

tian dayton^{phd}

MAY IS MENTAL HEALTH MONTH



Issue #4

One time Tough Guy Soprano Turned Mental Health Activist



May is mental health awareness month so we're taking a look at how one Hollywood insider is using celebrity to spotlight the stigma surrounding mental illness. You may know Joey Pantoliano as "Cosmo" from the movies *The Fugative* and *U.S. Marshalls* or as tough guy Ralphie Cifaretto from *The Sopranos*. However tough and impenetrable Joey's characters public roles were, privately he has been battling with alcohol, drugs and mental illness much of his life. Joey's personal struggles have led him to create a foundation called **No Kidding Me 2**. It's a celebrity-fueled advocacy effort to change the way society views mental illness. Some of the people serving on the advisory board are Robert Downey, Jr., Marcia Gay Harden, Patricia Cornwell, [Harrison Ford](#), Matt Dillon, and Robin Williams. As a result of his work with the foundation and his own personal encounters, Joey has heard hundreds of stories from people about their experiences with mental illness. This inspired him to create a documentary, also titled *No Kidding, Me, Too*, an inspiring, provocative and even humorous look at brain disease and the people living with it.

See Dr. Dayton at the following upcoming events:



U.S. Journal
and
TRAINING, INC.
The Institute for Integral Development



Caron, New York City monthly psychodrama workshops
www.caron.org, 1 800, 678-2332

The military asked Joey to tour Iraq thinking that his tough guy reputation would help soldiers to open up and share about their personal struggles, all of these experiences have strengthened Joey's commitment to help to remove the stigma around depression and other forms of mental illness, the stigma that keeps people from opening up about the kinds of personal issues that might make one desperate enough to drown their pain in drugs and alcohol or to take their own lives. He is only too aware that this struggle is a life and death one, more American soldiers are being lost to suicide than in battle. I met Joey about a year and a half ago. He's a charming, talented man who it's impossible not to like immediately....hopefully, you will get a sense of the man and his mission here.....

Tian: What inspired you to create No Kidding Me 2 and to make a documentary about mental illness?

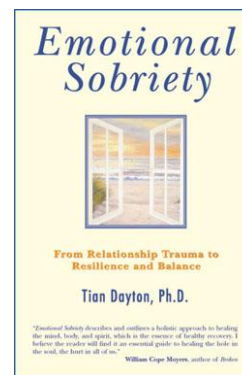
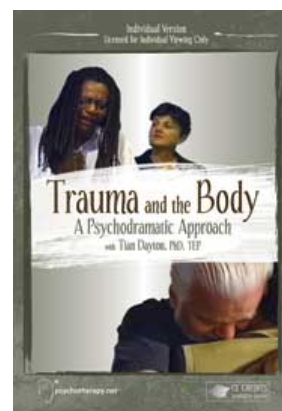
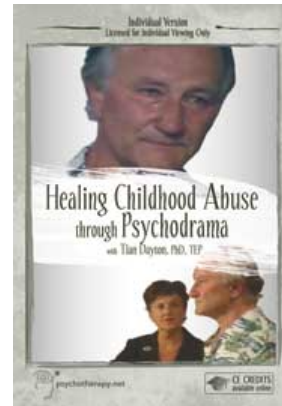
Joey: I prefer "dis-ease" because "mental illness" implies permanence, but I see brain dis-ease as a transient thing. My dis-ease, clinical depression, literally comes and goes. Having surrendered to it, I've learned how to get through the dis-ease when it appears. I can sense it coming. It's the opposite of "ease." It's the opposite of the peace of mind that I desire, that peace of mind which I never had that defined the emptiness living inside me. In the end, I think it's better to have a brain dis-ease than to be mentally ill. Too often people who suffer from depression and other mental health issues stay silent because they don't want to "out" themselves. There is a stigma attached to brain dis-ease that frightens people. It stains you, places you on the other side of the boundary that society draws between "us" and "them." You become one of "them," the crazy people who are cloaked in invisibility.

But here's the problem: the boundary is not real; it's a myth. There is no separation between "us" and "them." We are them. If you aren't, then your mother or your best friend or your teacher is. Brain dis-ease touches each of our lives directly and indirectly. Once I learned that I had a brain disorder, I didn't make any attempts to keep it secret. I would talk about it openly with friends and colleagues. What surprised me was the number of people who, in response, would then tell me about their own diagnosis. That's what inspired me to create a foundation called "No Kidding, Me, Too" (www.nkm2.org). It's goal is to educate Americans about brain dis-ease and tear the stigma out of the closet, de-isolate it so that people will be surprised to find millions of others like themselves.

Tian: Why is this so deeply personal a passion for you Joey??

Joey: There's always been this kind of thing inside of me, a numbness, a sadness. I tried to fill it up with fame. Anything that was fast. Too much was never enough for me. I wanted it quick and I wanted it fast. I worry more than I should, I obsess on situations that I shouldn't. And no matter how I can cognitively understand how I shouldn't be – that it's all in my head – I still feel it in my heart. That was how my subconscious worked....

When I was diagnosed with clinical depression, I realized it wasn't of my own doing, it wasn't my own selfishness. I wanted some peace of mind, I wanted my mind to rest. Now with modern medicine, with my exercises and yoga, I'm able to find glimpses of peace of mind. My brain doesn't have the capacity it did when I was younger to produce the chemicals – the endorphines, the norepinephrin so I am getting some help with it. It's sanity



Read more from Dr. Dayton:



management that I'm occupied with now!



Tian: How did you get all of these young people to talk so openly about diagnosis in your documentary?

Joey: The core of what we believe at *No Kidding, Me Too* is that we don't have the luxury of anonymity. When I first started telling people that I live with a mental disease, I was always greeted with, "no kidding, me too!" Or "my brother, my mother too." So that's what I decided to call the organization.



National Association for Children of Alcoholics

[Visit the NACoA website for more information](#)

Tian: So your openness helps others to feel more open?

Joey: Yes, it breeds a sense of comfort. There's a shared struggle. Everyone you see in the documentary made it to the cut because they're all such heroes..... They trusted me with their stories. They felt safe in sharing their secrets. And that's what this movie is really about, six upwardly mobile individuals; a vascular surgeon who is bipolar; amazing kids just going out into the world. Our stories were alike. We didn't know we had a mental disease. We just knew there was something wrong. And through the journey of trying to figure out how to fix that emptiness that lived inside of us, and still does occasionally, we took on behaviors like cutting, or boemia, anorexia, gambling, alcohol, drugs; things that felt better, and made us feel whole. And then they stopped working.

[Jim Peake, Internet Marketing Consultant](#)

Tian: What do you want young people to gain from this film?

Joey: We believe that a young kid can see this movie and say, "wait a minute. Drugs are not the answer. I don't want to screw my brain up now. I don't want to increase my chances of being depressed later in life.(a possible side effect of adolescent drug abuse) Why do myself that kind of damage?" When teens turn to drugs, they're literally taking the happiness they're going to need in their 30s and 40s and using it up in their teens. I'm talking about dopamine and serotonin, etc. This movie is telling them there's no shame in how they feel, they're in good company.

Tian: In this documentary, you talk to soldiers in Iraq and Afghanistan. What kind of stories are you hearing from soldiers related to mental health?

Joey: This is the first war where our military is losing more GIs to suicide than they are to battle. We were hearing that the post-traumatic stress and the feeling of powerlessness may not be entirely about being in battle. The kids that are completing their suicides tend to be Anglo-American, between 19 and 21 years old, first tour of duty within their first 6 months. The soldiers and officers that I talked to, a lot of their issues stem more from what's going on at home than what's going on there with the IED's. It's about situations and relationships at home. Last September, during Suicide Prevention Week, we went to Iraq through the USO to show the documentary and share our experiences with mental dis-ease, our strengths and weaknesses, our hopes, and to communicate the counter-intuitive message that they have to surrender to their dis-ease in order to win. There I was telling these warriors who are there to win a war that they must surrender to win, that the more I talked about my own dis-ease and the more I surrendered to it, the less stressful it became. The military actually allowed us to say "surrender to win" in the program. It was a tall order to ask in the military, nothing less than a complete mindset change. It turns out General Patton was wrong to slap that soldier (in the movie, that is), because that soldier was suffering

from PTSD, and Patton thought that by smacking the kid it would help him to grow some balls. But the guy was as ill as someone with bandages, and the only difference between him and another wounded soldier was that he didn't have the bandage to prove the wound. The reception in Iraq was better than I could have imagined - shockingly wonderful. After seeing the movie, the GI's became intimate with us. They were sharing things with us that they wouldn't share with anyone else. We were one of them. They were one of us. This isn't a military disease after all. What's happening in the military is a microcosm of what's happening all across this country. If you go to nkm2.org, there's a 3-minute piece called "[Between Iraq and a Hard Place](#)" that we put together from footage during our Stomp the Stigma tour in Iraq.

Tian: Was part of this intergenerational, was mental dis-ease and addiction in your family?

Joey: My mother hated alcoholics. Her father was an alcoholic. Her father also sexually abused her and many of the women in his family. That was a well-known fact that we determined shouldn't be in my first book. I withheld that information. Well, you know, you are as sick as your secrets, and I withheld that information. I had a lot of alcoholics on the Pantoliano side of the family. And a lot of degenerate gamblers like my uncle Pete. He lived to be 92 years old but he was a degenerate gambler. My mother died at 63, my aunt Tillie I think was 59. Aunt Tille was a drug addict and alcoholic. My mother was a drug addict. She was addicted to prescription drugs and tranquilizers. We didn't know that. How could you know that in 1965? We just knew that she needed her fucking tranquilizers. I knew that I was an alcoholic by the time I was 25 years old. In my first book, I talk about how I came to learn that drugs and alcohol were a real danger growing up in Hoboken. My cousin and sometime step-father Florie threatened to shoot me in both my legs with his handgun if I ever came home loaded. Talk about a deterrent to have a drug-free family. Alcohol was acceptable and drugs weren't. I don't know if it's because of my ADD or what.

Tian: So you lived a bit of The Soprano's at home, life imitating art? Or the other way around?

Joey: I remember trying marijuana in school and not liking it. It made me paranoid, it made me feel like everybody was watching me, it made me feel out of control. The only time I bought it was to impress a girl I wanted to go to bed with. She was my first. I went down to Hoboken to score it, went back to her place and I thought her and her friends were going to rob me. It was not fun.

So I didn't do marijuana. I remember going to see 2001: A Space Odyssey at the Fort Lee movie theater. All the guys were taking mescaline, because they said the only way to see this movie was being high on mescaline. I took a tab of mescaline and I immediately had a panic attack, and I went into the bathroom and I shoved my arm down my throat and vomited out because I was afraid of what Florie would do. In the end, I knew that drugs and alcohol would get in the way of my success, and success was the first thing I turned to to fill the hole inside, the emptiness. That hole was the size of God. So I waited until I was successful before I started using.

Eventually, my problem was alcohol, but the only real addition I had was to vicodin and percocets. And that started as an honest mistake. I was doing a scene on the Sopranos in my second season. The scene was, I was in a steam room with Peter Reager and Jimmy Gandolfini. We were doing a scene where we were making some deal on the Esplanade. And they used

a natural steam heat to create the feeling. I walked by it bear foot and I got first degree burns on my ankle. The pain was unbelievable. They sent a doctor down that prescribed percocet to take care of the pain. And I remember the doctor giving me a whole warning on this drug, "Be careful." I remember that it felt good, it numbed the pain, made the pain manageable. But it also made me feel better. I remember saying to my psychiatrist that it just put a bounce in my step. It made me feel alive, it gave me energy. In the beginning it would last for five to six hours. I'd get on them, and then I'd get off them. I soon realized I was having a problem.

In terms of alcohol, my true love was wine. But then again, I was always concerned about calories. I was told that if you had a vodka, you could get twice the high for less calories. So I started doing vodka on the rocks for less calories. Then the vicodin (and percocets). Literally, I stopped drinking alcohol and just did vicodin. I was going around for three years saying I was an alcoholic and I didn't drink. I mean, I thought I was sober!

I realized that I was addicted to Vicodin when I got flu-like symptoms from withdrawal. It only happened twice, but it was awful. I thought it was the flu, I was aching, vomiting from the meds. At that point, I was taking 12 a day. I was going through 90 pills every ten days. I was shopping doctors, getting them on the Internet. "My back is hurting, doc." And I didn't make it up, I literally would think my back was hurting me. I believed it. My subconscious was telling me, I need medicine. I thought I had everybody fooled, my daughter, my son, my wife. But they all knew. They knew all the time.

And the whole time, secretly, I wanted to OD. I wanted to die. Life was so unpleasant and there was no reason to live. If this is what my life was going to be, that even these pills didn't work, I'd rather be dead. I would wake up in the morning and my first thought was, "Fuck, I'm still here."

And of course, I felt it was everybody else's fault. Nobody understood me. Looking back, I was severely depressed. How much was situational depression because of the stress of jobs, 9/11, losing friends; how much was clinical depression without a basis in outside reality, I don't know. My family wanted me to quit stressful acting jobs because they thought they were killing me. But it wasn't the jobs. It was something I was carrying into the jobs. And, every time you're on a job, drugs are accessible. That was the problem that fed my problem.

Tian: Have you felt stigmatized in Hollywood now that you've come out so loudly and strongly about your experience?

Joey: No way. That's where we all wind up anyway, in Hollywood! It's a virtual cornucopia of mental dis-ease! We just call it "addiction." But "addictions" are the symptoms. Underlying addiction is mental dis-ease.

Movies tend to demonize or romanticize. They don't tell the truth. The truth is, there's an upwards of 80% recovery rate with all forms of dis-ease once you have been diagnosed and have surrendered to it and have begun to treat it.

Tian: So how do you see recovery or Emotional Sobriety?

Being a part of these 12-step programs, I realize that by not drinking and being alcohol-free today doesn't mean I'm sober. You know, I hear people say "I've been sober 20 years," but there's still anger and resentment pouring through them. My goal is to have emotional sobriety, where I'm

emotionally free and walking through life in a loose-fitting garment, you know? I met you because somebody told me about your book *Forgiving and Moving On*. You told me you wrote this when you were going through a serious time in your ACOA recovery. At that time, I was thinking about committing suicide. I believe that in order to be reborn, like even the Christ figure, that I need to take a murder weapon and turn it into a symbol of peace.

Tian: So that is what fuels your passion for making mental illness “cool” or more acceptable and understood?

Joey: I connected to your book *Emotional Sobriety* immediately, and to you and your husband, because you got what I was trying to get to. You helped me know what I was trying to get to.

Tian: You brought the St. Francis poem?

Joey: Yes, because although he was not an alcoholic, he did, like us, go through the emotional ringer. And as he came out on the other side of that painful experience, this prayer was his expression of what he could see, feel and wish to become:

*Lord make me a channel of Thy peace
That where there is hatred I may bring love
That where there is wrong I may bring the spirit of
forgiveness
That where there is discord I may bring harmony
That where there is error I may bring truth
That where there is doubt I may bring faith
That where there is despair I may bring hope
That where there are shadows I may bring light
That where there is sadness I may bring joy*

*Lord grant me that I may seek rather to comfort than to be comforted
To understand than to be understood
To love than to be loved
For it is by self forgetting that one finds
It is by forgiving that one is forgiven
That it is by dying that one awakens to eternal life.*

To be able to be the architect; to build a river or a stream that's going to take my children off the course that's been my course, so they won't have to go through what I went through. That's the greatest value of what people like you are helping me with and are making our society aware of, finally. Dani, my daughter, has already told me, "I'm not going to drink, I'm not going to drug, because I know I'm going to like it and I know I have your genes, Dad." She's only 18 and so self aware. She decided to join a church group to find a Higher Power to keep her from trying. She picked her college because the other school she was looking at had the highest rate of heroin use in the country, and she said, I didn't want to go there.

Tian: What would it like the world to know...

Joey: That you're not alone, we're not alone. We spend so much time trying to keep the world from knowing our secrets, saying things to ourselves like, "If they only knew what a failure I am.... I got em all fooled but they're going to find out. They're going to find out about me!" But really my heart, all it

wants to do, at the core, is say, "hey, you exist, me too. let's hug." That's why I'm so attracted to the 12-step program. Because I hear these stories and I say, "Oh my God, that's me."

--
