

490 Post Street, Suite 1640  
San Francisco, California 94102  
p 415 227 4953 f 415 354 5690

GEORGE K. LERNER, M.D.

PSYCHIATRY

Diplomate, American Board of Psychiatry and Neurology

---

February 4, 2024

Hon. Lewis A. Kaplan  
Daniel Patrick Moynihan United States Courthouse  
500 Pearl St.  
New York, NY 10007-1312

Dear Judge Kaplan:

I am a Board Certified Psychiatrist in private practice in San Francisco. Formerly I served as an Assistant Clinical Professor in Psychiatry at the University of California, San Francisco, and was an attending psychiatrist at UCSF Langlely Porter Psychiatric Institute and at the VA Medical Center San Francisco. I have been Sam Bankman-Fried's psychiatrist since 2019. Sam Bankman-Fried waived his rights to confidentiality for me to be able to write a letter to the court. In the Spring of 2022, I transitioned my (already remote due to COVID) private practice to part-time and relocated my family to The Bahamas in order to take a position as an in-house coach at FTX. What I write reflects my knowledge of Sam from both relationships.

I am writing to you to ask for leniency for Sam Bankman-Fried, as I do not believe that his conduct was motivated by personal gain, and furthermore I believe that his psychiatric conditions led others to misinterpret his behavior and motivations.

I am saddened to see how Sam Bankman-Fried is being viewed by the public. Throughout the proceedings and for months prior to the trial, it has been assumed that his actions as CEO of FTX were driven by greed. I respectfully disagree with this view. Sam has always lived a very modest life. Even as a billionaire, he drove the most basic car that was available. He wore ragged t-shirts and shorts. He cooked most of his own meals, usually frying Trader Joe's vegan meat with sparse vegetables, making enough for any housemates or drop-ins who were around. Oh, what most of us would do with a billionaire's status and fame?! None of this was for show. He just doesn't care about the things most people care about. It was an interesting revelation to me when he refused to go to Davos to speak at the World Economic Forum, even though a number of people had put pressure on him to do so. This made me question his ability to receive normal human ego-gratification. After all, who would pass up a chance to be seen with world leaders?

When I first got to know Sam in 2019, he was working at Alameda Research in Berkeley. He was one of the people who told me about the goals of the relatively new Effective Altruist

490 Post Street, Suite 1640  
San Francisco, California 94102  
p 415 227 4953 f 415 354 5690

GEORGE K. LERNER, M.D.  
PSYCHIATRY

Diplomate, American Board of Psychiatry and Neurology

movement: to live in such a way that one could make the greatest positive difference in others' lives. "Altruism" is a fallacy to psychiatrists. We don't believe in it. But I indulged him. At first, I tried to figure out the pathology that leads someone to that degree of self-sacrifice. You see, it's not a natural human instinct. Although I am much too cynical to embrace the philosophy, over the years I've come to appreciate and look up to many Effective Altruists, including Sam. The philosophy involves self-sacrifice and a teleological approach to the world. Given my knowledge of Sam, from therapy sessions and in observing him in the workplace, he strongly held himself to this moral commitment. That he did so despite battling life-long depression is all the more impressive. During his house arrest, Sam wrote, "There will probably never be anything I can do to make my lifetime impact net positive." It is a devastating self-assessment for someone who has devoted his life to improving the welfare of others. But he continued to work as hard as ever, with the same intensity and determination.

I am reminded of a conversation I had with Sam sometime in the Spring of 2022. I had been concerned about Sam's sleep, diet, and physical activity. I told him that he may not be noticing the consequences for his everyday health, but that his focus on work at the expense of personal health could well shorten his life. He sat for a few seconds and shocked me with his response. He asked me if it would impact the next five years of his life, and said he was not concerned about his health past that. He explained that due to circumstances, he was in a unique place to help others right now by earning to give, and that opportunity would probably not last more than five years or so. Thus, he didn't care what happened to him after that. I knew what Sam meant. I knew it because, in the 3 years I had known him, he had been steadfast and invariable in his goal of benefiting the world through earning to give, and almost completely unconcerned about his own happiness. That makes him, for better or for worse, an exceedingly unusual person, and anyone who tries to understand him through the lens of normal human desires will misunderstand him.

There is another aspect of Sam that is crucial to understand his self-presentation and how he is read by others. Sam is on the autism spectrum, a condition that can interfere with some everyday functions. In Sam's case, it impaired his ability to communicate emotions and understand social cues. He tended to behave awkwardly around most peers. He did not consume alcohol, did not partake in island recreational activities, and did not typically attend parties. I had to work hard to convince him that he should forgo work to make an appearance at a party for the sake of employee morale.

In the months that followed FTX's implosion, he would discuss the events that led to it in logical, dispassionate terms. In many ways, of course, this was the "rational" thing to do. It is the behavior that would be common and sensible to someone who has the constellation of symptoms we associate with related labels of Asperger's, autism, ASD or neurodiversity. But

490 Post Street, Suite 1640  
San Francisco, California 94102  
p 415 227 4953 f 415 354 5690

GEORGE K. LERNER, M.D.  
PSYCHIATRY

Diplomate, American Board of Psychiatry and Neurology

to the rest of us, it can seem wooden, or uncaring. This lack of conventional affect, combined with odd gestures and lack of eye contact, can reduce our ability to feel empathy towards them, and can lead us to jump to negative conclusions about their true motivations and feelings.

Sam's cognitive strengths have allowed to compensate to a considerable extent for these social deficiencies. As a result, many people have not noticed them. But when Sam is stressed/overextended, he can lose his ability to compensate and as a result can come across to others as brusque, unfeeling, sometimes as if he doesn't even hear them. As CEO of a \$30 billion startup that went from zero to 100 in two years, he was under constant, immense pressure and shouldering way more responsibility than most people can cope with. This letter is not the place to discuss the impact of Asperger's on communication between Sam and others during the time period covered by the trial. But I can tell you the world looks very different through the eyes of the neurodiverse.

I have great respect and affection for Sam Bankman-Fried. I've mentioned his focus on others. He was also a creative and caring leader – and someone I very much enjoyed talking and being with. He is an exceptionally brilliant 31 year old who can still have a significant, positive impact on this world, allowing him an opportunity to make amends for the damage he has done. I urge you to consider a sentence that would allow Sam to return to society with time to have a productive and meaningful work life that would benefit humanity.

Sincerely,



George K Lerner, MD