

The Bonnie Tapes

Discussion Notes

Description of the Videotapes

Mental Illness in the Family

More than ten years after the onset of paranoid schizophrenia, Bonnie and her family talk about their journey from pain, fear, denial and anger to an uneasy acceptance. With dignity, warmth and candor, they describe the emotional toll that the illness has exacted from each member of the family.

Recovering from Mental Illness

Bonnie describes the difficulty of separating compelling illusion from reality and of finding an identity separate from her illness. With remarkable clarity and retrospective insight, Bonnie talks about what it's like to navigate a maze of confusing and isolating symptoms – like “voices,” fears, and unfounded suspicions – and the often debilitating side-effects of medications. She and her family discuss the reality of: finding perspective, mutual trust and acceptance; overcoming disappointments; and achieving growth, understanding, and recovery.

My Sister Has Mental Illness

Bonnie's sister, Kathy, talks about growing up in the shadow of a sister with mental illness. With disarming honesty, she speaks about her struggles with guilt, isolation, self-esteem, helplessness and loss – and her continuing efforts to reclaim a meaningful relationship with Bonnie.

Why These Videotapes Were Made

The Bonnie Tapes will introduce you to an unusual family – unusual not because it has been struck by schizophrenia, but because its members have achieved an unusual level of sharing their feelings about it. Their discussion will help others to understand the impact of serious and persistent mental illness on the entire family. For those who share that experience but are having difficulty with acceptance, it will help them to face their feelings and recognize that they are not alone.

These videotapes are not intended to sum up all the issues, for such a summary would necessarily be different for each audience. They are intended to provide a springboard for productive and dynamic discussion about these issues.

The length of these tapes makes it possible to view one and still have ample time for discussion during a normal forty-five minute class, workshop or training period. We believe that the value of the videotapes can be greatly enhanced by the discussion following the viewing.

Remember that the major purpose of these – and all of the tapes we produce – is to elicit discussions in which members of your group share their experiences, thoughts and emotions with others. There are seldom easy answers to the issues these tapes raise. We want to raise people's sensitivity to many important issues and to combat the stigma of mental illness.

Notes to the Discussion Leader

Before viewing the videotape:

You will probably want to preview a tape before using it with a group. We strongly recommend that you not talk about your own reactions until the others in your group have discussed theirs.

While viewing the videotape:

Groups will react differently depending upon the experience of the participants. The size of the group will affect how audibly its members respond. For example, laughter tends to happen more readily in larger groups.

After presenting the videotape:

When the tape ends, there may be a silence while people collect their thoughts. This is particularly true if people found it moving. Allow this to happen. There should be no rush to get people talking.

You may find people moved by the video to discuss feelings they have never discussed before. These people will need the encouragement of a warm, supportive environment in order to take part.

Your discussion will be more productive if you take care to ask open-ended questions. Every audience has different needs. Allow the audience to take the discussion where their interests lead them.

The following pages contain suggested topics you may want to use to generate discussion. **Some Quotes from the Video** (pages 4-6) or **What Others Have Said After Viewing these Videos** (page 6) may also be useful in eliciting comments from your audience.

Suggested Topics for Discussion

“Mental Illness in the Family”

- What was your reaction to the video? What impact did it have on you?
- How does each member of the family express guilt? Is this guilt normal? What would you say to them? Can you identify with these feelings?
- Why is talking about the illness so difficult? What did members of the family discover about each other in this video? What secrets did they hold?
- Was there anything you found surprising? Why?
- What was the impact of stigma on Bonnie and on the other members of the family? How did it affect the decisions they made?
- What is it like for Bonnie to be the “center of attention” in the family? How does this affect her sister, Kathy? Her parents? Can you identify with any of these feelings?
- Bonnie’s mother describes life as a series of ups and downs. What does this mean to you? Can you relate to those feelings?

Suggested Topics for Discussion (continued)

- What is day-to-day life like for this family? How do you think this has changed over the last ten years? What continues to be difficult?
- How do you recognize the onset of an illness? Why is denial such a common reaction? Where can you go for help?
- What losses have each member of the family experienced? How do they grieve these losses?

“Recovering from Mental Illness”

- What was your reaction to the video? What impact did it have on you?
- What did you learn about the experience of mental illness in general and schizophrenia in particular? In what ways can you relate to Bonnie’s experience or that of her family or counselors? What surprised you?
- Why was it difficult for Bonnie to trust others – even her family? Does Bonnie seem to trust completely now? How does Bonnie’s family deal with her suspicions? Can you relate to this problem? What helps you?
- What does Andrea mean when she says, “It’s hard to separate out the person from the illness?” Why do you agree or disagree with her? How is your experience the same? Different?
- What does recovery mean to Bonnie? To her family? In what way(s) does Bonnie appear to have recovered? What do you think continues to be a problem for her?
- What is recovery from mental illness for you? Do you believe it is possible for individuals to recover from mental illness? Why or why not?
- Bonnie and her family credit the medication for making recovery possible. What role does medication play in treatment? Why do people with mental illness often have difficulty taking prescribed medications consistently? What can/should a supportive person do?
- What is the role of a support system in treatment and recovery? How does a person build one or become an effective part of one?
- What is the role of hope in recovery? What is the role of expectations? Can expectations hurt? Why or why not? What can a person do to promote hope?

“My Sister Has Mental Illness”

- In what ways do you identify with or relate to Bonnie’s sister Kathy?
- How well does Kathy understand her sister Bonnie’s illness? To what extent does she feel responsible? Is this reasonable? Is it understandable?
- To what extent does Bonnie’s Sister Kathy feel included in discussions about Bonnie’s illness? In the family? Why do you think so?
- In what ways is Kathy’s relationship with Bonnie similar to and different from the relationship you have with your siblings? What can Kathy and other members of the family do to help improve the sibling relationship?

Suggested Topics for Discussion (continued)

- Why is it so hard for Kathy and Bonnie to talk? What can be done to improve communication in the family? What would be the benefits of improved communication?
- How might having had other siblings changed things for Kathy?
- In what ways does Kathy have to compete with Bonnie? What aspects of that sibling rivalry are “normal” and what aspects are related to the illness? In what ways can you relate to those experiences or feelings?
- How did Bonnie’s illness affect Kathy in the past? How does it affect her in the present? How does Kathy believe it will affect her in the future?
- How does Kathy see Bonnie’s future and how does that vision affect her own planning? What would you say to Kathy?

Some Quotes from the Video

“Mental Illness in the Family”

“We’re falling apart.... I don’t know what’s happening. I don’t know how to deal with this on a daily basis.”

“I always wonder if there’s something I could have done or said or helped her with... so that she wouldn’t have gotten sick.”

“It took a long time before we could open up and deal with it.... But ten years ago, we didn’t talk to people.... We didn’t tell anybody... ‘cause we wanted to protect you.”

“I started getting bitter when I was in the day treatment center.... I always believed that by that age I would be at a certain point in my life, and my life was so ruined.... I had to start from scratch... and I didn’t know if I wanted to make it this time.”

“It was a Sunday and the doctor finally... said “paranoid schizophrenia....” We had a wedding to go to that afternoon. I’ll never forget it. We went to the wedding like nothing happened. We never told a soul.”

“Kathy was home... the first weekend from college and we’re all sitting around the table and she’s telling us what college is like.... And then, all of a sudden, we hear Bonnie just completely losing touch with reality. Oh, it was so scary, you know? You know what to do when somebody breaks a leg, but what do you do?”

“Something was going on back then and I didn’t say anything. And who knows how things would have turned out had I said something.... But, then again, who’s going to listen to a ten-year-old?”

“The more you talk about it, the more you know you’re not alone. And people have got to understand and learn.”

“So often I want to say, ‘Gee, Bon, is you’re not really up to it, you don’t have to stay here. You can go upstairs....’ I don’t want to say that because it’s not fair. You have every right to be there with us, you know. But then I know everybody is sort of uptight.”

“I think we can deal with this as long as we can communicate with each other.”

Some Quotes from the Video (continued)

“Having a member of the family... with a major mental illness is... all-consuming. It never goes away. It takes everything you have. It’s with you all the time.... It tears you apart.”

“You feel really guilty.... ‘Why did it have to happen to her, you know? She’s such a good person, you know. Why does she have to go through this?’”

“Recovering from Mental Illness”

“I always thought that all I have to do is get over this now, get over this one hurdle, and then I’ll be fine for the rest of my life. And then I had another breakdown....”

“I finally got through high school. Don’t ask me how I did it. I was sleeping in the car on the way to school.... I’d be in school, barely keeping my eyes open, I’d get home. Finally graduated... got a job, lost the job because I was falling asleep on the job. I was so tired.”

“What’s tough about the psychiatric illnesses [is] that they really... influence a person’s mood, and a person’s behavior and a person’s thoughts. And then you say, ‘Well, what is a person except their mood and their personality and their thoughts?’”

“If you hear them say something and they [tell you] they haven’t said anything... that gets confusing.”

“It’s just very recently that I’m able to say, ‘It’s her illness. It’s not anything maybe I did. It’s her illness.’ And even now... even when she’s on the clobasipine and doing wonderfully... it comes through... and then I think, ‘Maybe she does hate me.’”

“I sort of think of recovery as... the symptoms stopped by the medication and then the person can go on with their own growth and their own development and their own life.”

“It’s the worst thing in the world having so many problems and needing so many answers, and having a psychiatrist that sits and says nothing?”

“Sometimes people tell me that they know when their families stopped having any expectations of them. They understood that as ‘give up’ time, that there was really no getting better and that people had given up on them.”

“I can remember you wanted me to do housework... and I couldn’t do [it].... I know you didn’t understand. I can remember thinking exactly what I’m thinking now: ‘She doesn’t understand. I don’t have the energy....’ I thought you were thinking I was just... lazy.”

“it’s hard to trust yourself if you’re hearing voices. It’s hard to be able to trust your own perceptions and not know whether what you’re perceiving is real or not real.”

“When it goes away... and you finally realize, ‘Wow! Hey, I’m a good person.... I can feel good and look good....,’ the world around you is still looking at you like a mentally ill person.”

“My Sister Has Mental Illness”

“I was the oldest and I felt like I always, always had to do the right thing, always be good, you know. Since Bonnie was the one making all the noise, I would just be the good one who never got in trouble.”

Some Quotes from the Video (continued)

“Being home was so difficult because it was always like walking on eggshells, and she scared me sometimes... because she had so much anger.... I was afraid she would hurt me.”

“Keeping a secret takes a lot of energy.”

“I think they wanted me to have as normal a year as possible.... I was uninvolved in it... that first year. I was concerned and I know it... was affecting me in certain ways that I probably... couldn't put my [finger] on.”

“After my parents go, Bonnie is going to be my responsibility and... we've accepted that. As a matter of fact, when we looked for house, we looked for rooms where Bonnie could live.... Jim and I talked about it and ... he feels the same way, you know, that Bonnie would come with us.”

“You feel really guilty.... ‘Why did it have to happen to her, you know? She's such a good person, you know. Why does she have to go through this? On the other hand, ... if it was me, I don't think I could be as strong as she is. She's so strong.”

“I remember my boyfriend at the time – we were planning to get married – said, ‘If our children turn out like Bonnie, it's your fault.’ I said, ‘Oh, my God! That's so mean!’”

“We never really talked about it that much with each other, you know. At least,... I never really talked about it. And I think the three of them made the decision not to talk to our family about it.”

“They were so focused in on [Bonnie]. And I understood that. I mean, I just wanted to help her. And I sort of just went off on my own. And I did my own thing.”

What Others Have Said After Viewing These Videos

“Professionals will often note that Bonnie is more articulate than their clients usually are. A response can be that their clients may be going through a similar process even though they do not talk about it yet.”

“Bonnie's family couldn't have talked to her when she was psychotic. This led to realization of the family's support of Bonnie.”

“It's important to remember that anybody in the family can have a bad day – which will affect everybody. Having mental illness doesn't mean you're not entitled to have a bad day.”

“It's clear that Bonnie's family is still struggling with the illness. One message to be drawn from this is the need for everyone in the family to participate in discussions about the illness.”

“I wonder if the family members really accept that they are not responsible for the illness. I suppose all of us ask, ‘What did I do?’ or ‘What could I have done differently?’ even if, on an intellectual level, that we know better.”

“The medical profession is based on having an illness, treating it and getting well. Some social workers do not see this as applicable for mental illness, which is why the profession has problems with mental illness.”

“Bonnie often seems almost normal – but is she really? How can we tell?”

About the Participants

The producer, Jack Churchill, met Bonnie's mother, Peggy, at an Alliance for the Mentally Ill meeting. Jack, an award-winning filmmaker, was inspired by his own experience of his own son's schizophrenia, to make video-based programs about mental illness. Peggy told him that her daughter was doing well and that Bonnie had a lot she wanted to say to help others. After meeting and talking, Bonnie and Jack decided to do some taping together. That was the beginning of what became a series of three tapes

Early in the process, Bonnie's parents also volunteered to take part. The idea of taping Bonnie's sister, Kathy, came later – which is why she doesn't appear in the taping with the family. Her participation as a sibling, with her own unique issues, added an important dimension to the project.

Linda Husar, M.S.W. – the social worker who also has a sibling with mental illness – met Jack at a meeting of the Alliance for the Mentally Ill. Linda was another particularly fortunate addition to the project. Her thoughtful interview with Kathy reflects her profound understanding of the role of a sibling in a family affected by mental illness.

Finally, Bonnie and Andrea Blodgett, M.S.W., met at a conference where Andrea was presenting. They had an immediate rapport based on their mutual interest. In the taping, Andrea was especially effective at getting Bonnie and her family to discuss the specifics of symptoms, identity, expectations, and the meaning of recovery.

Today, Bonnie still deals successfully with the challenges of her mental illness. In spite of occasional setbacks, Bonnie is able to call on both her support systems and her own significant coping skills. She continues to advocate for individuals with mental illness and speaks both locally and nationally about her experiences.

Being Fully Alive with Mental Illness

By Bonnie Jean

“What’s wrong with my daughter?” The question was asked over and over again. The answer was paranoid schizophrenia.”

Coping with drugs, alcohol abuse and mental illness – in the midst of sometimes unhealthy family relationships – I felt totally alone. I tried talking to my friends, but they thought I was only “stressed out.” I knew I was on the edge, but I had no support system to fall back on.

It hit. With it came the delusions of grandeur, blackouts while not on drugs or alcohol, and hallucinations so bad that everything before me was unreal. My family life slowly deteriorated and became intolerable. I knew I was not alone in trying to deal with the stigma. I knew my family was suffering, too. The guilt from this realization is something I will always suffer from.

When I graduated from high school, I worked as a secretary for a while. I decided that was not what I wanted to do for the rest of my life and I made up my mind to return to school. I wanted to learn. I wanted to be independent. I also knew I had to sacrifice my happiness and my personal freedom.

Although I felt as though I hit my personal bottom in the meantime and gave up all hope, a blessing came to me. This blessing was a glimmer of hope disguised as anger. I learned how to use anger in a constructive way, and I listened to it again and again. This is how I got back on my feet again and earned my B.A. in psychology. I am now working in the mental health field and hope to go back and earn my masters in social work. I feel as though I’m finally tracking the “path that has never been walked on.”

Negativity can be transformed into a positive attitude that increases your self-worth. Blaming yourself for someone else’s limitations is “beating yourself down.” No one deserves this. If there are days when you feel you do not deserve any self-love and love from other people, you must stop being so stubborn. You will only lose out on a fulfilled life.

It is extremely difficult for someone with an illness to cope with guilt and blame. Blaming yourself is cruel and devastating. Guilt and blame hinder personal success and growth. They can lead to thoughts of suicide. It is important that you accept no fault and that others not make you feel responsible for your own pain and loss. Achieving this is possible, but it takes inner strength and other channels of love and unconditional support.

This is the beginning of a new way of life for me. I will live fully life at its best.

A Final Note

Thank you for your interest in *The Bonnie Tapes*.

We would be pleased to hear your reactions to the videotapes and to learning about your experiences with it. Please address your comments to us at the address below or email us at info@miepvideos.org.

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