DISCUSSION FOR ORDINARY PEOPLE - ANSWERS

Introduction
This is a film about a family catastrophe and how the resultant trauma plays itself out among the survivors one year later.

CONRAD
He survives the boating accident in which his older brother Buck drowns. He has survived a serious suicide attempt and the movie begins 1 month after his discharge from a psychiatric hospital.

Diagnostic Issues

DEPRESSION
- insomnia
- diminished appetite
- suicidal thoughts
- decreased interest
- decreased concentration
- social withdrawal
- mood – depressed, anxious, irritable
- affect – flat to constricted

PTSD
Meets time and severity of event criteria
- re-experiencing: flashbacks, nightmares, intrusive recollections
- avoidance symptoms: affective numbing, diminished interest in activities, estrangement from others
- hyperarousal symptoms: insomnia, irritability, outbursts of anger, difficulty concentrating, increased startle

COMPLICATED BEREAVEMENT
- PTSD – like characteristics
- survivor guilt
- anger
- suicide attempt
Psychological Issues

SURVIVOR GUILT
- theme ushered in by intense response to Karen’s suicide
- intensified by competitive themes between the brothers
- this is a common theme in pts. who survive traumas in which others die

STIGMATIZED VIEW OF ILLNESS
Mother – concerned with “what neighbors will think”

Schoolmates – call him crazy, flaky, because of hospitalization

Coach – has prurient curiosity about hospital, ECT; is patronizing

Father – over-protective, needs to make everything right; walking on eggshells because of the tension between Conrad and mother

FAMILY PERCEPTIONS
Conrad accurately perceives that his mother now hates him. Initially he gets no consensual validation about this. As the film progresses, both his therapist and his father come to recognize the accuracy of this perception. What difference does their support make?

PLACE OF FEELINGS
At first Conrad is afraid of, distrusts, and disavows his feelings. He is afraid they will overwhelm him with their painfulness. How does this shift in the course of the movie?

MOTHER

Diagnostic Issues

BEREAVEMENT – loss of Buck

OBSESSIVE COMPULSIVE PERSONALITY DISORDER; NARCISSISTIC FEATURES
Preoccupied with orderliness, perfectionism, mental and interpersonal control at the expense of flexibility and openness.
- preoccupied with rules and can’t adapt to situation now without conventional rules
- suspicious of affect and denies her own
- preoccupation with details, e.g. clothes husband wears to Buck’s funeral
If Buck had not drowned, it is possible that the mother’s personality would not have been unmasked as profoundly maladaptive. She might have been diagnosed as having OC personality type rather than disorder.

**Psychological Issues**

In the beginning of the movie, Mother seems like the healthiest person, and Conrad seems like the sickest. How is it that their roles reverse?

**IMPOUNDED AFFECT**
Mother is unable to accept what she is feeling, particularly her hatred and rage toward Conrad. This inability cuts her off from relationships and denies her self-knowledge. She becomes more rigid and controlling as she feels more alienated and angry.

**DEFENSES**
- avoidance
- repression
- intellectualization
- isolation of affect
- reaction formation
- splitting

This is typical OCP repertoire. It fails because it substantially distorts reality.

**FATHER**

**Diagnostic issues**

Does not have a psychiatric diagnosis though he is bereaved.

**Psychological Issues**

**PSYCHOLOGICALLY MINDED** – is able to tolerate painful perceptions of self and others. His ability to face personal and family issues honestly saves himself and Conrad. He retains the capacity for empathy.

**DEFENSES – higher level**
- sublimation
- identification
- altruism

**GUILT** – about Conrad’s suicide attempt
LOSS AND GRIEF
- loss one son and almost losing the second
- loss of the best part of his wife
- loss of love of his wife

OTHER ISSUES

Lethality assessment
How do you compare Conrad’s lethality potential in the beginning and the end of the film? What factors make you more comfortable at the end?
- C is more verbal
- he is less isolated
- he is able to tolerate affects
- he has personal assets

Thoughts on psychotherapy/the psychiatrist