

**Mental Health Disorders and Their Representation in Media:  
an Analysis of Silver Linings Playbook**

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## Introduction

*Silver Linings Playbook*, the romantic comedy written and directed by David O. Russel, depicts the life of Pat Solatano. After losing his wife and job, Pat finds himself at a mental hospital located in Baltimore. Eight months later, he's released and moves back home with his parents, where he begins picking up the pieces in hopes to rebuild the life he shared with his wife Nikki. His life takes another turn when he meets a girl named Tiffany who offers to help him reconnect with his wife in exchange for a favor.

The focus of abnormal psychology is on unusual patterns, behavior, emotion and thought (Comer, 2013). This movie presented characters with psychological disorders although never explicitly mentioning them. By assessing the behaviors and symptoms, a general consensus could be made. Varying forms of treatment were also displayed in the movie such as group and individual therapy as well as the use of medication. These characteristics display a direct relationship to the field of abnormal psychology.

The first mental health disorder presented was bipolar disorder, particularly bipolar I disorder. This can be characterized as full manic episodes or hypomania and major depressive symptoms that may follow a manic episode (Comer, 2013). Pat displayed many of the symptoms associated with this disorder such as a reduced need for sleep, racing thoughts, heightened activity examples being jogging and dancing, poor judgment, and risky behaviors, which can be classified as a hypomanic phase. He was also experiencing moments of sadness, anxiety, irritability, and loss of enjoyment in activities previously enjoyed which can be classified as a depressive phase (Comer, 2013). The second disorder presented was obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD). OCD can be characterized as a combination of persistent thoughts, ideas,

impulses, and or images (obsessions) and repetitive acts or fixed behaviors that must be performed by an individual to reduce anxiety (compulsions) (Comer, 2013). Pat's father displayed symptoms associated with OCD. They manifested in a form of superstitions about the Eagle's games, which lead to various compulsions like fixing the remotes while watching the game, using Pat as a good luck charm, and gambling away things of value. The third disorder presented was depression which can be characterized as a low state where an individual experiences significant levels of sadness, low energy and self-worth, and or guilt (Comer, 2013). Tiffany displayed similar depressive symptoms like her irritable mood, in the beginning, her feelings of loneliness when she first met Pat and when the man she texted showed up at her house. She also expresses very little interest in spending time with her sister and displays moments of unclear thought processes. The final disorder presented to us in the movie was borderline personality disorder (BPD) which is characterized by instability, major mood shifts, impulsivity, and an unstable self-image. Tiffany, although undiagnosed, displayed similar symptoms such as instability in both her romantic and family relationships, her impulsive behaviors associated with sex and the consumption of alcohol, and her drastic mood shifts.

### **Analysis through a Critical Lens**

Media today plays a significant role in the lives of individuals across the world, becoming a resource many heavily rely on. In relation to *Silver Linings Playbook*, there are several scenarios where individuals and populations may be affected by watching this movie. Individuals who are ill-informed on mental health disorders and what they entail could be affected by this movie because of the lack of diagnoses and inconsistent treatments individuals had. Additionally, the ways in which comedy, violence, and negativity are used to depict mental

health conditions can have a negative impact. People with the disorders depicted in the movie could also be affected - they may feel that their condition is being inaccurately represented or over-glorified through the use of a movie. Additionally, those who are sensitive to violence and vulgar language could be affected as both are displayed heavily throughout the movie.

The representation of each disorder in the movie as a mental health condition was accurate for the most part. Symptoms and treatments for bipolar disorder, OCD, depression, and BPD that were described in the movie are done well. However, lack of representation of these disorders can be seen in the absence of recognition of the diagnoses and in the inconsistency of treatment demonstrated by a character who was reluctant to take his medication. “This resistance to taking lithium is played out in the lives of tens of thousands of patients every year. Almost always it leads to a recurrence of the illness; not commonly it results in tragedy” (Comer, 2013, p. 276).

“In the case of mental illness, considerable research has shown that the media is the public’s most significant source of information regarding mental illness” (Smith, 2015). The information presented in the media often serves as a negative and misleading image of a mental illness and creates stereotypes that are damaging to those living with it. A typical depiction of a mentally ill person presents them as unstable and dangerous to those around them (Smith, 2015). False representation of mental illness leads to the creation of stigma and increases the rates of violence and discrimination against people with mental health conditions. It also creates barriers to treatments and support that is crucial for those living with mental illness. “If you are crazy, can you still be sound of mind?” (Price, 2011). Stigma is also associated with the language and stereotypes we use to describe those with mental illnesses (Walter, 2015). The poor choice of

language that was displayed throughout the movie could play a significant role in dehumanizing or stigmatizing the individual behind the statement, as well as evoking an unnecessary fear towards people with a mental illness and resulting in violence against them (Price, 2011).

### **Personal Reaction**

After watching this movie several times over the years, I have come across new things every time that have allowed my view of this film to constantly change. The first time I watched it my focus was on the romantic and comedic aspects. While I did not completely ignore the troubling portions of the movie, I was not as informed on the issues presented as I am now. Due to the insights I now have on mental health disorders I was able to see it through a different lens and my emotional reactions towards this movie have been heightened.

Throughout the movie I found the language used by characters and the blatant disrespect towards those with mental health disorders appalling. Although it is just a movie, I know this is an actual depiction of how mental health disorders are viewed and how the individuals with the disorders are treated. One scene that I always have a strong emotional reaction to is the playoff game that Pat and his brother attend. During the scene, a group of White men are walking past the bus where another group of Indian men are set up, and as an individual from the group of White men approaches the bus he says “What’s that smell? Nasty Indian curry, this is America baby, go back to your country!” (Russel, 2012). After that is said, the men break out into a fight and rather than the police choosing to restrain any of the other individuals involved in the fight, they choose to drag Pat off. Every time I watch this scene I feel a sudden sensation where my heart drops to my stomach and I am instantly consumed with rage, not only because of that one

cruel individual but also due to the actions of the police officers involved. This is no surprise to me as situations like this happen every day in the real world, but it is heartbreaking. No matter what this situation is at hand, those who are deemed as different will never be treated as they deserve which is a painful but sad reality.

I believe I had the reactions I did to this movie because I know first hand how it feels to be treated differently. Growing up in a rural community here in Maine that has little to no diversity brought many difficult times. I stood out wherever I went, was always made fun of, and always had a hard time processing why I was treated the way I was. Although I have not been diagnosed with a mental health disorder, the fact that I am different will always be a key factor in how I am treated as well as the individuals struggling with their mental health.

Overall, the movie fits my personal perspective on mental illnesses. It highlights the complexities of disorders that many people might have either overlooked and or have not accepted. It also highlights the stigma that is associated with mental health conditions, which is a good way to bring light to the hardships many people face. However, in my opinion, the creators of the movie played on the stereotypical portrayal of those living with mental illnesses as violent instead of highlighting the fact that they are more likely to be victims of violence. This piece of misinformation further perpetuates the stigma that surrounds mental illness and is being used to justify violence and discrimination that people living with it experience.

## References

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