

Healing Voices: Let's Change the Conversation

Summarized by Thomas T. Thomas

With the harrowing and inspiring stories of individuals who are learning to negotiate and grow through their madness, ***Healing Voices*** challenges us to rethink our cultural understanding of “mental illness” by bringing a message of recovery and charting a course for effective alternative treatments that enable people to live productive and meaningful lives.

This feature-length movie (available at <http://healingvoicesmovie.com>) was a documentary produced by Digital Eyes Film and written and directed by P.J. Moynihan. One of the film’s producers is also one of its participants, Oyrx Cohen.

The story starts with Cohen recalling his first psychotic break, shortly after he enrolled at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst, with all the excitement and stress that the process entailed. He entered an “extreme state of consciousness” and attempted to accelerate his car to the point of taking off and flying away, except that he hit a truck instead. He described his psychosis as “responding to something in the environment that’s not right.”

The theme that mental illness is as much a response to the conditions of today’s society as a sickness in the brain recurs throughout the movie. One in five people in this country in any given year suffer from some form of mental illness. Cohen called these people “canaries in the coal mine,” suggesting that they are the sensitive ones who react to our current social problems.

Ron Coleman, founder of [Working to Recovery](#), who himself has experienced schizophrenia—and described himself as “a schizophrenic who went back to being Ron Coleman”—was interviewed in the movie and stated that hearing voices is a normal human experience.

Another of the movie’s subjects, Dan, said he had been hearing voices since middle school. Among the many voices, he had an imaginary friend he called “Red Eyes,” whom he described as a seven-foot-tall ant demon. Dan said the voices were a gift, but a dangerous gift, and he considered himself “weird in a cool way.” But when he went to see a psychiatrist, she told him it was an illness and he should get rid of his symptoms. But Dan saw his voices as allowing him to live.

Robert Whitaker, author of [Anatomy of an Epidemic](#), described our treatment of people with mental illness going back to colonial times. “Treatment follows from how you conceive of the mad,” he said. “Because we fear them, we don’t listen. And because we don’t listen, we hurt them.” He noted that the only people who have treated the mad with consideration were the Quakers, who considered them simply as brethren.

“Madness is a mystery,” Whitaker went on, “and there are many paths to madness.” Among them, he listed stress, trauma, lack of sleep, and illness as conditions that can lead to psychosis.

Jen was a third subject profiled in the movie. She said she is now raising her children in “a consensus reality.” As a young woman she had been an athlete, but then she began experiencing mental illness. She tried to be compliant with her medications—she had been on thirteen different drugs—but she felt “foggy.” From there, she went cold turkey, “which I don’t recommend.”

She had been told she had an incurable illness. When she called the help lines in a crisis, they told her she couldn’t be helped. Soon after, she found others like herself who “couldn’t be helped” and she started a group that met to talk about their situation. “What’s labeled mental illness is a mind-body discord that comes out as behavior,” she said. “We are not behaving in a constantly narrowing definition of normal.”

Another professional expert interviewed for the movie, Bruce Levine, PhD, stated that the increase in mental illness in the country resulted from “pathologizing normal behavior.” He cited the diagnosis of Oppositional Defiant Disorder as describing the characteristics of every social activist, and Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder is attributed to boys who will pay attention to the things that really interest them. “Medicating kids is one way to subdue resistance,” Levine said. He said the psychiatrists in charge of defining illness through the [*Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*](#), the handbook of psychiatry, have links to the pharmaceutical companies and an interest in increasing medication.

Oryx Cohen worked with another person with lived experience, Will Hall, to start workshops on withdrawing from medications and founded the Freedom Center, which is modeled on Alcoholics Anonymous. They are not anti-drug, but instead have a welcoming and nonjudgmental approach.

Cohen noted that medication is a spectrum, with on one side the drugs that treat disease, and way over on the other side are recreational drugs like alcohol, nicotine, cocaine, and heroin. But no wall separates the pharmaceutical and recreational drugs, and all of them create an altered mental state. “Alcohol causes brain damage,” Cohen said. “But then so do the antipsychotic medications.”

He noted the strong emotions and fears around the psychiatric medications. His groups focus on harm reduction and ask people to look at the risks and benefits of medication, but also the risks presented by extreme emotional states.

Dan said the side effects of his medications were more of a problem than the issue they were supposed to treat. “When emotions are real, they’re real. And the negative ones can take you to some dark places.”

Jen described herself as “slipping away to other worlds,” where she was gone for days and then woke up in a hospital that she was not able to leave. “Everyone says, ‘This person is sick and needs to be locked away.’ Dealing with people in their environment doesn’t make sense to them,” she said.

Oryx Cohen said that the medical response to emotional distress is making the whole situation worse. And Robert Whitaker noted that the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual* was started in the 1980s with a basis in symptoms, not in biological factors like genes. For example, the same antipsychotic medications are given for both psychosis and bipolar disorder without regard to causes. “We need to rethink this whole psychiatric enterprise.”

Marius Romme, the founder of the [International Hearing Voices Network](#), said that as a psychiatrist in Holland he had been trained not to collaborate with his patients. And then one woman resisted the treatment he prescribed for her experience of hearing voices. From that, he reasoned that if this experience is real, then someone will know how to cope with it. And so he turned to the patients themselves.

Peer-run organizations like this have taken off in America. But Cohen noted that, first, you have to overcome the sense that you can't talk about the things happening inside yourself. "People really hear these voices, and they are a part of their lives. Psychiatry says this is a symptom of an illness. But this is an emotional and spiritual reaction to people's problems."

The peer-run organizations don't provide services, Cohen said. They provide a place for people to come and talk. "People should have a choice in the path to recovery," he said. The peer movement is a social support system teaching that there's another way. It's also based on the civil and human rights movements.

Bruce Levine noted that people in today's society live, in Thoreau's words, "lives of quiet desperation." They feel helpless, powerless, and isolated. Instead of focusing on society's ills, psychiatrists are "treating a broken brain like a broken arm." But what if they are wrong?

Oryx Cohen's story ended with a conference he attended in Austin, Texas. He became overstressed in arranging events and suffered a "seizure type of experience." His friends did not want him to be admitted to a psychiatric hospital in Texas, and so they drove him home in a minivan to Boston. There he continued in an altered state and was hospitalized and medicated for the first time in years, and the conditions were horrible. He managed to be transferred to a local Peer Respite center, one of six in the country. It was a safe place, he said, without the violence between patients and staff he experienced at the hospital. The respite center was "paradise."

Robert Whitaker said that this is a human rights story: people being locked away, losing their freedom, and being forcibly treated. "If you want to help people, you have to restore the interactions between people. If mental illness is all in a person's brain, it prevents us from making a more just society."

Will Hall concluded, "My states are gifts that belong to me."

Dan, with the friend Red Eyes, said, "Is it hard to stay in the world? Yeah! When people ask would you do something different, I just wish the voices would schedule their time better."

And Jen said, "The diagnosis—looking at me like I'm in a petri dish—doesn't work. It ignores where I'm coming from and my experience. I'm a human being."