

## Can Movies Erase the Stigma of Mental Illness?

In the past five years, the U.S. Surgeon General, Bill Clinton's White House Conference, and George Bush's New Freedom Commission have all identified stigma as a major barrier to the life opportunities of people with mental illness. Epidemiologic research suggests more than half of those who might benefit from psychiatric care opt to not pursue it to avoid the stigma. The work and independent living goals of many people are blocked by employers and landlords who buy into mental illness prejudice. Advocates and researchers alike have condemned the entertainment industry for flaming the fires of mental illness stigma. Movies like *Psycho* and *Friday the 13<sup>th</sup>* perpetuate the homicidal maniac as the base of many stigmas.

Advocates have also noted that other movies may actually weaken the stigma. Examples include Jack Nicholson's portrayal of a person with obsessive compulsive disorder in *As Good as It Gets*, Winona Ryder as a young person with borderline personality disorder in *Girl Interrupted*, and the Oscar winning *Beautiful Mind* with Russell Crowe. Crowe's John Nash shows poignant, and somewhat accurate, depictions of the delusions and hallucinations that challenged him on the way to the Nobel Prize. I am still in awe when, half way through the film, I realized that the charming college buddy and stern government boss central to the story were figments of Nash's psychosis. Positive comments about these films focus on sensitive rather than sensational depictions based on fact rather than fiction. Many social critics hold these examples up as possible mechanisms for turning the tide of stigma; films based on fact can bring down the falsehoods. I am not so sure.

Psychiatrists and psychologists are appropriately reverent of fact. They realize that only with comprehensive information can psychiatric disorders be understood and treated. Unfortunately, facts and information do not have similar effects on the public. A film presenting a slice of life that focuses on symptoms fails to show the complexity of the person with mental illness. Symptoms and their corresponding disabilities present a pitiable image that robs all people of the strengths that round out their persona. Factual presentation of symptoms also stresses the differentness of those with the disorder. Stigma researchers agree that differentness is at the heart of prejudice and discrimination. "That person with mental illness is different from me because of his symptoms." Being perceived as different from normal justifies being treated differently (usually worse).

What recourse might films consider to diminish stigma? Unfortunately, there are no easy answers, especially for an industry whose purpose is to entertain. Drama and comedy essentially strive to accentuate the difference in order to emotionally move theater goers. This may sell films, but it is unlikely to diminish stigma. Challenging differentness requires dwelling on the mundane; the lives of people with mental illness are just like everyone else. They have dreams and challenges which are largely lived out via the demands and tedium of everyday life.

Can entertainment be based on tedium? Not likely. However, films have tackled prejudice without exacerbating differentness by framing the stigma in background. Consider some examples. Instead of making skin color the focus, he happens to be a man of color. Skin color was not central to the Emmy winning success of *Cosby Show* but rather Bill Cosby's comedic genius as Cliff Huxtable. Instead of making a physical disability prominent, she happens to use a crutch. Dr. Kerry Weaver on NBC's drama, *E.R.* gets around County General on a crutch since the second year of the series, yet no plotline has ever explained the disability that requires this aid. Instead of accentuating one's psychotic symptoms, he just happens to be struggling with schizophrenia. Think how the stigma of mental illness would be challenged if the successful trial lawyer anchoring a new drama had schizophrenia in addition to a life in the suburbs with his wife, kids, SUV and golden retriever. Making mental illness mundane is the secret to beating it in the movies.

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