

Discussion Notes for “Families Coping With Mental Illness”

Congratulations! You are about to show a tape that countless family members and professionals-in-training have found profoundly moving and informative. These notes will help you maximize the tape’s value and impact.

Who can profit from the tape? *Family members* of people with serious mental illness will find the tape supportive and informative. *Mental health professionals* from all fields will gain important insights into what families face.

A meeting which brings *professionals and family members together* can be extremely effective.

Stimulating a rich discussion is a key role of the tape. It can bring out reactions and responses that will help make this session memorable for all.

Each person will have his or her own experiences to add. Many will want to talk about what they have learned on their own. **The sharing of lives and emotions will help others.** It will increase the value of the tape for everyone in your group.

Many family members have commented that the tape helps them connect with each other and talk, sometimes for the first time, about their ill sibling or offspring.

The first and most difficult rule for discussion leaders is not to say too much. Yet (as you know) you need to set the stage for a good discussion.

Before the tape

You may want to include some of the following information in your introduction to the tape:

The group of family members in the tape includes siblings as well as parents. All live in the greater Boston, Massachusetts area. They were invited to take part by the two social workers in the group, Joan Nemser and Lenore Pollen, who led the discussions. They were selected from people who had been in family seminars conducted by Nemser and Pollen. Thus, some participants knew others, but they had not met as a group before.

The group came together specifically to make the videotape for the purposes of helping other family members and contributing to the training of professionals. The illnesses of their family members include bipolar disease as well as schizophrenia.

After the tape

Don't force a discussion too soon. Your group will probably want a moment of contemplation. Then we suggest you begin with a short, open question. Here are some examples:

Do you recognize yourself in that group? Or: Does anyone recognize any of those experiences?

Does anyone want to comment on whether things are still the same?

Are family members (especially parents) still blamed?

Mental health care is currently moving towards shorter hospitalizations and managed care. How does this trend affect the issues raised in the tape - such as how to set limits and have our own life.

Allow pauses to happen so that members of the group can begin to respond to each other. The individual experiences and reactions of members of your group will expand the value of the tape for the entire group.

A few more questions you might wish to ask, particularly if there are professionals in the group:

Has the training of mental health professionals improved since the incidents described in the tape?

Do the sometimes insensitive responses described in the tape still occur?

Do textbooks in use still tend to blame families?

Additional resources

Anthony, William; Cohen, Mikal, & Farkas, Marianne (1990). *Psychiatric Rehabilitation*. Boston: Center for Psychiatric Rehabilitation, Boston University.

Berger, Diane & Lisa (1991). *We Heard the Angels of Madness: One Family's Struggle with Manic Depression*. New York: William Morrow.

Deveson, Anne (1992). *Tell Me I'm Here: One Family's Experience of Schizophrenia*. New York: Penguin Books.

Hatfield, Agnes B. (1991). *Coping with Mental Illness in the Family: A Family Guide*. Available from the National Alliance for the Mentally Ill (see below).

Hatfield, Agnes B. & Lefley, Harriet (1993). *Surviving Mental Illness: Stress, Coping, and Adaptation*. New York: The Guilford Press.

Johnson, Julie Tailard (1988). *Hidden Victims: An Eight Stage Healing Process for Families and Friends of the Mentally Ill*. New York: Doubleday.

Torrey, E. Fuller, and others (1995). *Surviving Schizophrenia: For Families, Consumers, and Providers (3rd Edition)*. New York: Harper & Row.

Journals and organizations

The Journal, California Alliance for the Mentally Ill, 1111 Howe Avenue, Suite 475, Sacramento, CA 95825. Quarterly, \$25 annually.

National Alliance for the Mentally Ill, 200 Glebe Rd. Suite 1015, Arlington, VA 22203-3754, (703) 524-7600. Publishes *The NAMI Advocate*, which reviews and lists other publications. The National Alliance for the Mentally Ill is probably the best known advocacy, support and education organization concerned with mental illness. It will put you in touch with local chapters.