Video and Poor Insight in Persons With Schizophrenia

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This paper contains a personal anecdote that may help in resolving the insidious problem of persons with schizophrenia lacking insight about their illness and thus falling back into a psychotic state.

My younger brother suffers from schizophrenia. He and my family have battled this illness for more than a decade. His condition deteriorated to point of losing complete control. He was delusional, aggressive, and completely divorced from reality. And despite our best efforts, he ended up homeless, roaming the streets dirty, smelly, and in tattered clothes. He was as bad as a person with schizophrenia gets. More importantly, over this more than decade long period, he was in and out of many inpatient and outpatient programs (often several times to each program) within our city and county. He was placed on conservatorship 3 times and forced to take medication. As a result, each time his condition improved and he regained control and mental clarity. Unfortunately, he never believed there was anything wrong with him. More importantly, he believed schizophrenia was a bogus disease that did not afflict him. As a result, he would inevitably get off the medication and resume the cycle of psychosis and homelessness.

After years of failing to convince him that he did indeed have an illness that was destroying his life and required treatment, we nearly gave up and concluded that this was his and our fate. However, I decided that if he was not going to believe me or anyone else, he may believe his own eyes. Therefore, during that last 2-year period of his psychosis, I decided to secretly videotape him whenever I was in contact with him or he was in contact with our family or whenever he was simply talking.

Over the next 6 months using my cell phone camera, I recorded him being himself during his psychotic state. I recorded him as spoke in an irrational, disjointed fashion that made no sense; I recorded him as he irrationally and unpredictably became aggressive to those around him, including strangers who had said or done nothing. In general, I showed him exactly as he was with little or no provocation from me or anyone else. I was able to put together hours of unedited and unadulterated footage of him being himself.

At the end of this 6-month period, I was able to once again get him back in conservatorship. He was placed back into an inpatient program for several months and was once again forced to take medication. As a result, he regained his mental capacity and self-control. However, he still did not believe he had any illness.

I did not immediately show him the video footage after he regained clarity and control. I did not want anything to shock him back into noncompliance. Therefore, I waited for a time that I believed appropriate, which was about 3 months after clarity. Before I showed him the footage, I explicitly warned him about what it was he was going to see. At first, he refused to see it, believing it was another trick or attempt to embarrass him. But after some discussion, he agreed to see some of the video, so we sat together and I began showing him the footage. When he first started to see it, he was angry and belligerent at me for recording him, but more importantly, he did his best to dismiss what he was seeing by creating excuses for his behavior. However, I continued to convince him to see more, and reluctantly he did. And after a few sessions of us sitting together and viewing the footage, I placed all the raw footage onto an iPad and instructed him to see as much or as little as he wanted to on his own without the presence of others. Curiosity got the better of him and he began to periodically view the footage. Over time, he began to get disturbed by what he was seeing. He was shocked and disappointed over his behavior and could not believe he would say or do what he was seeing. However, there was no denying that it was him in the footage and the behavior was his. Therefore, he slowly and ultimately came to the only conclusion possible: there was something seriously wrong with him. For the first time, he saw himself as everyone else saw him, and in his rational and clear state, he was forced to conclude that the person in that video footage is a person with schizophrenia.

Subsequently, my brother concluded the inpatient treatment program. He was placed in a half-way home for a short period and ultimately moved in with family before finding a place on his own. It has been 2 years since this process began. He is reaching the longest stretch of health since his diagnosis. He no longer denies his illness and
more importantly for the first time, he is diligent about his medication and is committed to never going back to the state he was in. For the first time since his diagnosis, he has insight into his condition, and we, his family, have optimism.

As you know well, the lack of insight is a nasty and insidious problem for those who suffer from schizophrenia. In fact for many who continue to suffer from this disease, the lack of insight is the only barrier to treatment and regaining health. I believe video may be the answer. My brother’s condition was as bad anybody else’s. It seemed hopeless and inevitable that he would spend his life suffering on the streets, in jail, and/or mental hospitals. It was a tragedy that hung over my family for a very long time. But again, we now have hope and optimism. More importantly, I believe this same strategy may bring resolution and optimism to other sufferers and their families as well.