Movie Review: *Requiem For a Dream*

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We all have moments when we simply do not want to accept our current realities. We might be dealing with a personal crisis, as we all experience tragedies in our lives. Someone we loved died, was raped, has a drug dependency issue, has an eating disorder, and it is just simply too difficult for us to accept. We cannot accept it to be true because it is far too painful, so instead, we look for a means to escape our harsh reality. This is where addiction unfolds: it provides an alternative to the problems we do not want to face. In Requiem For a Dream, we see four individuals in the throes of addiction, and viewers experience their struggles as if they, too, are addicts. The movie focuses solely on the characters as they navigate through the consequences of their addiction; intense close-ups and subjective camera techniques allow viewers to experience an addict’s reality from the perspective of an addict (Ebert, 2000). We also see that addiction is tied to other psychological issues, such as psychosis, depression, and PTSD.

Requiem For a Dream does an excellent job of accurately portraying addiction as we see the characters’ lives spiraling out of control. In his film review, Roger Ebert also agrees: “What is fascinating about Requiem for a Dream, is how well he portrays the mental states of his addicts. When they use, a window opens briefly into a world where everything is right. Then it slides shut, and life reduces itself to a search for the money and drugs to open it again” (2000). We see Harry, Marion, and Tyrone addicted to heroin, and Harry’s mother, Sara, addicted to prescription pills containing amphetamines. Through them, we see the desperation, and eventually isolation, that addiction creates.

According to the National Institute on Drug Abuse (NIDA), “Regular heroin use changes the functioning of the brain. One result is tolerance, in which more of the drug is
needed to achieve the same intensity of effect. Another result is dependence, characterized by the need to continue use of the drug to avoid withdrawal symptoms" (Drug Facts: Heroin, 2013). In the movie, we see the extreme consequences of withdrawal. Although Harry and Marion are in a relationship, he encourages her to have intercourse with her therapist in exchange for money they will be using to buy heroin. She does so, and in her actions the viewers see that withdrawal is so painful one would be willing to do nearly anything to get their next fix. Later on, we see Marion engage in oral sex with a pimp in exchange for heroin, and she ultimately joins an underground sex show to support her addiction.

Harry develops an infection in his arm from using dirty needles. He begins to withdraw, but he decides to shoot up and uses the infected vein. Harry knows his arm is in bad shape – and his friend, Tyrone, points this out, too. This illustrates how desperate Harry is to get high. He soon is in terrible, writhing pain and Tyrone takes him to an emergency room. When the doctor sees that Harry is a heroin addict, he does not treat him; instead he grabs the vials of medicine on Harry's bedside table and walks away, claiming he will return to help. He does not – and soon cops show up to arrest both Harry and Tyrone. The doctor's actions and Harry's subsequent lack of care are a direct result of the stigma so often encountered by drug addicts.

After their arrest, Harry and Tyrone are put in a prison work program, which is a form of civil commitment that was frequently used in the 1960s (Heroin Addiction, NIH, 2013). We see that Harry is still in severe pain, and he is brought back to the hospital. He is anesthetized and awakes to find his arm amputated. In the meantime, Tyrone remains in jail where he faces racism and stigma from correctional officers. As the movie ends, each
character is in complete isolation. We see each of them crawl into the fetal position, as if being engulfed by their own intense suffering, and in doing so, indicating they have little remaining hope. Because of the accurate portrayal of addiction and its consequences, an ‘A’ MMI rating seems most appropriate for this aspect of the movie. Although Marion’s therapist is far from ethical, and this could potentially lead to mistrust in mental health care providers, I still think an ‘A’ MMI rating is warranted. The rollercoaster of addiction is so poignant that viewers can easily see that it takes over one’s life – and this serves to reduce stigma.

Harry’s mother, Sara, demonstrates a culmination of several psychological issues. She herself is an addict, although her addiction began as a result of her weight loss obsession. Sara has other addictions, too: she is addicted to watching television and consuming caffeine. She employs all of these factors to escape from her lonely reality. She watches television to pass the time, and becomes enthralled with a motivational speaker who focuses on weight loss. She eventually seeks help from a doctor, who prescribes her amphetamine-based weight loss pills. She quickly becomes hooked on them, something that does not go unnoticed by Harry.

According to the National Institute on Drug Abuse (NIDA), the following symptoms are acute characteristics of prescription stimulant dependency: increased energy, irregular heartbeat, and dangerously high body temperature (Health Effects: Prescription Stimulants). In the movie, Sara exhibits all of these symptoms. Harry takes notice when they are having a conversation and her teeth are chattering nonstop. He asks his mom if she is taking uppers, and she claims she does not know what her pills contain. She assures Harry (and herself) that she is merely following the doctor’s suggestions. In a further attempt to justify
her addiction, she tells Harry that losing weight gives her a purpose in life. Her suffering becomes more apparent to the viewers: “It’s a reason to get up in the morning. It’s a reason to lose weight, to fit in the red dress. It’s a reason to smile. It makes tomorrow all right.

What have I got Harry, hm? Why should I even make the bed, or wash the dishes? I do them, but why should I? I’m alone.” Harry backs off, and it is clear that she does not want to stop taking her pills.

The long-term symptoms of prescription stimulants include: addiction, anxiety, paranoia, and psychosis (Health Effects: Prescription Stimulants, NIH). At one point or another, Sara experiences all of these side effects. She begins having both auditory and visual hallucinations, and envisions her refrigerator consuming her. She is also convinced that she has been invited to be a guest on the television show that she constantly watches. This obsession perpetuates her weight loss (and addiction) because she wants to fit into a special red dress she plans to wear on the show. She ends up losing a great deal of weight, but it comes at a high cost. Sara escalates into full-fledged psychosis and is placed in a psychiatric ward. She is unresponsive to treatments, so while she is still amid psychosis, her doctor advises her to sign an informed consent document to receive electroconvulsive therapy (ECT). Unfortunately, by the end of the movie, she remains in the psychiatric ward, as her psychotic symptoms are still present.

The film does an incredible job of accurately depicting psychosis, however, the treatment Sara receives from mental health care professionals is not exactly accurate. The way they are represented in the film (cold and unhelpful) enhances stigma that pertains to getting help. People might watch this movie and decide not to get help for fear that they,
too, will be treated as Sara was. For this aspect of the movie, an ‘F’ MMI rating seems most appropriate.

It is common for addiction to run in families. Addiction can also be exacerbated when an addict is in a relationship in which both parties are addicts. “Whether a person decides to use alcohol or drugs is a choice, influenced by their environment – peers, family, and availability. But, once a person uses alcohol or drugs, the risk of developing alcoholism or drug dependence is largely influenced by genetics” (NCADD). In addition to genetic factors, addiction can sometimes be triggered by underlying mental illness(es). “This (self-medicating) can compound the depression and make it far worse. A drink or two, a line of cocaine or two, might temporarily relieve some symptoms, but the backlash when the chemical leaves the body brings the depression to new lows” (Zwolinski, 2010). In the movie, I think Sara demonstrates symptoms of depression prior to her addiction. She admits that she is lonely and lacks purpose in her life. It is likely that her depression played a role in maintaining her addiction, as she tells Harry that her pills give her a reason to smile again.

We see Tyrone have flashbacks to his childhood, and I wonder if Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) plays a role in his addiction. It is never confirmed whether or not he has this psychological disorder, but he does display accurate symptoms of it. There is a strong link between PTSD and addiction. According to the Department of Veterans Affairs, “Some people try to cope with their Posttraumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) symptoms by drinking heavily, using drugs, or smoking too much. People with PTSD have more problems with drugs and alcohol both before and after getting PTSD.” Following a paradoxical relationship, PTSD can influence addiction and addiction can intensify PTSD symptoms.
“Drug and alcohol use allows you to continue the cycle of "avoidance" found in PTSD. Avoiding bad memories and dreams or people and places can actually make PTSD last longer.” In the movie, it is clear that Tyrone uses drugs to escape haunting memories from both his past and present.

In *Requiem For a Dream*, we see that addiction can be perpetuated by social and environmental factors. There is more than one occasion when Harry does not want to use, but he sees either Tyrone or Marion “push off,” and he decides to join in. At one point, Marion blames Harry when they run out of heroin and begin to withdraw. He tells her, “What was I supposed to do, sit there and watch you push off without taking any for myself?” This shows the viewers how consuming drug addiction can be – getting their next fix becomes their sole purpose in life. It also shows that addiction is more likely to be maintained when one’s peers and environment are conducive to shooting up.

*Requiem For a Dream* does an excellent job of portraying how addiction affects entire family units. When Harry sells his mother’s television set to obtain drug money (this is a regular occurrence), Sara discloses that she will not turn Harry in because, “He’s my only child – he’s all I have.” With this statement, we see Sara enable Harry’s addiction, but I also think she is in denial about the severity of his heroin dependency. Both of these factors perpetuate addiction because until Sara is ready to accept that her son is addicted to heroin, she will keep enabling his behavior. Soon after, Sara becomes addicted to her diet pills. When Harry finds out she is taking them, he becomes very worried and advises her to stop taking them. His worry quickly dissipates when he decides to shoot up. Sara’s concerns for Harry, and her tendency to enable, quickly disappear when she develops her own addiction. Suddenly nothing else matters to her other than taking her pills, and losing
weight. We see that their worlds become reduced to drugs: finding them, taking them, and maintaining them. The ways underlying mental illnesses are represented, and their role in addiction, as well as how addiction affects families, is accurately portrayed in *Requiem For a Dream*. An ‘A’ MMI rating seems most appropriate for these aspects of the movie.

*Requiem For a Dream* most definitely leads to a greater understanding of addiction, and its related issues. In his movie review, Roger Ebert comments on this: “Anyone under 17 who is thinking of experimenting with drugs might want to see this movie, which plays like a travelogue of hell” (2000). Its no-holds-barred portrayal of the consequences addicts face certainly does not sugarcoat the grim reality of addiction.
References


