

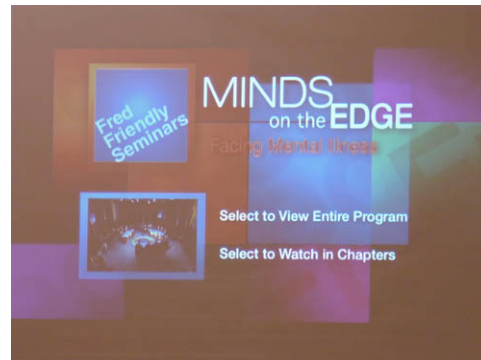
Minds on the Edge: Facing Mental Illness

Summarized by Thomas T. Thomas

At our January 27 meeting, we showed a one-hour video that aired on PBS stations last fall called *Minds on the Edge: Facing Mental Illness*.¹ The video, one of the Fred Friendly Seminars, explores severe mental illness in America as part of a national consensus about how to improve the kinds of support and treatment available for people with mental illness. It explores the challenging ethical issues as well as systemic flaws in program and policy design, service coordination, and resource allocation yet provides a glimpse of innovative solutions being implemented across the country.

Moderated by **Frank Sesno**, Director of Media and Public Affairs at The George Washington University, the video took the form of a roundtable discussion. The panelists represented a wide array of medical, legal, and personal experience, including people with mental illness and those who take care of people with the illness. The panel members included:

- Associate Justice **Stephen Breyer** of the U.S. Supreme Court.
- **Arthur Caplan, PhD**, Emanuel and Robert Hart Professor of Bioethics, Department of Medical Ethics, University of Pennsylvania.
- **Pete Earley**, author of *Crazy: A Father's Search Through America's Mental Health Madness* and former *Washington Post* reporter.
- **Frederick J. Frese III, PhD**, faculty member in psychiatry at Case Western Reserve University and Northwestern Ohio Universities College of Medicine, and a person with schizophrenia.
- **Avel Gordly**, founder of the African-American Mental Health Commission, former member of the Oregon House of Representatives, and mother of a person with schizophrenia.
- **Eric Kandel, MD**, neuroscientist awarded the Nobel Prize in 2000 for his work on the physiology of memory.
- **Judge Steven Leifman**, Miami-Dade County Court Criminal Division, Special Advisor on Criminal Justice for the Supreme Court of Florida.
- **Estelle Richman**, Secretary of Public Welfare, Commonwealth of Pennsylvania.



¹ <http://www.mindsoneedge.org/>

- **Elyn Saks**, Associate Dean at the University of Southern California's Gould School of Law, a person with schizophrenia and author of *The Center Cannot Hold: My Journey Through Madness*.
- **Thomas Simpatico, MD**, former Director of the Division of Public Psychiatry at the University of Vermont's School of Medicine, President of the Vermont Psychiatric Association.
- **Tracey Skale, MD**, Chief Medical Officer of the Greater Cincinnati Behavioral Health Services.
- **Lauren Shapiro**, Director of Public Policy, National Coalition of Mental Health Consumer/Survivor Organizations, and a person with Schizophrenia.
- **Susan Stefan**, Attorney at the Center for Public Representation, Newton, Massachusetts.
- **Sam Tsemberis**, founder and Executive Director of Pathways to Housing, faculty member at the New York University Langone Medical Center.

During the discussion, Sesno posed the situations of two hypothetical patients. One was a young woman in college who is exhibiting symptoms of bipolar disorder. As her condition deteriorates, her professors and family try to get her into treatment. The other patient was an adult male already diagnosed with schizophrenia. When his only remaining parent dies, he loses his source of support and connection to the community, becoming homeless and a danger to himself. The moderator then asked the panelists to role-play from the points of view of the patient, the parent, the professor, doctors in various settings, the police, the judge, and the local politician, all of whom are either trying to help the person or are required to deal with the situation.

As they worked through the attempts of family, friends, and society to help these people on the edge, the panelists made several observations, including:

- Our mental health system is the definition of insanity—doing the same thing over and over and expecting a different outcome.
- The system is not really a system but “a lot of things put together with bubblegum.”
- What the person with mental illness wants is to be offered opportunities and a chance to be treated as a member of society. The person ultimately is looking for “a capability framework rather than a disability framework.”
- People who work in law enforcement, who are usually the first person outside the family to see the patient during an episode of psychosis, need crisis intervention training.
- During the hearing process to evaluate the person for treatment as “a danger to self or others,” there are usually conflicting purposes. The court and the family want to see the person made safe; the attorney representing the person wants to see his client's wishes fulfilled. Ultimately, these are different visions of the person's autonomy.
- People outside the mental health system don't think of mental illness as just another illness. They think there is something unusual about it.
- Locking people up—which is the result in the criminal justice system—doesn't produce treatment.

The closing comment by Dr. Eric Kandel was a hopeful one. Biological science is capable of focusing enormous power. It has already shown great

progress in dealing with other medical conditions. Mental illness presents the greatest challenge that biology has ever faced: understanding the human mind itself and its relation to the physical brain. But he felt sure that eventually biology will show progress here as well.