

Healthmonitor

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Feeling Good!

"Sopranos" star
Joe Pantoliano speaks
out about his battle
with depression

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Rodney Hampton
helps his mom
fight back!

DEAR READER

This issue of Health Monitor features several articles about people, famous and not, who are facing the challenges of chronic illness. First, you won't want to miss our exclusive interview with Joey "Pants" Pantoliano, who plays Ralph Cifaretto on HBO's hit drama "The Sopranos." In this issue, the well-known character actor speaks frankly about his battle with clinical depression.

We also have an article about Eva Hampton, mother of NFL all-pro Rodney Hampton. For 17 years, Eva has had to cope with diabetes. It hasn't been easy, but thanks to good medical care and the encouragement of her family, this grandmother of 10 is still going strong.

Last but certainly not least, check out our story "Making choices, taking chances." It's about a young woman named Christine Miller who was diagnosed with rheumatoid arthritis (RA) when she was just a toddler. Despite a variety of obstacles, this high-spirited Baltimore attorney hasn't let RA stop her from doing whatever she pleases. One exception: She can't wear high heels!

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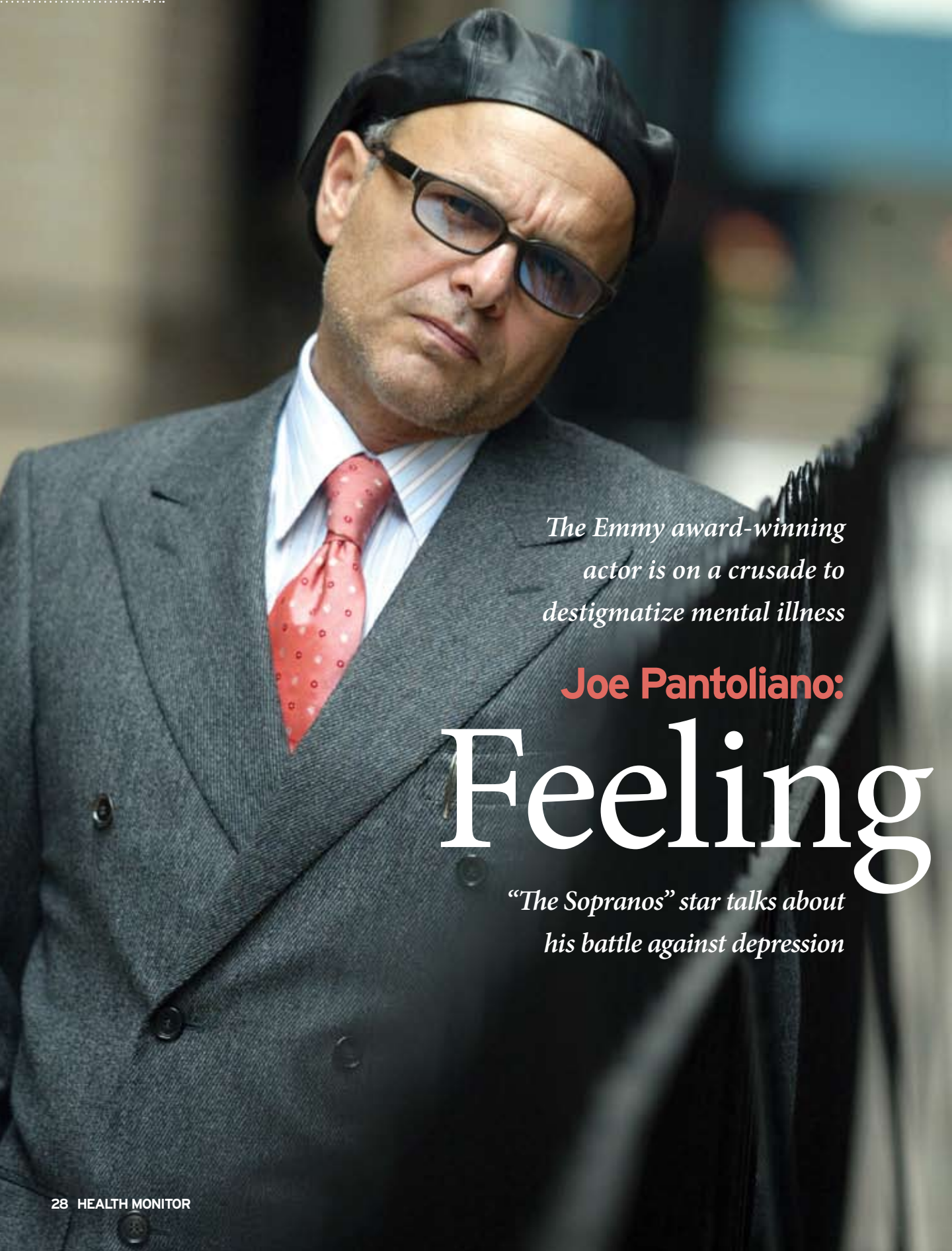
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The Emmy award-winning actor is on a crusade to destigmatize mental illness

Joe Pantoliano:

Feeling

“The Sopranos” star talks about his battle against depression

Joe “Pants” Pantoliano was a mess. The wiry character actor, best known as the hotheaded mob lieutenant Ralph Cifaretto in the HBO show “The Sopranos” was losing weight he didn’t need to lose. And at night he was tossing, turning, and having dark dreams about his volatile, chain-smoking mother, who’d been dead for 25 years.

Pantoliano—often referred to as Joey Pants because people find it hard to pronounce his surname—was in the midst of making the movie *Canvas*, which opened in New York last October. In the film, he plays John Marino, an ordinary man struggling to hold his family together after his wife develops schizophrenia. Actress Marcia Gay Harden’s vivid performance as a woman out of control reminded Pantoliano of his own mother, who, he now recalled, often “hit herself and screamed for tranquilizers.”

To add to his woes, just a few days before they started work on *Canvas*, one of Pantoliano’s closest friends had committed suicide. It came as a total shock; none of his friends had known that anything was wrong. His friend’s death and the terrible memories set the actor, 56,

Good

into a downward spin; he was so upset, he began to think that he might be better off dead. “When I was at my bottom, I was taking pills hoping that I wouldn’t wake up the next morning,” he said during an exclusive interview with *Health Monitor*. “But I wasn’t sharing any of this. I was embarrassed by the thoughts bouncing around in my head.”

Letting down his guard

As soon as *Canvas* was finished, Pantoliano returned to his home in Connecticut and made an appointment

with his doctor. His doctor examined him and then asked how he was doing. Finally, Pantoliano let down his guard and confided just how bad he’d been feeling. The doctor sent him to a psychiatrist, who diagnosed Pantoliano with clinical depression and started him on a treatment regimen that includes exercise, nutrition, talk therapy, and antidepressant medication.

With treatment under way, things

“One day during a rehearsal I started banging my head on the stage floor”

started clicking into place. For one thing, Pantoliano realized that his bout of depression during the making of *Canvas* wasn’t his first. “I remembered doing a play when I was 21—it was *Rats* by Israel Horowitz. I was in Vermont, but I didn’t like it there, and one day during a rehearsal I started banging my head on the stage floor. I scratched my face and drew blood; they had to

come and grab me from the stage. I felt like I was having a heart attack; I couldn’t breathe. I was also paranoid; I felt like the director was out to get me.”

The memory of that breakdown, and others, made Pantoliano see that he had actually been battling depression for many years—and that it had taken a heavy toll on his life. “When you’re not diagnosed, you self-medicate,” he says. “With me it was alcohol. It took care of the pain temporarily, but it created its own problems. I almost lost my entire family. When I’d come home, the dogs were the only ones who would greet me. As they were running out to say hello, my children were running upstairs to their rooms because they didn’t want to see me. One time my wife said I’d put

up a wall, and the wall was getting so high, they could no longer climb over it.”

As Pantoliano’s state of mind improved, he was able to stop drinking. “I came off the booze and got involved in a 12-step program. I’d been afraid of getting involved in organization-type things, but I went to a meeting with some friends, and the people there embraced me. It was where I belonged.”

Remembering his mother

As he started to learn about mental illness, Pantoliano became convinced that his mother had spent her entire adult life with undiagnosed bipolar disorder, a cyclic disease in which sufferers periodically exhibit manic and depressive episodes.

Several years earlier, he’d written *Who’s Sorry Now* (Dutton, 2002), a tragic-comic autobiography about his childhood in Hoboken, N.J., with his first-generation Italian-American parents, Dominic “Monk” Pantoliano, a hears driver and factory foreman with ties to the mob, and his mother, Mary, whose temper was so violent she once broke her husband’s collarbone. “You never knew what you were going to get with her,” says Pantoliano. “But at the time, I’d thought my mother’s behavior was her choice.”

Destigmatizing mental illness

Pantoliano also learned how stigmatizing mental illness can be. Whenever he was hired to work on a movie he had to get a physical exam for insurance purposes. “When I started taking antidepressants I realized I was being discriminated against by the insurance companies,” he says. “Two days after an exam, I would get a call from my lawyer saying, ‘they won’t cover you if you have a nervous breakdown on the set.’”

When Pantoliano countered that he took medication for high cholesterol and asked why that was so different, the insurance companies said, “We’ll cover you if you have a heart attack, we just won’t cover a psychotic episode.”

This struck the actor as supremely unfair. “As far as I’m concerned, the

brain should have the same First-Amendment rights as the liver, the kidney, and the gallbladder....”

During the time *Canvas* was being edited, Pantoliano found out that he had plenty of company. When fans came up to him in public and asked what he was working on, he'd tell them about the movie and about his own diagnosis. Often, he says, the response would be, “No kidding, me too. My brother is schizophrenic,” or “No kidding, me, too—I'm bipolar.”

“I was amazed,” says Pantoliano. “Mental illness touches four out of five Americans, whether they want to admit to it or not.”

The groundswell of support led the actor to go public about his depression by consenting to an in-depth television interview with NBC anchor Brian Williams, and allowing himself to be featured in an article in *People* magazine titled “Fighting Depression.” He also started a foundation called No Kidding Me Too (NKM2). Its goal, he says, is to “Educate Americans about mental illness and tear this stigma out of the closet and de-isolate it so that people will be surprised to find millions of others like themselves.”

To help spread the word, Pantoliano put together an advisory board that includes friends, associates, and several of his A-list celebrity pals, such as Marcia Gay Harden, Edie Falco, Delta Burke, and Robert Downey Jr.

On May 28 in Hollywood, Pantoliano presented actress Sally Field with the inaugural NKM2 award, which he created to honor entertainers who are “passionate about removing the stigma from mental illness.” Field starred in the 1976 TV movie “Sybil,” about a severely disturbed young woman suffering from multiple personality disorder brought on by childhood abuse. Field also guest-starred on an episode of “ER,” as a woman with bipolar disease. She is, says Pantoliano, “an amazing actress.”

Upcoming NKM2 plans include hosting parties at the Republican and Democratic conventions to raise aware-



Joey Pants: Career highlights

Joe Pantoliano has appeared in more than 100 movies and TV shows. He first gained national recognition for his role as Guido the Killer Pimp in the 1983 comedy film *Risky Business*, costarring with Tom Cruise. In 1988, he played bail bondsman Eddie Moscone in the Robert De Niro comedy *Midnight Run*. Other roles followed, and in 1999, Pantoliano had his biggest box-office hit as the traitorous renegade Cypher in the blockbuster *The Matrix*. In 2000, he played a seedy character—police officer John Edward “Teddy” Gammel—in the stylish thriller *Memento*. In 2001, he joined the cast of “The Sopranos,” for which he won an Emmy Award for Outstanding Supporting Actor in a Drama Series in 2003. *Canvas* is his most recent movie.

ness of the need to destigmatize mental illness on the part of lawmakers and the public at large. The overall mission, says Pantoliano, “is to empower those with mental illness to admit their illness, seek treatment, and become even greater contributing members of society and obliterate this stigma.”

One day at a time

These days, when Pantoliano isn't working on the set or giving interviews about NKM2, he can often be found at home in Fairfield, Conn., playing with his four dogs or hanging out with his kids, Marco, 27, Melody, 22, Daniella, 16, and Isabella is 9.

Lying back on his couch, Pantoliano scratches one of his pooches behind the ears and says that despite

the seriousness of his mission, he thinks it's important to keep a sense of humor and perspective—even when it comes to mental illness. “I want,” he says with a grin, “to make crazy sexy.”

(Excerpt) She loves me, she loves me not ...

In his book, *Who's Sorry Now*, Pantoliano recalls a time in his early 20s when he brought a girlfriend, Ellen, to his mother's house for a visit, and an argument erupted between him and his mother at the dinner table. This scene provides a good example of Pantoliano's mother's erratic—possibly bipolar—behavior.

My mother ... stood up from her chair, took a breast in her hand through her clothes and twisted it like a corkscrew, saying, “I curse the milk that fed you! You shoulda died in my womb! In my womb you shoulda died!”

Within minutes I was yelling back at Mommy at the top of my lungs, “That's it, I'm leaving! And I'm never coming back!”

Mommy yelled back, “Get out! Don't ever come back! You should drop dead, you dirty stinking dog! If you were on fire, I wouldn't piss on you to put it out!”

The next thing I knew, I was outside with Ellen and our packed bags. Ellen seemed to be praying for a quick delivery elsewhere—anywhere but here....

Suddenly ... Mommy propped open the screen door and stuck her head out. “Joey, you want coffee?”

Without missing a beat I turned and answered, “Yeah, no sugar. You want any, Ellen?” I asked.

She just shook her head no.

That was Mommy in a nutshell. She never stayed mad. She got over it and moved on, until her next performance.”

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