

No Letting Go: A Family's Grief and Hope When Mental Illness Strikes



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Thirty minutes into the family mental health drama *No Letting Go* 14-year old Tim (Noah Silverman) tosses aside his homework and shouts at his mother, “You don’t get it. I don’t need to go to school anymore.” He has been in therapy since he was ten and seems to have paralyzing anxiety that prevents him from adjusting to school and enjoying formerly fun activities with his friends. His mother Catherine (Cheryl Allison) is very much aware of her middle son’s mental health struggles. She has been dealing with the consequences, often without support or encouragement, for the last four years: former friends offer unasked-for advice and criticize her parenting behind her back; condescending school officials minimize the problem while failing to offer an appropriate learning environment; and husband Henry (Richard Burgi) has a limited understanding of their son’s troubles and Catherine’s efforts to deal with them. At this point in the story Catherine may seem to be the only one who is fully aware of the problem in her family. But Tim is right. Catherine doesn’t get it. Tim’s problems and their effect on the family are going to get much worse before real understanding takes hold and healing begins.

No Letting Go draws on the personal experience of writer and producer Randi Silverman, whose own middle son lives with bipolar disorder (played in the movie by his younger brother Noah). At a recent screening I attended with my wife in Darien, CT, Ms. Silverman stated that she made the movie to inspire community dialogue about childhood mental illness and its impact on families. As the parent of a child with problems similar to Tim’s, I felt such a strong identification with the characters of this movie that it seemed to be my own family’s life depicted on the screen.

No Letting Go is partly a story about grief: a family struck by and eventually coming to terms with the emergence of a serious, potentially-disabling illness in a child. At the point in the story when Tim is ready to give up on school, Catherine and Henry are still in the earliest stages of grief – denial and anger. They know there is a problem, a serious problem, but they have yet to grasp how serious, let alone how to come to terms with it and be effective advocates for their son.

By midpoint in the story, Tim’s problems have escalated to the point that he is not attending school and his parents can no longer manage him. They take him to an

expensive specialist with a long waiting list of patients and are told “There are worse things than not going to school.” When the doctor tells them Tim has bipolar disorder the gravity of their son’s condition begins to sink in. “Timothy has an illness. Do you really understand that,” the doctor asks.

In what might be considered the negotiation stage of grief, Catherine resists the doctor’s recommendation to send him to a residential treatment center for as long as a year. The doctor tells her “it is humanly impossible for you to provide the kind of structure he needs.” Catherine and Henry fight the urge to send their son away for as long as they can, until the crisis reaches a breaking point. In a heart-rending scene they break the news to Tim and two big men show up at the house to escort him to the treatment center.

The first time I watched *No Letting Go* in an auditorium full of people, many with families just like mine, I could not help but think of the movie as a by-the-numbers tale of childhood mental illness and its impact on a family. The story hit all the familiar points for those of us who have struggled to raise a child with serious mental health problems: lack of understanding, disapproval, or abandonment by friends; the enormous costs of treatment and education, much of it ineffective; disavowal of responsibility by condescending school officials; unbearable scenes of emotional distress and anger, often on the verge of spilling into violence; guilt and heart-wrenching pain for the affected child and damage to family relationships as sibling tensions mount and spouses polarize.

One mother in the audience commented that it was the other people in her life who really needed to watch this movie. By that, I assumed she meant the friends, acquaintances, extended family members or anyone else who had judged or failed to understand what her child and she had been through. I had a similar reaction my first time watching *No Letting Go*. The movie felt like a validation, something I could hold up to others and say, watch this and you may begin to understand what we have been through. For that, I am grateful to Ms. Silverman. There may be many of us who lived the story in this movie, but she was the one – with the backing of her family and effort of the entire cast and production team – who had the persistence, skill and courage to bring it to the public spotlight.

Having first watched *No Letting Go* at an official function of my employer Laurel House, in partnership with the Darien Library and the Community Fund of Darien, I was caught up in the message of the movie and its potential to create greater public awareness about childhood mental illness and its impact on families. A second viewing in private allowed me to feel the story and its characters on a level that was much more personal. *No Letting Go* is not just an indie film with a poignant social message. It is a fully realized life of a family with ultra-believable characters and a compelling storyline. I did not realize how strong the story is until I watched it a second time and allowed

myself to feel the full range of emotions that so closely resemble an experience of grief, from stubborn denial, anger and sadness, to acceptance, and ultimately healing.

Ms. Silverman is to be commended for opening up the community dialogues that accompany the public screenings of this special movie, the next to occur on November 16th at Westport Woman's Club in Westport, CT. Those of you in Fairfield County with a personal connection to mental illness may wish to bring a family member or friend who would like to understand more about this issue. Ms. Silverman intends to bring these dialogues to other communities in the future, and we will try to keep you informed of upcoming screenings in the link below. Whether or not you attend one of the public screenings of *No Letting Go*, I urge you to get a copy of the DVD and share it with the people who really matter to you. It is the kind of movie that changes people's minds and hearts on a topic much talked about in society but very rarely this well understood.

'No Letting Go': A Film Review



By **Lloyd I. Sederer, MD**

There is no letting go when you have a sick child. But the journey from illness onset to getting effective treatment and on to recovery (for the fortunate) — and the tribulations along the way — is different when the illness is a serious mental disorder.

One in five youth will develop a mental illness, half of them by the time they are fourteen and 75 percent by the age of 24. In the USA, that is 14 million youth, annually. But for the great predominance affected, and their families, typically many years are spent with the condition untreated or in seeking effective care that can make a difference.

So it was for the “Spencer” family in *No Letting Go*. Their experience reflects the true story of the producer and co-screenwriter Randi Silverman: they had lived comfortably in a suburb north of NYC, with a businessman father, a stay at home mom, and three boys until mental illness began. Their middle son, Tim, was ten (though even younger in the actual story) when he began to be unable to attend school, have friends, bear his anxious and dark moods, or tolerate being with his family. The family sought help from a psychologist and then a child psychiatrist. They tried therapy and medications. They moved their son from one school to another, hoping that would make a difference.

The mother read everything she could but more so tried everything she could but nothing worked. The boy's illness grew worse, his functioning became ever more compromised, and his fits of rage were more than the family could manage.

With mental illness, especially when it is not recognized, understood or effectively treated (and as few as 20 percent of youth actually receive proper care), the impact on the child, family, school, and community have painful reverberations on each other. The film shows us how, unlike with physical illness, mental disorders can often pit family members against one another, profoundly disrupt the lives of all those close to the ill child, evoke condescending and gratuitous judgments from friends, relatives and educators, foster discrimination and bullying at school, and engender horrific doubt and guilt in all those intimately affected.

Tim was a sweet child; but over time that sense of him was at risk of being lost as his illness progressed and he descended into mental illness. His parents tried but they could not control his behaviors, and nor could he. Through this film we go deep inside this family, a mark of great courage by the writer/producer who was telling her own story — and thus the story of every family with a child with a serious mental illness — without sentimentality or evasion. The film is perhaps one of the best primers I have seen for families, and they are legion, facing similar problems.

As a psychiatrist and public health doctor who has worked in my field for over 40 years I struggle to explain mental illness to families (and to those who are ill). Countless books and articles are available and try. But nothing is as powerful in conveying information that touches the heart as is a story. And a story visually portrayed, with an arc that takes us on a painful ride from which we emerge with hope, is a beautiful thing.

The actors are a fine ensemble. Cheryl Allison plays the mother who not only faces mental illness in her child but then confronts serious physical illness herself. She brings us into her character and we realize how even the best of efforts can take a very long time to work, all the while testing confidence, stamina and belief. Noah Silverman, a real life son of the writer/producer and thus the actual brother of the boy who was ill, played the teenage Timothy and did remarkable justice to the experience of mental illness in an adolescent. Richard Burgi, as father Henry, illustrated with aplomb how a dad goes from not knowing and judging to knowing and making a difference. Jan

Uczkowski, as the oldest son Kyle, I thought was the best among the crew: we felt his anger, his disappointment in the fallibility of his parents, his loss, and his love. Critically played roles were delivered by a number of child actors who portrayed the boys in the family and their friends from early ages until their adolescence. Fans of *Orange Is The New Black* will recognize Alysia Reiner as mom's friend who makes a difference and who, as well, faced mental illness in her family; this role is truly different from her as the warden in *OITNB* - she has range. The other actors harmonize well. They seem on a personal as well as a professional mission to enjoin us to enter this family's experience with mental illness, and to demonstrate the vital role that family has in a child's recovery.

My colleagues and I, as well as countless families, now have a terrific resource. *No Letting Go* is an alternative, a master class, to many fine books for parents, families and friends facing mental illness in a child and who need to appreciate how these conditions perplex, confound and cause pain. And its message of not letting go, never giving up, is one we all need to hear and see.

No Letting Go screens in New York City and Los Angeles, and then goes on *Video on Demand* at the end of March. Watch it and tell others about this film - for that may be the gift they need to help them face mental illness and find a path to recovery.

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