

PROFILE

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Coming Soon:

Spotlight On...
Mental Health

website only publication

www.eiconline.org



Sally Field (Actor), Dr. Kay Jamison (Author/Professor) and Dr. Neal Baer (Exec. Producer)

EIC is looking for productions that accurately depict mental health issues. If you have a show or movie you think we should see, please forward it to Barbara Lurie at the Burbank address below.

For more information about EIC's mental health initiative, please contact Barbara Lurie at:

v. (818) 955-6850
f. (818) 955-6870
email:
blurie@eiconline.org

www.eiconline.org

EIC East
1760 Reston Parkway, Ste. 415
Reston, VA, 20190-3303
v. (703) 481-1414
f. (703) 481-1418
email: eiceast@eiconline.org

EIC West
500 S. Buena Vista Street
Burbank, CA 91521-7283
v. (818) 955-6845
f. (818) 955-6870
email: eicwest@eiconline.org

U.S. Surgeon General Meets With the Industry About Mental Health and the Media

Knowing that people generally fear what they don't understand, the Entertainment Industries Council, Inc. (EIC) tried to shed some spotlight on mental health issues by hosting a conference between the Surgeon General of the United States, Dr. David Satcher, and leaders of our industry. Held at the Beverly Hills Hotel in January, the event also featured former *ER* Executive Producer and current *Law and Order: SVU* Executive Producer, Dr. Neal Baer; Academy Award-winning actor Sally Field; best-

selling author and Johns Hopkins University Professor of Psychiatry, Dr. Kay Jamison; and Dr. David Litts, Special Advisor to the Surgeon General.

A primary focus of the conference, attended by producers, directors, writers and both network and studio executives, was the pervasive stigma confronting those suffering from mental illness. Dr. Satcher encouraged the industry to continue what many TV shows and films have recently achieved: sympathetic and accurate portrayals of mentally ill people as having problems rather than causing them, being more troubled than troublesome and -- as is true in real life -- being more frightened than frightening.

Dr. Satcher sees the industry as a crucial vehicle in shaping public perception and heightening understanding about mental disorders. "There's an overwhelming problem of stigma that interferes with people getting the help they need. So less than half of the people who suffer from mental health problems each year seek treatment," he told the audience. "I'm here with the Entertainment Industries Council to look at the whole issue of mental health and the role the media can play. I believe this group has the ability to bring awareness and change attitudes among people in America about many different issues and there's no issue in my opinion in greater need of changing attitudes than mental illness."

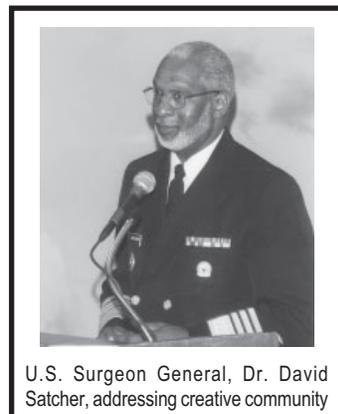
Dr. Satcher pointed out that 80 to 90% of people who commit suicide suffer from a mental illness which could have been treated. "But so many people don't get diagnosed until they take their lives. We can change that."

EIC President and CEO Brian Dyak enthusiastically underscored the sentiment that the entertainment industry is a particularly effective conduit for information about the various mental disorders. "In the mental health area, new scientific understanding has opened up a wealth

of opportunity to engage the industry around mental health issues. Our intent is to give the creative community a more in-depth view of the changing standards around mental illness."

Dr. Kay Jamison, an expert in bi-polar disorder (otherwise known as manic depressive illness) added an exclamation point to that statement in her own presentation. "I can't emphasize it enough: Mental illnesses are very, very common. They seem less common than they in fact are because people are so reluctant to talk about them."

Showing none of this reluctance herself, she vividly described the awful roller coaster ride of manic depression, not only as an observer, but as a passenger. The author of the medical school textbook Bible on manic-depression told her own story of coping with the euphoria and despair of this illness, and of her own attempted suicide. By coming out publicly, she's hoping she may move others to seek treatment for their mood disorders. She estimates that 20% of all untreated depressives commit suicide, and yet most either don't seek or receive proper treatment. "I'm amazed at the number of people affected by suicide. It doesn't necessarily make sense to outsiders because people don't talk about it. They're ashamed, or more



U.S. Surgeon General, Dr. David Satcher, addressing creative community



Brian Dyak, EIC Pres./CEO with Peter Roth, Pres., Warner Bros. TV at Mental Health Forum

We [scientists] can produce the best available science - that's our job - but when it comes to communicating information to the American people, we need help and I can't think of a better partner than the entertainment industry.

Dr. David Satcher

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You and Me

If you're overly excited
 You're happy
 If I am overly excited
 I am manic.

If you imagine the phone ringing
 You're stressed out
 If I imagine the phone ringing
 I am psychotic.

If you're crying and sleeping all day
 You're sad and need time out
 If I am crying and sleeping all day
 I'm depressed and need to get up.

If you're afraid to leave the house at night
 You're cautious
 If I am afraid to leave the house at night
 I'm paranoid.

If you speak your mind and express your opinions
 You're assertive
 If I speak my mind and express my opinions
 I'm aggressive.

If you don't like something and mention it
 You're being honest
 If I don't like something and mention it
 I am being difficult.

If you get angry
 You're considered upset
 If I get angry
 I am considered dangerous.

If you over-react to something
 you're sensitive
 If I over-react to something
 I'm out of control.

If you don't want to be around other people
 You're taking care of yourself and relaxing
 If I don't want to be around other people
 I'm isolating myself and avoiding.

If you talk to strangers
 You are friendly
 If I talk to strangers
 I'm being inappropriate.

For all of the above you're not told to take
 A pill or are hospitalized, but I am.

Debbie Sesula

to the point, they feel guilty about it or in some way responsible. But it's a huge public health problem."

Dr. Jamison cited the surprising fact that suicide kills more adolescents and college students than cancer, heart disease, diabetes, strokes and AIDS combined. These statistics were given a moving face by Dr. David Litts, U.S. Air Force Colonel and Special Advisor to the Surgeon General on suicide prevention, who related real stories about suicides that he's gathered in his talks around the country. Straddling the diverse worlds of entertainment and health, Harvard-trained physician and Emmy-nominated writer and producer Dr. Neal Baer spoke about his role in shaping a mentally ill character on TV. He scripted an *ER* episode featuring Maggie, the bi-polar mother of medical student Abby Lockart. Though it's far from an air-brushed characterization - she is exasperating, irrational and intrusive - it unfolds with insight, sympathy and a faithfulness to real-



Sally Field, in character as Maggie, with daughter Abbey Lockart (Maura Tierney) on the set of *ER*.

able research she did to imbue the character with depth and realism - interviewing patients, reading books, and meeting with psychiatrists.

Gathering this information, she used her artist's mind to take her where she would go if she had the disorder. "My task was to let this fire that I live with, a kind of on-edge place, to allow that part of reaching not only for other people's emotions, but my own to create this complex character. I was allowed to go with the colors that came to me even though they weren't in the script. Some of the fire and difficulty Maggie has weren't written. I know that's where she lived. I knew it went further than what's easily put on a page."

During the conference, a few clips of recent television programs that portray mental illness in a constructive and sensitive way were shown by Barbara Lurie, EIC's Associate Director of Programs. Among those singled out was *Law & Order: Special Victims Unit* for its portrayal of a schizophrenic man as being a crime victim rather than victimizer. Both the episode and Ms. Lurie emphasized that, according to many studies, people with mental disorders as a whole are no more menacing than the population at large.

Also shown were *Seventh Heaven's* empathetic depiction of a teenager coping successfully with life after a suicide attempt and *Judging Amy's* enlightening characterization of a person trapped inside an obsessive-compulsive disorder.

Another clip from *Judging Amy*, as well as one from *The West Wing* were selected for their portrayals of lead characters receiving mental health treatment. Hopefully these characters will provide role models for untreated viewers similarly in need of help.

Spotlights illuminate. By shining a light on mental health issues, the conference tried to soften the shadows of stigma and misunderstanding that surround what it means to be mentally ill. The Surgeon General expressed hope that our industry will continue to do so as well.

ity, thanks in part to Dr. Baer and to Sally Field, who portrayed her.

Creating quite a buzz in the mental health community, the character has been a powerful catalyst for sufferers of this disorder to reach out and connect, and not feel so isolated with their problem.

"What I like to do is tell old-fashioned stories," Baer told the group. "They provoke because they attempt to pose tough questions. They educate because they present an abundance of information accurately." He spoke about the need for sensitivity in the mental health arena, but not at the expense of unabashed honesty. "When presenting topics dealing with mental health, we have to address an enormous amount of stigma that already exists. We have to try not to stereotype those suffering from mental disorders. But importantly, we have to pose tough questions and not shy away from asking them because they might rankle some viewers or Standards and Practices."

If Dr. Baer gave Maggie her thoughts and actions, Sally Field's compassionate but jolting portrayal gave her a soul. Ms. Field spoke of the consider-

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For additional information regarding EIC's current projects please contact Marie Gallo Dyak at:
 v. (703) 481-1414
 f. (703) 481-1418
 email: mgdyak@eiconline.org