

A Critique of the *Dr. Phil* Show on Schizophrenia

Summarized by Thomas T. Thomas

How truthful—and how useful—is the media’s representation of mental illness? What are members of the general public being told? A recently aired episode of *Dr. Phil* included an interview with a young woman suffering from schizophrenia—a segment in which video producers tried to recreate the impact of visual hallucinations—and examination of a family’s difficulties in caring for a relative with mental illness. At our January 25 meeting, we viewed and discussed this show.

The first guest was “Mary,” who had been suffering with schizophrenia since she was 18 years old, and whose mother had been similarly diagnosed. Mary said that she had actually started hearing voices at 16, but she tried to stop the voices herself and did not tell anyone about them until her first full psychotic break two years later. The voices were always angry and belittling, telling her she was ugly, stupid, and would fail. Sometimes the voices were male, and sometimes female. When she heard people laughing, she thought they were laughing at her. In groups with other people, she imagined that they were able to read her mind and would put thoughts into her head if she made eye contact.



DR. PHIL

Mary’s hallucinations—which were often preceded by a smell of burning and decay—included seeing demons, seeing the faces of friends dissolve as if they were dead, or turn into demons, and seeing her own face dissolve in a mirror. Sometimes, also, she saw angels, which she described as “cleaner and brighter than the average person.” Inanimate objects like the grain of a piece of wood might suddenly start flowing like water. Sometimes she would see small flying things like insects in front of her face.

In order to hear people over the voices in her head, Mary would concentrate on their mouths to read their lips, but then she would see the words coming out and dropping to the floor.

Once, after her husband left the house on an errand, Mary thought he was a demon when he came back, and she picked up a knife to defend herself. She would sometimes see her sleeping husband as dead and decomposing. Mary started believing that her husband and even her 12-year-old son were trying to kill her in her sleep.

Her first diagnosis was of depression, and Mary was not actually diagnosed for schizophrenia until age 30. Even with proper medication, she heard voices and had hallucinations, but if she stopped taking the medication they became much

worse. Still, Mary was able to function at a high level: she raised a family and held an office job, although she avoided contact with people and worked with her door closed.

“I gained a lot of weight on the antipsychotics,” she said, “but it was a choice of being a size four and insane or this weight and sane.”

Said Dr. Phil, who is a clinical psychologist and introduced Mary’s psychiatrist in the audience: “I’m just so proud of you for coming here.”

The second guest was “Anne Marie,” whose mother was suffering from schizophrenia, which she described as “a monster that has crippled my mom.”

Anne Marie said that conversations with her mother would start off normally but then go off on a tangent: “She would say that President Bush is in her garage, that people had been murdered in her apartment, that people were coming out of the electrical outlets. I love my mother, but she thinks there’s nothing wrong. There’s nothing I can do.”

The show included clips from a camera set up in Anne Marie’s kitchen to show her mother in her agitated state. Anne Marie said her mother stayed up smoking and pacing all day and night except for a few hours of fitful sleep.

Dr. Phil explained that someone with schizophrenia was not evil or possessed, and that this was not a split personality or multiple personalities. Her mother had a brain dysfunction.

He said he was very optimistic. Schizophrenia is an “umbrella diagnosis” because of its various aspects. Its onset is usually during the teenage years to mid-twenties, and later for women. Because Anne Marie’s mother started her symptoms in her mid-forties, apparently under the stress of a divorce and the death of a friend, as well as being sleep deprived, he thought she had a good prognosis and there would be a diagnosis of “schizophrenia not otherwise specified.” Dr. Phil introduced a team of experts in psychiatry and elder law who would take Anne Marie’s mother in hand and treat her while respecting her rights.

The final guests were two young women, “Melanie” and “Rachel,” aged 23 and 17, respectively, whose grandmother and mother had both suffered from schizophrenia and they wondered if they would inevitably become ill. Dr. Phil asked them if they were hearing voices or experiencing hallucinations themselves, and they said no.

He said that we don’t know everything we need to know about the illness but that no one had found a “schizophrenia gene.” Research indicates that about 10% of cases have a genetic component, but there are many other causes attributed to schizophrenia. He referred the audience to the show’s website, which included the warning signs of schizophrenia. He also recommended several organizations, including Schizophrenics Anonymous, sponsored by the National Schizophrenia Foundation. However, he failed to mention the National Alliance for the Mentally Ill (NAMI).

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Overall, the membership’s reaction to the program was positive: “very good,” “pleasantly surprised,” and “without sensationalism.” Members were impressed with Mary, the courage she showed in allowing herself to be interviewed, and the lack of stigma demonstrated in the fact that she held a job.

Anne Marie and her mother's story were "very real," although members felt that creating an instant team of professionals to cure her mother offered "false hope."

The members were impressed with Dr. Phil's sensitivity, his approach to Mary and the two daughters, and his attempts to educate the general public. They were disappointed that he did not list the signs and symptoms of schizophrenia, nor the various therapies that are available, and that he did not mention NAMI. Program chair Liz Rebensdorf said she would formulate these reactions into a letter to the show's producers.