

THE UPSIDE AND DOWNSIDE OF TS IN THE MEDIA

Once upon a time—not that many years ago—Tourette Syndrome was a stranger to the media. The TSA family jumped at any mention of TS in a newspaper advice column or appearance on a television talk show. We wished for more exposure. Now we have it. TS is everywhere. Characters with TS, and related neurological disorders, routinely appear in TV shows, films and in novels. Magazines and newspapers profile individuals with TS in the news and on the sports pages—and most Americans think they know about TS. Is this a case of “be careful what you wish for?” Yes and no. The relationship between TS and the media has an upside and a downside. From the rude and crude ridicule in a few slapstick comedies to the insight provided by some serious authors—TS is all over the media.

Is TS Just Too Complicated for TV?

The central problem with any depiction of TS is that TS itself is a mysterious, individualistic disorder that surprises experts with its variety of symptoms. No one character in a movie will ever “explain” TS completely. The most anyone can hope for is that the portrayal will be honest and not mislead the viewer.

Musician Rick Fowler explains it this way, “I think that these media exposures are generally good because they transform startling symptoms into more common occurrences and make them less shocking to the public. However, it is dangerous to portray an often-paralyzing disorder as something too light. In addition, the person with TS can erroneously appear to others as somewhat silly and/or shallow. Much-needed understanding can evaporate if you seem to be enjoying the disorder.”

Fourteen-year-old Zachary Hollis is sensitive to the way characters with TS are portrayed. Zak says, “I don’t like the shows on TV that show people with TS being the bad guy. I know TS is strange but I don’t like it when they make it out to be not what it really is. I like to see TS portrayed in a real way. When they show just a lot of out of control behavior and focus on the swearing, that is not what TS is all about—TS is more than cussing.”

TS as the dreaded “cursing disease” can be an easy laugh or provide a shortcut to dramatic tension in a storyline. Jeffrey Kramer is acutely aware of the downside of using the TS shortcut.

He’s convinced that it leads to “. . . one dimensional characters, while real characters are so much more interesting because they are complex and multi-dimensional. It’s easy to take one aspect of this disorder and use it for a quick laugh or to supply dramatic tension, but for complex characters you have to go deeper—and this isn’t just about TS it’s for all characters. When we had our TS story on *The Practice* we concentrated on an effort to ‘get rid of’ people who were distracting and disturbing because they are different.” TS represented the variety and diversity of humanity and how, in Jeffrey Kramer’s words, “It’s so much better with all the shades in the spectrum.”

Playground Chatter

Although the main character of *Monk* has OCD and not TS, he has many fans within the TSA family. In fact, it’s Zak Hollis’ favorite television show. Zak’s mother Sandra puts it this way, “When Zak was going through really bad contamination fears it made him feel better, I think, to see that Monk carried wipes everywhere he went! Bad OCD, like bad tics, can be an isolating and difficult thing to carry around with you all day long. *Monk* helped him not to feel so different. Our whole family is convinced that Tony Shalhoub must have some loved one in his life who has OCD.”

Although *Matchstick Men* is not a children’s film, the image of Nicolas Cage ticcing and twitching has had an impact on some playgrounds. At TSA we’ve heard reports of children being teased with the taunt, “Matchstick Man.”

In *Matchstick Men*, Nicolas Cage puts on a convincing performance as a man with both TS and OCD. His obsessions and tics are remarkably real, which makes the end of the movie disturbing to Cage fans familiar with the reality of life with TS. His tics, twitches and socially-inhibiting obsessions all but disappear when he leaves his life of crime and finds the love of a good woman. If true love could cure TS, TSA would run personal ads in this newsletter!

There are many *Matchstick* fans at TSA including Dr. B. Duncan McKinlay, a psychologist. “My favorite kind of TS movie these days—what I consider a ‘next generation TS movie’—is something like *Matchstick Men*. To me, the positive message inherent in that

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