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SOC 433

16 October 2025

Mid Term Reflection

Mental illness is something that most people really don't understand until it personally affects them or someone they love. It's so frequently unseen, unheard, and misunderstood especially when it's a severe mental illness like schizophrenia or major depression. After I read *A Boy Broken* by Douglas J. Engelman, my instructor in sociology, I was really touched by what was done to him and his personal pain he wrote of in regard to his son, Doug Jr. His honesty about how his family dealt with Doug's schizophrenia gave me a different perspective on the emotional toll of mental illness not only on the diagnosed patient, but also on his or her loved ones. Engelman's journey through the loss, denial, confusion, and helplessness was not only a father's story, it was a reflection on what so many families quietly go through every day.

At the beginning of *A Boy Broken* in the Prologue we automatically hear about the sad passing of Engelman's son, Doug Jr. which starts the story off with you wondering what may have happened and why the book started at such a big moment in his life. We soon find out that Doug has schizophrenia, when one hears this you immediately think someone is crazy. Within *A Boy Broken* Engelman states "the word schizophrenia conjures up mental images of scenes from the movie "Psycho" with Anthony Perkins a mild-mannered motel clerk, at the same time acting on psychotic impulses to kill" (Pg. 23) the stigma schizophrenia has is crazy due to how it is presented on social media or the movies. Once you are diagnosed with something like schizophrenia it can tear you down more because of how people will view you and treat you. Many people will not be willing to help or even look at you if they know you have a mental disorder. Once hearing this news and having to tell your loved ones is also a hard thing to do and that showed in this book. Reading about how Engelman went

through many stages of denial once finding this out about his son was really eye opening. At first not wanting to believe it and then it turning into anger because what could happen to someone you love dearly.

When becoming someone's caregiver it can weigh you down very heavily. Engelman did not know what it truly meant to be a care giver or what to do when it came to helping Doug with his schizophrenia. Engelman found a book called *Surviving Schizophrenia: A Family Manual* which helped him understand different kinds of treatments for it and some helpful facts on schizophrenia to know what was true and what wasn't because of all the stigma it has. You never know how much someone will need your help until it is too late and you are too far in the process. Many people will think they are just looking out for their loved ones then come to the realization that the amount of help that they are giving is more on the care giver side and may end up just becoming a caregiver. This can take a toll on someone's mental and physical health due to possibly being held back from living a regular day to day life instead of being able to live freely and worryless, you must make sure the person is always okay and safe.

When someone is diagnosed with a mental disorder, especially one as severe and life-altering as schizophrenia, it's not uncommon for them to react with denial or disbelief. This reaction is often not just emotional resistance but a psychological defense mechanism. Accepting such a diagnosis means confronting the fact that your perception of reality may not be accurate, that your own mind, something you've always trusted, could be misleading you. This is an extremely upsetting finding, and individuals naturally avoid it. With schizophrenia, denial is more complex. The symptoms themselves which are hallucinations, delusions, disorganized thinking could be so severe and real sounding that the person literally cannot distinguish them from reality. To them, these events are real. For example, in Engelman's story, his son still remembers that there has to be a Wendy, even though there is mounting evidence that she is an illusion. To the rest of the world, it might be irrational or stubborn, but to his son, Wendy exists. Being told that she doesn't exist isn't confusing; it's dangerous to his entire idea of reality. This denial of the diagnosis is also described in medical circles as "anosognosia," an illness where the patient knows no better about their illness. It's not denial on the emotional plane, but instead a neurological expression of the disease itself. This makes schizophrenia very difficult to treat, as the patient will refuse medication or therapy, not out of being obstinate, but because they simply feel

that nothing is the matter with them. For loved ones and family members, having a person struggle this way can be emotionally debilitating. There's a particular kind of helplessness that comes from understanding that no matter how hard you work trying to explain or assist them, they may not comprehend it or worse, they might even assume you're part of the issue. The emotional burden becomes overwhelming. You're constantly second guessing your own approach: Am I doing any good? Am I doing it worse? Is there something I can do that will reach them? May people ask that question hoping to receive an answer but it never comes.

I spent my childhood watching one of my siblings struggle with depression. It wasn't something that came and went, it lingered, quietly affecting everything in our home. And yet, all these years on, he still struggles and has become a constant presence in all of my family's lives. My brother sleeps all day. He barely speaks to anyone, and when he does, he becomes quickly annoyed. He has no interest in hanging out with us, and it's clear even though he doesn't say anything that he doesn't care about himself much. There's a heaviness around him that can't be ignored, though he attempts to hide it. It's not tiredness or crankiness, you can just see in his eyes that he is struggling. I wake up the majority of mornings with him in my head wondering whether he slept through the night, or if he is okay. I question if there is something I could be doing to help him feel more supported. I overhear my parents hushing each other when they think no one is listening. They are always worried about him whether he is doing all right, about his life after college, about his sanity. I realize that they are scared too. Scared of what will happen if he doesn't change or if he will be okay. No matter how much they try to hide the depth of their fear from us, I can see it and I can hear it. Their fear equals my own, and sometimes the entire house seems to be holding its collective breath for a break to come in the form of a turning point that never happens. The worst thing is, my brother has no idea just how much this affects us. He simply can't understand how much we're thinking of him, speaking of him when he's left the room, putting in emotional effort to hope that he'll be fine. Depression does something to individuals, makes them oblivious to the love surrounding them. It is like living inside their own mind, and nothing can get through. They always feel invisible, unwanted, or alone even when they are surrounded by people who would do anything just to make them smile again. That's the greatest agony. We are here, we care, we're trying but he can't sense it, or maybe he does not think it exists. My brother is struggling. It touches routines, relationships, moods, and even

communication. It creates distance and guilt, silence and tension. You start feeling helpless, stuck between wanting to help and not knowing how because it can cause so many problems., I have learned that depression can be incredibly isolating not only for the person but also for the ones who love them.

A Boy Broken has not only deepened my understanding of schizophrenia and its devastating impact on individuals and families, but also made me reflect on my own experiences with mental illness in my family. Douglas J. Engelman's honest and painful journey through his son's illness showed me how isolating, overwhelming, and emotionally exhausting it can be to care for someone who is struggling. Mental disorders like schizophrenia and depression don't just affect the person diagnosed, they ripple through entire families, creating worry, confusion, and heartache. Through both Engelman's story and my own experiences, I've come to understand the importance of compassion, patience, and education when supporting those battling mental illness. We must also recognize and support the caregivers, who often carry a heavy burden in silence. Most importantly, we must continue to fight the stigma surrounding mental health so that more people can feel safe seeking the help they need, and fewer families are left to suffer in silence.