

Silver Linings Playbook: Discussion questions and 'talking points'

1. Both Pat Jr. and Tiffany have a psychiatric diagnosis. What about Patrizio/Pat Sr.? Does he appear to have mental health challenges that might deserve medical attention? If so, what might be some of the reasons that hold him back from getting medical help? ...He is a very powerful personality, asserts a great deal of control over his wife and sons, and has a lot of anxiety. Does his general approach to dealing with his anxiety seem to be responsible, and with what effects to his family?
 - Pat Sr. might be described as displaying some symptoms of obsessive-compulsive disorder, including strong superstitions and some might say, pathologic gambling tendencies. Some of his superstitious beliefs and how he applies them to questions of whether, when, and how to lay bets on his favourite sports team are not all that unique. Do his superstitions get in the way of his mental health?
 - What are pockets—or even expanses—of superstitious beliefs in our culture that work against mental health?
2. Self-control seems to be a highly esteemed value in our culture. Pat Jr. obviously has challenges with self-control. He is judged and judges others (e.g. Tiffany and his father) for lacking it. What are some examples in the film? What might be some examples of unfair negative judgments directed at persons with mental health conditions who perhaps cannot control—or, at least cannot control the degree of—the effects of their condition on their behaviour? Still, excusing conditions are given to some people and not others on the basis of their age or their gender, for example. What might this tell us about the social determinants of mental health?
3. What are Tiffany and Pat Jr.'s support systems and people in this film? Does their relationship with each other, and with those around them, seem realistic? Are there unrealistic elements in their relationships? If so, what sort of relevant messaging is built into this film that may or may not be helpful to persons dealing with mental health conditions and their supporting families?
4. Psychiatrists have historically held a great deal of power in our culture. At the same time, there are strong anti-psychiatry currents in our culture since the 1960s. How is Pat's psychiatrist, Dr. Cliff Patel, portrayed as a psychiatrist? How are psychiatrists portrayed in other Hollywood films you know of? How might the portrayal of psychiatrists in popular films shape people's help-seeking behaviours when it comes to accessing mental health services?
5. Note how the term "crazy" is used in this film to describe, and sometimes self-describe, characters with mental health conditions. Is the use of this term humorous, sometimes harmful, or always harmful? Are there any examples of humour in this film which are harmful to persons living with mental health conditions?
6. Note how Tiffany's older sister Veronica speaks of her sometimes in the third person, talking about Tiffany as if she is just a set of problems and symptoms. Tiffany has it in her to challenge her sister on this account. Have you ever heard someone talk about a patient or a family member in ways that do not acknowledge their presence? What are examples where this sort of disrespect happens in our healthcare and social services systems, or within our very own families? What are ways to challenge this sort of disrespect?
7. Pat Jr. is overcome in the middle of the night with the need to find his wedding video, and he creates quite a disturbance for his parents and even the neighbourhood in his efforts to find the video or get others to assist him in finding it. This is presented as a point of humour for the viewing audience and is featured prominently as such in the trailer for the movie. Why are people who exhibit obsessive-compulsive behaviours laughed at so routinely when appearing as such on screen? This movie at

least shows a bit of Pat Jr.'s anguish while in this state. What do we know by way of experience and research of what it's like to live with OCDs that might help to see better what experiencing this condition is like from the 'inside'?

8. Deborah Brauser from [Medscape Medical News \(27 Dec 2012\)](#) writes: "...not all reviews and online postings about the movie have been positive, especially with respect to the ending. The film ends on a very happy note, with a big kiss between the two main characters. Some critics have expressed concern that the movie suggests that, in the end, all you need is love (without medication) to heal mental illness. Richard Brody writes in *The New Yorker* that 'the story challenges the medical 'establishment' and the efficacy of medical science in bringing about results. [Pat Jr.'s] mental health depends (and guess where this is going in the story) on his ability to control his behavior through force of will. 'The movie will be a hit with those who think that hyperactivity is just a failure of discipline and depression merely a bad attitude,' he writes. However, this interpretation hinges on the belief that toward the end of the movie, Cooper's character is lying when he says that he is taking his medication, because in scenes at the beginning of the film, he is shown only pretending to take his medication."
 - What do we know about the stigmas associated with taking medication for mental health conditions?
 - At the same time, there are a lot of pressures from a variety of sources to place a lot of expectation on medication to be the decisive factor for dealing with mental health conditions. Do patients feel in a 'double-bind' as a result?
 - What are Tiffany and Pat Jr.'s stated reasons for getting off their medications in the past?
 - What are some of the reasons patients with bipolar disorder or depression go off their prescribed medications against the advice of their doctor?
9. What are some of the therapies used by Tiffany for dealing with her depression and grief, and by Pat Jr. for dealing with his bipolar disorder? Are the resulting gains for their health, as portrayed in the movie, realistic?
10. In an interview with *Vulture*, Steven Sholzman, a psychiatrist from Harvard Medical School, said that: "'falling in love is an absolutely awesome, wonderful thing, but it's not going to cure bipolar disorder any more than it's going to cure diabetes. The flip side of that is ... that people with psychiatric illnesses—horrible depression, bipolar disorder, even schizophrenia—they do better when they're in love.'" Quoted from [Medscape Medical News \(27 Dec 2012\)](#).
11. What is some of the messaging in this film around cultural standards for human beauty and body imagery? (For example with the scenes of the dancers at the end). What role does losing weight have in Pat Jr.'s story to himself and others that he has met certain standards that show him to "be [all] better now"?
12. Pat Jr. thinks that relationships (e.g. marriage) and one's mental health can break, and when broken they need to be fixed in the way a chiropractor fixes bodies with a 'chiropractic adjustment.' Where might Pat Jr. have learned this approach as the way forward, not just for himself, but what he sees as necessary for Tiffany and probably any others facing these same 'problems' in their lives? Is there anything unhealthy about this approach?
13. Some parents to children with mental health conditions, much like Pat Sr., sometimes feel as if they must have failed their child. What is the role of social stigma directed at mental health in silencing parents like Pat Sr. from communicating more openly with their affected children and from reaching out for help from outside the home?
14. At first Tiffany is presented as dealing with depression as caused by grief over the recent death of her husband. Later we find out more. As Tiffany explains her situation to Pat Jr.: "We were married for three years and five days, and I loved him. But for the last couple months, I just wasn't into sex at all. It just felt like we were so different and I was depressed. Some of that is just me, some of it was he

wanted me to have kids and I have a hard enough time taking care of myself. I don't think that makes me a criminal." Is there a difference between depression and having just a bad case of the 'blues'? What are some of the different types of depression? Are Tiffany's mental health challenges mainly situational? What are her ways of dealing with her situation? What works and what doesn't seem to be working for her?

15. What is this film's stance on slut shaming? What do we know about the consequences of slut shaming for relevantly affected women's health?
16. With respect to the character of Danny, what is a [Mental Hygiene Law admission status](#)? (See law relevant to Baltimore). In what circumstances is it legal to detain a psychiatric patient within a hospital or other health facilities in Nova Scotia?
17. Should Pat Jr. have been detained longer by the Baltimore institution that was responsible for his psychiatric treatment? ...There was a restraining order against Pat Jr. as a condition of his release. Are restraining orders taken seriously in Nova Scotia by those responsible for enforcing them? How often are restraining orders taken out against patients with psychiatric conditions? Are patients with bipolar disorder more likely to commit crimes of violence than otherwise neurotypical persons? How common is it for persons with bipolar disorder to commit crimes of domestic violence? Pat Jr. says to his psychiatrist: "'I'm not that explosion guy. My father is the explosion guy". Is there a part of Pat Jr.'s explosive behaviour that is beyond his ability to control? What about his father's problems in this regard?
18. Pat Jr. tells Dr. Patel: "I've been dealing with this [undiagnosed bipolar] my whole life. And without any supervision I've been doing it all on my own with no help and basically I've been white-knuckling it this whole time. It's a lot to deal with, especially when you don't know what the hell is happening, which I do now. Sort of." What does research show about how to best reach persons such as Pat Jr. when they are children so that they don't have to "white-knuckle" the experience of bipolar without knowing why they feel and behave in the ways that are a result of having the condition?
19. How do the various characters—Tiffany, Pat Jr., Dolores, Pat Sr., Danny, Ronnie—deal with stress and conflict? Do some approaches seem healthier than others? Are some approaches to conflict, featured in this film, very obviously unhealthy? What explains this?
20. Pat Jr. seems to subscribe to a 'forced' belief in the power of positive thinking to overcome his situation? Is there anything scientifically credible about this as a cognitive strategy to deal with bipolar disorder? Tiffany tries to convince Pat Jr. to stick with the dance programme—after all, it's giving Pat Jr. a chance for collaboration, discipline and focus. What does research tell us about the role of art as a means for mental health therapy?
21. For patients who are sometimes delusional, is it every okay to lie to them in order to prevent them from holding to beliefs and making decisions that go against their best interests? Pat Jr. threatens to pull out of the dance competition, and with good reason seeing as his father has made a parlay bet that requires Pat Jr. and Tiffany to achieve a score that will be incredibly pressuresome for them to achieve. Tiffany floats the idea to Pat Sr. and his wife Dolores that the only way to get Pat Jr. back to the routine of preparing for the dance competition is to promise him that his estranged wife Nikki will be there. The following conversation ensues:
Dolores: She [Nikki] won't come. She can't come.
Tiffany: Well, we have to tell him that she's coming.
Pat Sr.: We have to tell him that she's going.
Dolores: But that's a lie!
Tiffany: It's a white lie.
Pat Sr.: It's a white lie, what's the matter? That's no big deal. So it's a little lie.
Tiffany: No other way.
Dolores: No.

Pat Sr.: You know, we gotta leave a trail of bread crumbs so that he can live his life without ruining it.

Dolores: No. I ...I don't approve. You can't do it.

Pat Sr.: Well, you know, I didn't approve when you called her and you told her where....where he was running, so she could ambush him. I didn't approve of that, but you did it anyway, so I'm doing this anyway. That's it.

Tiffany: We're gonna tell him Nikki will be there.

[Dolores looks at both Tiffany and Pat Sr.]

Pat Sr.: You gotta be a part of it.

Tiffany: We have to do it.

Dolores: Aren't you nervous about lying?

Tiffany: Yeah. A little bit. But it's for the best.

22. Movies are often scripted according to expectations for the genre. This is a romantic comedy, and so its ending is accordingly upbeat. On the one hand, it's good to have movies which feature mental health content that create a context that isn't all 'heavy' or depressing. Still, relevant movies need to be sufficiently realistic otherwise they can mislead and abet false beliefs about mental health—the very 'fuel' of mental health stigmas, so to speak. As a vehicle for mental health education in general, and for fighting mental health stigmas in particular, what are some of this movie's strengths and weaknesses in terms of its portrayal of the lives and relationships of persons dealing with the mental health conditions featured?