditions could influence the way audiences perceive mental illness in the real world. Encoders creating messages in television concerning mental illness have the ability, intentionally or unintentionally, to create or enhance negative stereotypes and stigmatizations, and audiences decoding those messages can potentially interpret them as helpful, harmful, or somewhere in between. This would subsequently allow decoders to gain, consciously or subconsciously, an understanding of mental illness that may be either correct or incorrect depending on what is being depicted. With this also comes the possibility that viewers find inaccurate and negative representations helpful, or accurate and positive representations unhelpful. For example, portrayals of mental illness that seem empowering or helpful may actually lean more toward being stigmatizing and artificial, while portrayals that seem to be stigmatizing may actually be conveying empowering themes or natural human reactions that show that mental illness does not define a person or make them "bad." With *Grey's Anatomy* specifically, the idea of encoding and decoding helped me determine that seemingly negative portrayals within the show actually depict something important, empowering, and destigmatizing: characters with PTSD have the ability to maintain or mend relationships that may have been affected by portrayed symptoms of PTSD.

These sources work together to show that the representation of mental health conditions in television can range from positive and empowering to negative and artificial, as well as show how a representation's level of accuracy has the power to establish or reinforce stigma

surrounding what it's like to have a mental health condition and how people might view both themselves and others who live with mental illness. With that in mind, I sought to determine how positively and authentically *Grey's Anatomy* represents Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), specifically in two of its main characters, and what the effects of those representations could ultimately be for viewers of the show.

## Method

Over the course of 17 seasons, *Grey's Anatomy* has specifically dealt with anxiety disorders, including Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). In the season 5 two-part premiere, the show introduces Dr. Owen Hunt, portrayed by Kevin McKidd, a trauma surgeon on leave who arrives at the hospital after treating a patient at the scene of a car accident. After completing a two-episode arc, in which he kissed Dr. Cristina Yang after removing an icicle that had impaled her stomach, Owen returns to officially start working at the *Grey's Anatomy* hospital in season 5, episode 6. He reveals to Cristina that when he returned to Iraq, his unit was ambushed and he was the only survivor, and that he is now "living in the after," which both explains why he's back in Seattle to work and insinuates that he suffered trauma from the war ("Life During Wartime"). The introduction to his experience with PTSD begins here and continues to be developed throughout season 5.

Later, in the show's seventh season, Dr. Cristina Yang, portrayed by Sandra Oh, deals with PTSD following a shooting at the hospital that occurred in the season six finale. Cristina performed a difficult surgery on Derek Shepherd, the husband of her best friend, Meredith Grey, after the grieving husband of a deceased patient brought a gun to the hospital and shot Derek. While Cristina was performing the surgery, the gunman entered the operating room and held a gun to Cristina's head, telling her he was going to shoot her if she didn't stop repairing Derek's

heart (“Death and All His Friends”). Following this event, Cristina experienced symptoms of PTSD for several episodes in season 7 and eventually, although briefly, quit her job and left her spot in the residency program.

I watched 10 episodes of *Grey’s Anatomy* that incorporated Owen Hunt’s main experiences with PTSD, which took place primarily during seasons 5 and 6, and 10 episodes that incorporated Cristina Yang’s experience with PTSD, which occurred during the beginning half of season 7. Seasons 5 through 7 originally aired from 2008 to 2011. Episodes were streamed via Netflix and were handpicked via *LiveAbout* episode guides rather than randomly selected. The chosen episodes incorporated PTSD in either Owen or Cristina, whether it was a major part of the episode’s plot or it was referenced to supplement the main plot of a specific episode. Important episodes included the ones in which the PTSD was introduced, the episodes that contained the event that caused the PTSD to occur, and episodes in which the characters dealt with their mental illness. Other episodes that were important to watch included the episode in which Owen attended therapy for his PTSD, the one in which Cristina’s mental illness storyline appeared to be, for the most part, resolved, and the episode in which Cristina returns to the hospital for the first time after quitting to help when there is a shooting at a local college campus (see Appendix for episode list and titles).

Using an inductive approach, I took notes on how central to the storyline Owen and Cristina’s respective experiences with PTSD were throughout the episodes being analyzed, as well as which symptoms were being shown or neglected. Additionally, it was important to note if those incorporated symptoms were romanticized by the show or other characters for plot development purposes within the episode, or if symptoms were conveyed naturally, meaning that the show placed minimal focus on them as “symptoms” and used them as development solely for

the character's experience with PTSD. I paid attention to how the subject of mental illness was treated by other characters, and whether the character's illness was quickly and unrealistically resolved or continually incorporated into their character and subsequent character development. I also made note of how Owen and Cristina each acted toward other characters, looking for signs of unwarranted physical and verbal aggression and violence. Furthermore, I looked for instances where Owen and Cristina were depicted as being able to "shut off" their conditions and symptoms when necessary, either for themselves or for the purpose of the plot, and whether or not they appeared to get away with outlandish and unethical things in their careers because of their PTSD. By noting specific observations through an inductive research approach, I was able to make broader claims about Owen, Cristina, and the other characters around them in relation to *Grey's Anatomy's* portrayal of their separate experiences with PTSD.

## Analysis

### PTSD Symptom Inclusion and General Portrayal

From the selected episodes, *Grey's Anatomy* appears to integrate symptoms of PTSD in both Owen and Cristina that align closely with the information supplied by the Mayo Clinic. PTSD can be understood as a mental health condition that is triggered by either experiencing or witnessing a traumatic or terrifying event, with symptoms including "flashbacks, nightmares, severe anxiety, [and] uncontrollable thoughts about the event" that can be grouped into four types. These groups include "intrusive memories, avoidance, negative changes in thinking and mood, and changes in physical and emotional reactions" ("Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder"). The Mayo Clinic provides an extensive list of causes and risk factors for PTSD, including stressful experiences and their related length and severity, inherited mental health risks and temperament, the way a person's brain regulates and releases chemicals and hormones in response to stress,

and a lack of a support system (“Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder”). Certain kinds of traumatic experiences, including “combat exposure, childhood physical abuse, sexual violence, physical assault, being threatened with a weapon, [or] an accident,” can lead people to develop PTSD. *Grey’s Anatomy* has portrayed this specific mental health condition in two of its main characters, each with their own distinctive story and experience.

*Grey’s Anatomy* portrays PTSD in Owen in a natural and empowering way because his symptoms are not glossed over or romanticized, and because the violent tendencies he displays do not make him out to be irredeemable. The main symptoms that Owen displays include upsetting dreams or nightmares about the traumatic event, aggressive behavior, negative thoughts about himself, and memory problems (“Post Traumatic Stress Disorder”). Each of these symptoms are either interwoven into the plots of the episodes or are the main focus of the episode, and they continue to be incorporated past their original introduction. Examples of episodes where his symptoms are the main focus of the specific plot include “Elevator Love Letter,” in which Owen accidentally chokes Cristina in his sleep after the ceiling fan above her bed triggers him and reminds him of a helicopter (aggressive behavior), and “Suicide is Painless,” in which we get extensive flashbacks of Owen’s time in Iraq when he was forced to watch a friend die after an explosion (upsetting nightmares). Additionally, Owen experiences memory loss in “Elevator Love Letter,” telling Cristina he can’t remember what happened to make him choke her and that he has no memory of hurting her, and in “Sweet Surrender,” Owen attends therapy and tells his therapist that he can’t forgive himself for what he did, displaying negative thoughts about himself. His symptoms are incorporated plainly and definitively as they relate to previous character development and overall plot development, not just the brief development of one aspect of his character or one aspect of an episode. Any symptom that

*Grey's* shows for Owen extends further than one single episode to avoid it being “glossed over,” and none of the symptoms he displays are romanticized, made to seem desirable, or make him out to be completely irredeemable since the other characters around him that he hurts with his words or actions eventually forgive him.

For Cristina, an important symptom of her PTSD could be labeled as “irritability, angry outbursts, or aggressive behavior,” which falls under the category of “changes in physical and emotional reactions” (“Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD)”). Cristina’s occasional verbal aggression toward Meredith and other coworkers is an accurate symptom of PTSD and positively enhances *Grey's Anatomy's* portrayal of the illness, despite the fact that it could imply a negative perception of PTSD. In “That’s Me Trying,” before Cristina quits her job, she gets into an argument with Meredith on the roof of the hospital while waiting for a medical evacuation helicopter. The episode’s events have been leading up to this outburst, with Cristina being sarcastic, snarky, and annoyed with Meredith whenever she offers to help, and it culminates with Cristina yelling at Meredith and crying:

I’m ruined, okay? I am dead. I am wrecked. And you’re just walking around, what, babysitting me? As if you didn’t go through the same thing, too? Why are *you* okay... You were there, too, with your sad eyes, screaming at me to save his life... I didn’t have a choice! And *you* did that! If it was anyone else on the table, if it was anyone else standing there, I would’ve walked away... I would’ve walked away, and then I wouldn’t be here!

(“That’s Me Trying”)

This outburst essentially consists of Cristina blaming Meredith for her PTSD, saying that if Meredith and Derek weren’t the ones in the operating room, then Cristina would not have performed the surgery with a gun to her head and therefore wouldn’t have PTSD to this severity.

Despite the fact that Cristina blaming Meredith for her PTSD could be seen as a harmful or unhelpful representation of PTSD in terms of putting blame on others who really aren't at fault, it is more closely a raw and naturalistic representation of how someone in Cristina's position might feel. Although Cristina is never physically violent with anyone, she verbally attacks Meredith and places blame on her, which makes the exchange come across as one that implies negativity. Sieff's acknowledgment of the repetitive nature of frames could be applied here; if an exchange like this one is constantly framed as negative or a harmful representation, then people are more likely to view it as negative without taking a look at what it could mean on a deeper level. However, this singular exchange deeply characterizes Cristina, especially in this moment of pain; since Meredith is such an important person in Cristina's life, and because it was Meredith's husband on the operating table, there was severe emotional trauma tied to the event that caused Cristina's PTSD. She and Meredith also make up a few episodes later, which helps aid the realness of this exchange since it does not depict Cristina as ruining her friendship with Meredith because of a symptom of her PTSD.

Although some might argue that a damaged friendship may be an aspect of a more realistic representation, Cristina and Meredith's friendship thus far in the show has been depicted as one that is uniquely strong; this is not the first fight that they have, and it is also not the last, and each time they are shown to forgive the other and move past whatever caused the fight. Additionally, if their friendship were to be permanently damaged or altered by this fight, especially with the development it's already undergone, this could be seen as a negative representation in terms of scholarly analysis, as it would suggest that people with mental illnesses are unable to maintain close relationships with others. The show would also be going



against its previously developed history with portraying mental illness in a relatively positive manner, which it built with Owen's storyline.

### PTSD and the Individual Character

Throughout Owen and Cristina's respective experiences with PTSD, they do not have the ability to "shut off" their symptoms, turn them into "professional superpowers," or use them to their advantage in their work, which goes against the thing that Spieker suggests often occurs when writing about mental illness for television (159). Owen's PTSD sometimes interferes while he tries to build a relationship with Cristina, while Cristina's PTSD leads to her briefly quitting her spot in the residency program. They also do not feel a pressure to fully recover from or overcome their PTSD in order to feel happiness, which Spieker claims is the case for the television characters she discusses in her analysis (166). Owen makes the choice to attend therapy to better understand his PTSD and handle his symptoms; this suggests an empowering step toward healing and a better lifestyle rather than full recovery, since he still talks about his symptoms and experience with PTSD even after he is shown in therapy. Meanwhile, although Cristina overcomes her fear of the operating room and is able to come back to work, she can still recognize that she has PTSD, and it's not suggested that she's fully "cured" or needs to be in order to do the thing she loves, which is surgery. Both Owen and Cristina are able to lead lives that are sometimes infiltrated by their symptoms, but they are also both able to eventually maintain a relationship with each other and find happiness in their friends and their work at the hospital. They are not portrayed as constantly miserable or incapable because of their PTSD, as Spieker suggests is often the case.

Evidence of Owen's inability to shut off his symptoms can be seen in "Sympathy for the Devil" when he asks Cristina out on a date and shows up late and drunk at her apartment. During the episode, Derek's mother, who was a Navy nurse for 25 years, comes to visit; she meets Owen

and asks him about stories he has from the war and if he's been sleeping well. Following these exchanges, Owen looks visibly uncomfortable, politely half-smiling and never answering her questions outright. These questions can be understood as triggers for his PTSD, which culminate when he arrives at Cristina's apartment later that night. Owen knows he has a date with Cristina, and although he was excited for the date earlier in the episode, he ruins his plans by showing up to Cristina's apartment late and drunk; she tells him he needs a shower, which leads to him getting into her shower in his suit and telling her a deeply personal and graphic story from his time in Iraq. This not only displays a symptom of PTSD (i.e. self-destructive behavior), but it also shows that he is not able to control whether or not his PTSD interferes negatively with his life, which goes against Spieker's claim about mentally ill characters using their illnesses as "superpowers" (159). This emotional revelation that Owen experiences also further develops his character and experience with PTSD as well as his burgeoning relationship with Cristina, since he mentions later that he doesn't talk about the war but is shown here to be comfortable enough around Cristina that he can share this story and be vulnerable with her.

In addition to his inability to "shut off his symptoms," Owen's choice to attend therapy not only shows his character's growth with his PTSD experiences but also works to show an empowering lifestyle choice that may show audiences that therapy is a vital resource. Soon after he accidentally chokes Cristina in his sleep, Owen attends his first therapy session where he is able to finally name the things he is feeling, which he comes to understand as guilt and shame. His therapist tells him, "That's a start...you named it...the feeling. You have to know what it is before you can start to navigate to somewhere better" ("Sweet Surrender"). This states to both Owen and the audience that because he was able to name what he was feeling through therapy, he is closer to better managing his PTSD rather than suddenly and fully recovering. Owen's

work in therapy is also expressed to both the audience and Cristina when she confronts him, upset that he seems to be ignoring her and has already moved on from what happened between them. Owen explains to Cristina some of the work he's been doing in therapy and why he's doing that work; this subsequently explains his strange behavior throughout the episode, which involved him only speaking to Cristina in neutral, three-word sentences as though they were acquaintances rather than exes. He tells her:

My shrink gave me these sentences – we came up with them together. They're all 3-word sentences so I'd have something to say to you instead of the three words...that you know I feel but I can't say them, because it would be cruel to say them because I am no good for you. I don't want to torture you...So, yeah, I'm smiling and I'm saying, 'take care now.' I'm letting you off the hook. I'm trying. I'm trying so hard to let you off the hook. I'm trying to make it right, what I did to you. Can't you see that? ("No Good at Saying Sorry [One More Chance]" )

This exchange both expresses Owen's work in therapy as something that is helpful as well as his apologetic nature about the situation, which shows that he can be redeemable. In line with Hoffner and Cohen's article, which suggests that accurate representations can increase a willingness to seek treatment, the depiction of Owen seeking out therapy and benefitting from it could suggest to audiences that this is an accurate or positive representation within *Grey's Anatomy*, which could then lead to audiences being more willing to seek treatment for themselves.

Finally, Owen is able to recognize his own trauma to an extent, and this recognition only gets better with therapy. In "Sympathy for the Devil," the day after Owen shows up to Cristina's apartment drunk, Cristina tells him he has some "big problems," and he agrees with her. In a

later episode, after accidentally injuring her arm when she scared him awake, Cristina says, “I’m a big girl. I can handle my share of trauma. And I get to decide when I’ve had enough. It’s gonna take a lot more than a bad dream to scare me off,” (“I Will Follow You Into the Dark”). Owen tells her that it’s more than a bad dream, and she says that she knows, and they continue to move forward in their relationship. Owen’s recognition insinuates that he knows he has a problem that he can’t ignore and that he is unable to turn his symptoms off when they may be inconvenient.

Counter evidence could suggest that Owen is in fact able to “shut off” his PTSD in order to work; this would occur when episodes that talk about his PTSD are followed by episodes that do not. For Owen, considering the nature of the ordering of episodes, this goes to show that his PTSD is not being used as a plot development point. Owen experiences anxiety, guilt, and intrusive memories among other things, spread out over the course of a season and extending into others. In “Beat Your Heart Out,” Owen experiences a severe panic attack that Cristina helps diffuse; the cause of his panic attack is revealed to be his ex-fiancée showing up at the hospital. After dealing with this for the entirety of an episode, the show pauses for an episode in focusing on Owen’s PTSD, only to come back to it soon after in “I Will Follow You Into the Dark” when Cristina frightens Owen while he’s sleeping, and he accidentally pushes her into a shelf full of medical supplies, superficially hurting her elbow. The inclusion of these symptoms and the way in which they are spread out emphasizes the idea that his PTSD is being developed rather than skimmed over, focused on rather than portrayed for performative reasons, and this in turn allows for a more accurate and helpful representation.

Evidence of Cristina’s inability to “shut off” her mental illness is seen in various moments throughout the beginning of season 7. Soon after the shooting occurs, Cristina says she doesn’t care what the doctors decide to do with her, whether they give her administrative duties

to fill her time or fire her (“Superfreak”). This statement counters Cristina’s developed personality as a hardworking, competitive, and sometimes cutthroat resident who loves performing surgery. In early episodes of season 7, Cristina is unable to complete tasks that her superiors ask her to do, which again is the opposite of her already developed personality. Specifically, in “Almost Grown,” Owen asks Cristina if she’s okay, to which she defeatedly responds, “My patient deserves a doctor.” Later in the episode, Cristina is unable and unwilling to help a fellow resident convene a panel to decide whether or not a patient will receive a lung transplant. In “That’s Me Trying,” Cristina admits to Meredith that she cannot update her patient’s family because she is too scared herself to ease someone else’s fear; she admits, “I was scared when [the patient] coded. I’m scared now that he’s stable. I’m scared walking across the lobby. I am scared all the time.” Cristina also becomes unwilling to go to the operating room at all, which in itself is further evidence that she cannot turn off her PTSD or use it to advance her career, since assisting in surgeries during a doctor’s residency is an important step in learning. In “These Arms of Mine,” Cristina is seen choosing to lay down in an empty exam room rather than following Meredith to the operating room. Cristina’s actions in these episodes emphasize the fact that she is withdrawing from things she once enjoyed rather than excelling or even working the same way she did before the shooting, and she eventually quits her job at the end of episode 7.

Regarding counter evidence that suggests Cristina has the ability to “shut off” symptoms when she is working at a local bar in “Slow Night, So Long,” she only appears to be happier because she is away from the hospital and operating rooms and feels somewhat freed by quitting the job that gave her PTSD in the first place. She is seen getting drunk on the job and flirting with men in the bar, which does not insinuate that she is feeling back to her “normal” self since it goes against what has been defined and developed as her “normal” behavior in the previous six

seasons. In “Disarm,” when she is helping at the hospital after a shooting at a local college campus, it could appear that she is able to shut off her symptoms in order to help and perform surgery, but the previous episode, “Adrift and at Peace,” showed her having a breakthrough about her trauma while on a fishing trip with Derek. Additionally, Cristina tells Owen that she’s feeling better at the beginning of “Disarm,” which suggests that she is in a better place than in previous episodes but does not imply that she is fully healed. Her ability to perform surgery only implies that her breakthrough while fishing allowed her to overcome her fear of going into the O.R. and being a surgeon again.

### PTSD and Other Character Reactions

Although other characters dislike what Owen did to Cristina, most of the time during Owen’s experience with PTSD, other characters, mainly Derek and Cristina, offer support and do not demonize Owen after he displays violent tendencies. Following Owen’s accidental choking of Cristina, Derek talks to him about therapy and PTSD in general. Derek says, “they’re doing tests that show altered brain anatomy in patients with PTSD. They’re actually getting close to understanding the physical side of the psychological trauma. It’s amazing what you can see with an MRI...Post-Traumatic Stress is a real injury, Owen. It can be healed. There are resources – vet centers, therapy. You shouldn’t try and handle this on your own,” (“Elevator Love Letter”). This quote both directly educates the audience about PTSD and shows that, instead of turning his back on Owen or looking at him as someone who is dangerous or violent, Derek tries to talk to him about things that will help him, either with his PTSD overall or just with how he’s feeling about having PTSD. Derek, who is a neurosurgeon, also offers Owen his help specifically; although Owen turns him down at first, he agrees at the end of the episode to get an MRI with Derek’s help.

Cristina also shows Owen support when he experiences symptoms of PTSD, even when they affect her. In “Beat Your Heart Out,” when Owen has a panic attack after seeing his ex-fiancée and is reminded of how he had to leave her to go to Iraq, Cristina helps him calm down. She finds him alone in an exam room struggling to breathe, and after some non-violent struggling, she wraps her arms around him to apply pressure to his body to get him to relax while telling him that he’s okay (“Beat Your Heart Out”). Cristina also defends Owen to Meredith after he accidentally chokes her, saying, “If he had a heart attack or a stroke or lost a leg, would you walk away? How is it any more acceptable that I walk away from this? He’s wounded. He has war wounds, Meredith. It’s not cut and dry,” (“Elevator Love Letter”). In both of these instances, Cristina shows physical and verbal support for Owen and does not think less of him for having PTSD.

Although she does not demonize Owen for what he did, Meredith shows support for and tries to protect Cristina after Owen chokes her, and she does this by temporarily trying to prevent Cristina from getting too close to Owen. In “Elevator Love Letter,” Meredith says, “He wrapped his hands around your throat this morning, and you’re pretending like nothing happened...he literally tried to kill you. He’s barely back from Iraq. It’s obvious he has issues.” Her comments to Cristina about Owen could be perceived as harsh, but after watching her friendship with Cristina develop over the course of five and a half seasons, audiences are more likely to perceive that as Meredith defending Cristina rather than demonizing Owen. Additionally, Meredith appears to forgive Owen later on, and the two eventually become friends.

The only person who truly demonizes Owen for actions brought about by PTSD is Owen himself; during a therapy session, he expresses to his therapist his guilt over what he did to Cristina. He says, “I jumped in front of her. I knew. I knew I wasn’t together. I knew I was no

good for her, for anyone. And I wrecked her. And that is unforgivable. I don't forgive myself for that. I can't forgive myself for that. And I am feeling shameful about that. That is what I feel today – shame," ("Sweet Surrender"). Based on this dialogue in which Owen talks about his inability to forgive himself for what he did despite Cristina appearing to forgive him, his demonization stems from his own thoughts about himself, not from the behaviors or words from other characters. This self-criticism and its eventual reconciliation can show audiences that sometimes the way a person sees themselves is not always the way other people will see them, and also that therapy is a place to identify those kinds of feelings and work to resolve them.

Counter evidence could suggest that Cristina breaking up with Owen at the end of "Elevator Love Letter," and then later making crass comments to him about what happened, is her vilifying him. After Owen spends a day teaching other residents and seemingly ignoring Cristina, she says to him angrily, "All day you were teaching...and you ignored me... 'Take care now?' What is that? What, are you, like, you know, happy now? What are you? Just a 'choke 'em and forget 'em' kinda guy?'" ("No Good at Saying Sorry [One More Chance]"). However, immediately after she says this, Owen explains to her that he and his therapist have been working on three-word sentences, like "Take care now," for Owen to say to Cristina so that she can move on from the relationship, and even though Cristina does end her relationship with Owen, they reunite at the end of season 5.

For a majority of the time with Cristina's experience with PTSD, her co-workers do what they think is best for her while she is having symptoms; however, they aren't always supportive of her recovery, and sometimes they romanticize or diminish her struggles. Their occasional lack of support oftentimes stems from the fact that they rarely ask her what she wants or needs or what she is thinking; they tell her what to do and tell other people what they think she wants, but



they don't ask her. The only person who really does the most for Cristina, sometimes without doing anything at all that's related to convincing Cristina to go back to work, is Derek. He is the only character who shows true solidarity with Cristina, possibly because of his own experience with quitting work and because Cristina saved his life and sustained her trauma while doing so. The first instance of this occurs early in season seven when Cristina has her first PTSD episode; she lays on the floor of the operating room after another surgeon accidentally knocks over a tray of surgical tools, and the noise triggers Cristina, reminding her of gunshots. Meredith comes down into the O.R. to check on her, and Cristina says, "I can't feel anything. I can't move my legs," ("Shock to the System"). Owen, whom Cristina married in the previous episode, and Cristina's mentor and friend, Teddy Altman, had insisted that Cristina jump back into surgery somewhat quickly after the shooting. They assumed they knew her well enough to not ask what she wanted or how she felt about it. Consequently, Cristina experiences PTSD symptoms during the surgery because she was not yet ready to go back, and she also hadn't been cleared to perform surgery yet by the therapist in charge of monitoring the doctors involved in the shooting.

It's interesting to note that Cristina's therapy, unlike Owen's, is hospital mandated, and that many of the doctors present in the hospital during the shooting are either shown to also be attending therapy or they at least reference it. Cristina is also only shown seeing this therapist once, as opposed to Owen who attended therapy or at least referenced it in various episodes multiple times. Although the therapy is required by the hospital, is not shown frequently, and does not seem to help Cristina in any way, this representation still does not put therapy in a negative light, since the therapist himself is adamant on making sure the doctors he's treating are truly ready to return to work. He does not agree with Cristina returning to surgery and is shown to be angry that other doctors went over his head to put her in that position. He also is not tricked

into clearing other characters, such as Meredith, for surgery when they are pretending to be okay just to return to work.

Even though Cristina continues to exhibit signs of PTSD, most of her co-workers and friends continue to assume they know what she wants and needs without asking. In “Something’s Gotta Give,” Owen and Teddy tell the chief of surgery to hold off on sending in the official letter to the American Board of Surgery declaring that Cristina has quit. Later in the episode, they both talk about confronting Cristina at her own housewarming party to try and convince her to come back to work. Owen even admits that he believes he knows what she wants, but then asks Meredith what she thinks Cristina wants. Later in the episode, Derek is the one to say that staging an intervention for her is not a good idea and that they all failed at trying to help her. In “Adrift and at Peace,” Meredith and Owen argue about what they think is best for Cristina, and they blame each other for the fact that she quit and still has not recovered. The characters continue to refrain from asking Cristina what she wants or how they can help her, and instead do things that only make Cristina more upset or avoid interacting with them entirely.

Relating to a lack of support during Cristina’s experience with PTSD, her friends and co-workers sometimes verbally diminish her PTSD by making negative comments about her and her lack of work. In “Superfreak,” Callie and Arizona, Cristina and Owen’s roommates, want Cristina and Owen to move out of the apartment they all share. The way they go about asking Cristina to move out employs derogatory or insensitive comments and viewpoints. At one point, Arizona says to Teddy, “You know what would make you feel better? Telling Owen to get off his ass and get his traumatized wife out of our apartment” (“Superfreak”). This comment is a joke about Cristina’s trauma and PTSD, and both Callie and Teddy laugh in response. Later on, Meredith tells Callie, “Cristina’s career is hanging on by a thread. She can’t look at an O.R.

without breaking into a cold sweat, she's a newlywed, and last night she slept in my bed because Owen was in surgery, and she was afraid to be alone. You *really* want to put her out of her house?" ("Superfreak"). Callie, realizing she's been blunt about Cristina's PTSD and has lacked understanding, later tells Arizona that they're "monsters." At another point in the episode, Derek's sister makes multiple comments about Cristina and how she seems like a "dud" because she refuses to answer questions or operate. Although Derek's sister was not present during the shooting and does not know Cristina well, her comments are not necessary for anything other than to allow Derek to once again state that Cristina saved his life. These jokes and statements made by other characters indicate that Cristina does not always receive verbal support from the people around her while she's struggling, but that other characters, like Derek and Meredith, continually try to stick up for her when they can because of their close friendships or personal connections.

In addition to verbal diminishment, Cristina's co-workers and friends also show a lack of support through romanticization of her PTSD. In "Slow Night, So Long," Callie talks to some of the other doctors at a local bar where Cristina has started bartending after quitting her job at the hospital. She announces that she's jealous that Cristina gets to "live out the 20s we never go to [because] we were stuck in med school. Watch, ten years from now, we'll all have a midlife crisis and end up doing the same thing" ("Slow Night, So Long"). Her tone is flippant, and she is making a sort of joke to the other doctors, diminishing and romanticizing Cristina's PTSD by saying that she's jealous of what Cristina's doing. She also implies that Cristina has quit because of a mid-life crisis, when in reality, it's because her PTSD was impairing her ability to do her job. Later in the episode, when Derek tries to talk to his close friend about Cristina bartending, his friend brushes off what Derek is saying by explaining that "it's just a phase" and then moving

on to a different topic. His friend would rather talk about something else than engage in conversation about a co-worker he respects, and one that Derek is concerned about, which romanticizes her experience by suggesting that it's something someone can easily get over or recover from.

Counter evidence may suggest that the actions of Cristina's friends and co-workers seem like they are trying to do what they think is best for her, but certain exchanges between characters contradict this idea. In a documentary-style episode titled "These Arms of Mine" that follows the doctors around the hospital 6 months after the shooting, Meredith tries to stick up for Cristina and put her on a kind of pedestal, calling her a hero for her actions; this makes Cristina visibly uncomfortable, and she asks Meredith to stop. Derek is the only one who doesn't push Cristina to do anything and allows her to come to her own conclusions about what she needs and wants. Although this incident with Meredith might be encoded to appear positive or helpful, audiences, using Hall's idea of negotiated decoding which says that people can acknowledge the intended encoding while "making their own ground rules," could recognize it as being unhelpful or negative (60). In other words, audiences may see that Meredith is trying to be supportive but may understand that she is actually failing since she won't listen to Cristina and her wishes regarding her experience with PTSD and the event that caused it. Additionally, when it comes to insensitive comments about Cristina from Callie and Arizona, it could be said that they don't understand the full extent of her PTSD. However, they both experienced the shooting as well, even if they didn't go through exactly what Cristina went through, and they should understand to an extent that Cristina went through something traumatizing since they did, too. The comments they make also do not add anything to plot or character development; Callie and Arizona could wait to ask Cristina and Owen to move out, or they could look for another apartment themselves

without being inconsiderate toward people they are supposedly friends with. Ultimately, since these other characters are not taking into consideration what Cristina wants or how she feels, these representations of attempts at support are not as helpful as they could be.

## Conclusions

This analysis revealed that, for the most part, *Grey's Anatomy* represents Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder in a naturalistic way that promotes positivity and empowerment in both Dr. Owen Hunt and Dr. Cristina Yang. Their individual symptoms are deeply integrated within the dialogue and plot points of their respective episodes and are not glossed over or romanticized for the sake of inflated or speedy storytelling. Neither Owen nor Cristina have the ability to “shut off” their PTSD or use their mental illness as an advantage in their work place, and they are both shown to achieve some sort of “recovered” status that does not fully erase their experiences with PTSD or insinuate that they are cured of their mental illness (or need to be in order to be successful and happy). Rather, their “recovery” emphasizes the idea that people with PTSD are able to be assimilated in and important to society, as well as maintain careers, relationships, and good social status. In terms of how other characters reacted to both Owen and Cristina’s experiences with PTSD, both Owen and Cristina received fluctuating levels of support from their friends and coworkers, with at least one character showing full support for a majority of the time and others wavering in their levels of understanding and genuine encouragement. Despite the fact that other character reactions were not always positive or empowering, the respective relationships these characters had with Owen and Cristina did not become irreparably damaged, which is an aspect of the portrayals that could lead to destigmatization of mental illness, specifically PTSD and the way it affects those who have it and the people around them.

If what was noticed in the analysis of these episodes is true, then *Grey's Anatomy* could be a good example for other television shows to look to when considering how to portray mental illness, specifically PTSD, in a way that is naturalistic and empowering for viewers. My analysis of the show both contradicts and confirms various arguments made by scholars regarding mental illness in television and media, which reinforces its position as a fair example of PTSD representation. Both Sieff and Stuart suggest that characters in television with mental illnesses are mainly defined by those illnesses and do not have the capacity to have a “normal” life outside of their illness. Stuart states “television portrayals do little to convince the viewing public that people with a mental illness can recover or become productive members of a society,” going on to say that “mentally ill characters are frequently portrayed as disenfranchised with no family connections, no occupation, and no social identity” (100). *Grey's Anatomy* does not portray PTSD in Owen and Cristina this way without also allowing reconciliation of these things to happen. Similarly, Sieff claims that “studies suggest that people with mental illnesses are portrayed in the media first as a negative exemplar of a mental illness and then as individuals. Many characters with mental illnesses portrayed...have no job, accomplishments or any characteristics...beyond their particular mental illness” (262). Owen and Cristina are able to have social identities and connections, both with their friends platonically and with each other romantically, and Owen eventually reconnects with his mother. In terms of their occupations as doctors, Owen maintains his status as a trauma surgeon even when he is experiencing PTSD, and although Cristina briefly quits her job for a few episodes, she does eventually return to work after overcoming her fear of the O.R. Additionally, since both of them are long-term characters on the show, this leaves room for well-rounded development and inherently prevents them from

becoming “stock mentally ill” characters whose development and characteristics are only related to their mental illness.

In addition to proving that certain claims from both Sieff and Stuart are not applicable in this research, *Grey's Anatomy* reinforces claims made by Sieff and Hoffner and Cohen about the way representations can have positive effects on viewers. One of Sieff's major points within her article is that the “repetitive nature of [a] frame serves to reinforce the media image...the frame is stored in an associative network in memory...[so] when an individual recognizes an element of the frame, this activates closely related links or concepts in long-term memory” (266). This means that the more something is framed in a certain way, the more likely audiences are going to recall that frame and its meaning in the future. Since *Grey's Anatomy* repeatedly portrays both Owen and Cristina as redeemable characters who are able to reconcile with others in their lives, the repetitiveness of how the show frames them serves to reinforce an empowering and helpful media image for the show itself in the future, and for viewers who watched it when it first aired or stream it years later. The ability to recognize a frame and remember its related links may also allow for viewers to recall the way PTSD was portrayed in Owen when they see it being portrayed in Cristina, remember the ways in which the show allowed Owen to reconcile his mistakes and reintegrate himself into society, and form high hopes that Cristina's storyline will follow a similar pattern that provides potentially positive interpretations. Hoffner and Cohen discuss the implications of particular media portrayals of mental illness, saying that “scholars have argued [they] can have a strong impact, especially if audience members develop an emotional attachment or parasocial relationship to the characters” (1047). Based on their discussion of the effects that parasocial relationships can have on audiences (in terms of how they view characters and mental illness), if viewers form these relationships with Owen and

Cristina after following them for a period of time and getting to know them as characters, they may be more inclined to see these representations of PTSD as not only correct but also empowering. Hoffner and Cohen also credit other scholars for the idea that these connections and subsequent interpretations may result in a willingness to converse about mental health concerns; this is one of the first steps in reducing stigmatization and detrimental stereotypes. Within their studies, Hoffner and Cohen themselves offer up the idea that a person's "perceived influence of *Monk*...on self (but not others) is associated with greater willingness to seek treatment" (1048). This means that if a person perceives the representation to be a positive one, or if a person with a mental illness sees the representation as positive or truly representative, it might make them more likely or more willing to seek treatment. With this idea in mind, *Grey's Anatomy's* portrayal of Owen going to therapy, and its depiction of therapy as a beneficial and empowering resource for him, could lead to viewers seeing and understanding treatment in a better light and seeking it out themselves if they believe it's necessary.

Although I was able to draw these conclusions from the episodes I analyzed, it is important to keep in mind that my study was only a small sample of episodes of *Grey's Anatomy* and was only specific to two main characters who are allotted plenty of screen time as well as the potential for character arcs and long-term development. Therefore, I cannot say for certain that every portrayal of PTSD, either for other long-term or "patient" characters, in *Grey's Anatomy* has been done to the best of the show's ability, nor can I claim that the chosen episodes are the only ones in the series' entirety which mention both Owen and Cristina's PTSD. Additionally, since I have never personally experienced PTSD, and since I am only getting my information on PTSD symptoms from an online source rather than from years of education or study, I am only



qualified to make claims based on the information I gathered and witnessed rather than personal or professional claims based on experience.

For future research, various elements of both Owen's and Cristina's characterization as well as technical aspects of the show should be analyzed as potential factors in the way *Grey's Anatomy's* representations of PTSD are perceived. Owen's status as a veteran may alter the ways other characters and audiences react to his PTSD, and the fact that Cristina and Owen are in a relationship with each other through most of their respective experiences with PTSD could suggest that they cannot be in "healthy" relationships, or that they are codependent on one another when they are having symptoms of PTSD. The dynamic of their relationship could suggest an unhealthy, and subsequently detrimental, portrayal of PTSD that could lead to negative perceptions from audiences. Additionally, since Quintero Johnson and Miller's article suggests that there may be differences in the way mental illness is explained in men and women, further research may also be necessary to determine if it is possible that Owen and Cristina's difference in sex and gender has an effect on how their separate instances of PTSD are portrayed or perceived. Finally, the technical elements of the show itself and the narrative structure of storytelling in television pose further questions for future research about encoding and the visual or methodical choices that creators and writers for *Grey's Anatomy* employ.

Although *Grey's Anatomy's* representation of PTSD in two of its main characters is not perfectly free of romanticization or diminishment of symptoms, it employs its power as a fictional television show by representing as authentically as possible people experiencing PTSD and the subsequent interactions that derive from trauma and symptoms. The overall effect of the choices made in their representations is one of naturalism and empowerment; it can ultimately be beneficial for viewers in reducing stigma, increasing willingness to accept a diagnosis, and

motivation to get help. Characters act human – they struggle as people struggle and are not seen as having “superpowers” that enable them to get ahead or avoid accountability. They make mistakes, but they are always eventually forgiven and redeemed. The helpful implications of these depictions present us with the idea that a person is not evil, or weak, or in need of rescuing when they have a mental illness, but instead are capable and human, in every sense of the word. This, in turn, allows for audiences to connect with and root for these characters, to root for themselves when they are struggling, and to remember that living in the “after” does not have to be negative or permanent.

## Appendix

Collection of Titles of Watched Episodes for Both Owen Hunt and Cristina Yang in Seasons 5-7

Owen's character and background in the army, which sets up his PTSD, was introduced in the season 5 two-part premiere, titled "Dream a Little Dream of Me: Part 1" and "Dream a Little Dream of Me: Part 2." The episode in which Owen's PTSD was introduced is titled "Life During Wartime," and the episode that depicts a catalyst for Owen's PTSD via flashbacks is titled "Suicide is Painless." Episodes in which Owen dealt with his PTSD aside from the introductory episode, in order, are titled "Sympathy for the Devil," "Beat Your Heart Out," "I Will Follow You Into the Dark," "Elevator Love Letter," and "Here's to Future Days." The episodes in which Owen attended therapy for his PTSD are titled "Sweet Surrender," "No Good at Saying Sorry (One More Chance)," and "What a Difference a Day Makes."

The episode in which Cristina's PTSD was introduced is titled "Shock to the System," and the episode featuring the event that caused Cristina's PTSD to occur is titled "Death and All His Friends." Episodes in which Cristina dealt with her PTSD aside from the introductory episode, in order, are titled "Superfreak," "Almost Grown," "These Arms of Mine," "That's Me Trying," "Something's Gotta Give," and "Slow Night, So Long." The episode in which Cristina's mental illness storyline appeared to be resolved is titled "Adrift and at Peace," and the episode in which Cristina returns to the hospital for the first time after quitting is titled "Disarm."

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