

PAPER SPIDERS

Discussion Guide

THE STORY

Recently widowed Dawn (Lili Taylor) experiences growing anxiety as her daughter Melanie (Stefania LaVie Owen) plans to move away for college. An argument with a hostile new neighbor aggravates Dawn's mental condition and she begins to exhibit signs of persecutory delusional disorder. Melanie attempts a series of interventions to help her mom, but Dawn's paranoia spirals out of control. Challenging Dawn's reality of persecution threatens to destroy their loving relationship. Melanie is forced to make the toughest of choices as she struggles to keep her mother afloat. A bittersweet story about coming of age in the shadow of mental illness.

INSPIRED BY TRUE EVENTS

Paper Spiders is a journey from comedy to tragedy — much like the life of its main characters, and the personal lives of screenwriter Natalie Shampanier and her mom. She was a loving mother, a sweet and funny woman with a quirky sense of humor - and a victim of persecutory delusional disorder. As a therapist, Natalie explored all strategies to help her mom, but challenging her reality threatened to destroy their loving relationship. We hope to contribute to conversations about the need to support people coping with mental health challenges, and that those who face similar challenges will feel less alone in their journeys when they watch the film.



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DELUSIONAL DISORDER

Delusional disorder, previously called paranoid disorder, is a type of psychosis in which a person cannot tell what is real from what is imagined. The main feature of this disorder is the presence of delusions, which are unshakable beliefs in something untrue. People with delusional disorder experience non-bizarre delusions, which involve situations that could occur in real life, such as being followed, poisoned, conspired against, etc. These delusions often involve the misinterpretation of perceptions or experiences. People with *persecutory delusional disorder* believe that they are being mistreated, or that someone is spying on them or planning to harm them.

HOW TO HELP SOMEONE WITH PERSECUTORY DELUSIONS

If a loved one has persecutory delusions, you may feel unsure how to respond. Here are some things you can do to help:

- Listen. Though it may be difficult, listening helps them feel respected and understood.
- Avoid disputing or supporting their delusions. When a person's delusions are disputed, they will further believe them. At the same time, "playing along" with the delusion reinforces it.
- Redirect the situation. Instead of fighting or supporting their delusions, calmly share a different viewpoint. For example, if someone believes a parked car is spying on them, mention the possibility that the driver is shopping at a store.
- Be supportive. It's important to be supportive and nonjudgmental, even when the delusions are under control.



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DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. To which extent do you feel that Dawn's paranoid delusions were triggered by external stressors such as the death of her husband and empty nest syndrome?
2. Do you feel that the story would have ended differently had Melanie chosen not to confront her mother (in the police scene) and instead kept "playing along" with her delusions?
3. What do you think that the story wished to convey by the parallel plots of Dawn's paranoia and Daniel's alcohol addiction? Do you feel that there are parallels between psychosis and addiction?
4. To which extent do you think that Melanie's choices were justified when she decided to move away from her mother? Or when she chose to sacrifice her college dreams in order to support her mom?
5. How do you think that the story may have changed had Melanie's guidance counselor been equipped to provide her with NAMI resources?
6. "Sometimes you can't save a drowning man - you either sink with them or swim" - do you feel that Gary's words ring true, or represent a callous attitude?
7. Does any experience from your own life resonate with Melanie's struggles to support a loved one suffering from mental illness?
8. What do you think that the title "Paper Spiders" symbolizes?

