

***“I love you like crazy”***  
~ Being a Parent with Mental Illness ~

**DISCUSSION NOTES**

**Description of the Videotape**

Eight mothers and fathers who have mental illness discuss the challenges they face as parents. This tape is an introduction to some of the problems these parents are dealing with as they strive to be effective, supportive and loving mothers and fathers.

**Why This Videotape Was Made**

No one knows how many parents must cope with mental illness while raising children, but it is a far greater number than is generally realized. This video is intended to challenge the notion that people with mental illness cannot or do not have children.

This video is not intended to sum up all the issues, for such a summary would necessarily be different for each audience. It is intended to bring into the light of day a subject that is rarely discussed and to provide a springboard for meaningful discussion about these issues.

The length of this tape makes it possible to view it 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 videotape can be greatly enhanced by the discussion following the viewing.

Remember that a major purpose of this - and all of the tapes we produce - is to elicit a discussion in which members of your group share their experience, 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 the tape before using it with a group. We strongly recommend that you not talk about your own reactions until others in your group have discussed theirs.

**While viewing the video tape:**

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 video:**

When the tape ends, there will usually 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 talk about 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 questions you may want to use to generate discussion.

**Some Quotes from the Video** or **What Others Have Said after Viewing this Video** may also be useful in eliciting comments from your audience.

## **Some Suggested Topics for Discussion**

- \_ What were your impressions after viewing the video? What impact did it have on you?
- \_ Are you a parent? Do you identify with the parents in the video?
- \_ How are the parents you saw in the video like other parents you know? How are they different?
- \_ Was there anything you found surprising? Why?
- \_ What role has stigma played in these parents' lives?
- \_ How do the challenges posed by the symptoms of mental illness compare to those posed by other illnesses?
- \_ What supports do parents with mental illness need? What can the system provide? What else is needed?
- \_ Does these parents' fear of losing their children seem reasonable?
- \_ What is behind the guilt expressed by these parents? How much of this guilt is normal for all parents?
- \_ Do these individuals judge themselves in the same ways as other parents? Do they worry about the same things?
- \_ Do these parents appear competent?
- \_ How did you react to seeing these parents with their children?
- \_ Some people with mental illness report being advised not to have children. What is your reaction to that advice?
- \_ Did your feelings about these parents change through the video? In what ways?
- \_ What is the role of hope in the lives of parents and children?

## **Some Quotes from the Video**

“We can't even express anger about things we ought to be angry about. The slightest thing and they say we are not competent to be parents.”

“It's really sad that you would avoid treatment in order to keep your children, but that's what you do. You try to hide because the risk of losing your child is so real.”

“Walking on the streets with my baby - in a harness on my back - and to have everybody laughing: ‘Oh, she’s nuts. She’s crazy.’”

“I didn’t think about the fact that people lost their children over mental illness.”

“People misunderstand about mental illness. They think that you wake up one morning and you’re bonkers. They don’t understand that mental illness doesn’t affect you with symptoms all the time.”

“I think it’s sort of a duty, you know, to overcome society’s perceptions of who and what we are.”

“Overall, I think I’ve been a positive role model for my children.”

“I read in the paper and they had her up for adoption. It almost killed me.”

“The judge stopped looking at me. He began addressing his questions to my attorney.... My attorney became like an interpreter for the mentally ill.”

## **What Others Have Said After Viewing This Video**

“These are parents like you and me who are bringing up their children - sometimes with spouses, often alone - and dealing with the same issues we all deal with as parents. Raising children is a lot of work on a good day. So what is it to manage both child rearing and the difficulties of mental illness at the same time?”

“Ironically [state agencies] are viewed as a threat by mentally ill parents. Too often the first response of state welfare agencies to a mentally ill parent who needs support services is to take the kids away and not give them back without terrible delays.”

“As a woman with mental illness, I decided not to have children because I was concerned about my ability to care for them and I did not want to risk passing on my illness. Watching the loving parents in the video brought up the pain around these choices.”

“In plain and direct terms they walk us through the issues: what their illness costs them personally, what it does to their children and the rest of their family, what they have accomplished, and what they worry about day to day.”

“I was impressed by the awesome spirit of these parents. [They were] undefeated and undiminished by what they had to face.”

“They are... observers with much to tell us about public policies and public attitudes that make their job of parenting more difficult.”

“It speaks to the need for crisis planning and what supports help people.”

“As a parent, I feel what it must be like to lose a child. When you’re already suffering from a problem, it’s the last straw. It’s not something they get over. It’s totally devastating.”

## About the Participants

This group of parents met to make a videotape on the issues surrounding being a parent who has mental illness. Some of them had met each other in peer support groups and others in inpatient or vocational rehabilitation settings.

These parents recognized that there are few services focusing on family integrity for parents who are themselves coping with mental illness. All too frequently there is not only a disconnect between services for the parent and services for the child but also a conflict which threatens the family unit. Many families become lost in the cavernous gap in services.

The parents found strength in their common struggle to balance their children's needs against the challenges of their own mental illness. They found they shared common fears and concerns, and a common desire: to be with their children and to be the best possible parents.

They also discovered that the stigma of mental illness made it difficult for them to access what others often take for granted: housing, employment, community, competent legal representation, and a fundamental recognition that children benefit from continued interaction with their parents.

Most of the parents presented here are single parents. (Separation and divorce are often the fallout of mental illness.) They feel the services they lack are the same services that any single parent with a serious and persistent illness would need: competent childcare during treatment or hospitalization, help with daily chores, transportation, help with conflicting schedules, social outlets, support and understanding.

Many of the parents in the tape continue to offer each other support and advocate for each other. Some have formed lasting friendships. They hope that the videotape will help reduce stigma and promote the realization that people with mental illness can be loving, competent parents.

## About the Title

by Linda Gordon, M.S.

Choosing the right title for this film was a challenge. We wanted something memorable that would convey the feelings that all of us have about our children, our illnesses, and the challenges of raising our children in the context of stigma. We believe "*I love you like crazy*" fits.

The casual use of the word *crazy* in the title occasionally offends some viewers. After all, hasn't this word been wielded as a knife to cut away from the rest of society the people who carry that label? The answer is a resounding, "Yes!"

When I was three years old, my family first observed the extreme behavior that drew a solid and indelible line between me and those judged to be normal. That was almost fifty years ago. For most of those years, I was labeled "crazy" and reminded frequently of the limitations of my "tragic" fate. So I am sensitive to those attitudes, behaviors, and beliefs that add the weight of stigma to an already heavy life's burden.

With recovery, however, I have come to understand that no one has the power to hurt me without my permission and cooperation. I can choose to allow myself to be wounded by that label or I can reframe it.

There is another way of viewing the word *crazy*. It's what we mean when we fall head over heels in love. In that moment, being *crazy* moves from undesirable to desirable. We all want to feel crazy about someone and we want another to feel crazy about us.

The title works for me because it slams together those two meanings in a way most people may never have imagined: that people we might dismiss as "crazy" in the first sense may love their kids "like crazy:" they might provide for them physically, mentally and emotionally, they might worry about them, and they might sacrifice for them.

And, if that's true, we might need to rethink that first label because *isn't that how most of us feel about our children?* And then the line between *them* and *us* begins to blur.

My oldest son, Jeff, a physics and computer science major away at college, keeps in touch with me using internet "instant messages" we type back and forth. As our conversations wind down, I always end with "I love you like crazy" before I say goodbye. And Jeff always replies, "Me, too!"

So, when someone calls me crazy today, I think about my feelings for my son and I hear a different message than I did years ago. To say that I am crazy is to say that I am boundless and unique. I am original. I can color outside the lines. I do not need to be defined or limited. I am more - so very much more - than you can express or describe.

## **A Final Note**

Thank you for your interest in the videotape, *I love you like crazy ~ Being a Parent with Mental Illness*.

We would be pleased to hear your reactions to the videotape 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](mailto:info@miepvideos.org).

**Additional copies of these notes may be downloaded for free by visiting our website: [www.miepvideos.org](http://www.miepvideos.org) or by sending your request and \$3.00 (each) for a bound booklet to Mental Illness Education Project, Attn: Discussion Notes, P.O. Box 470813, Brookline Village, MA 02447, U.S.A.**