

# 'Sopranos' hitting the target on therapy

By SaraKay Smullens

In my experience as a therapist, women have always outnumbered men on the therapeutic couch (or chair). But during the second *Sopranos* season something unusual happened. More men began calling for appointments. They spoke of relatives they were raised to love but didn't really like or trust.

Most discussed the relationship between mob-boss Tony Soprano and Dr. Jennifer Melfi, his psychiatrist. All liked Jennifer — her manner, her voice, her way of discussing things, her slight middle-age spread, her hip glasses, and oh yes, her legs.

As the third season begins, the relationship between Tony and Jennifer Melfi has evolved as a central focus. There is the truest replication of the therapeutic experience I have ever seen dramatized. Tony had sought treatment because of panic attacks and accompanying fainting spells. Jennifer knows that Tony is a dangerous sociopath, but not because he was born without an ethics gene. He was raised to be criminal. Tony hallucinates about a young and beautiful mother figure, and with Jennifer's help he sees that his is a child's yearning for a mother to nurture him. It is Jennifer who figures out that Tony's mother is actually plotting to kill him.

With Jennifer's probing we learn

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that Tony's first panic attack happened as a young boy after he witnessed his father cutting a finger off the butcher for withholding part of his payoff. While Tony's father is a butcher, his mother is a cannibal. Free meat is sent weekly to the Soprano family. Cooking the meat is the only thing that arouses Tony's mother. Tony watches his parents' sexual prelude to the family dinner. His attack occurs as his mother slices the blood-red meat.

Tony's disclosures and revelations do not produce an "aha" experience and a new life. Facing the truth itself is a slow, terrifying process, one met with denial, resistance, rage and withdrawal at every juncture. It is a long and stony road that patient and therapist pursue together, one in which the cure can feel worse than the disease. And yet, for those who want to understand their lives, to externalize their demons, and make necessary vital changes, reality, though brutally stony, is the only path to take.

Jennifer — and I, as a therapist, am thankful for this — doesn't fit the three typical therapeutic stereotypes: nut case, saint or guru. She is real; her life far from perfect. Jennifer confides to her family that she is treating a member of the Mafia. Her husband, with whom she has recently reconciled, and her consulting psychiatrist insist that she refer her patient to a less threatening modality, behavioral therapy. Both fear that rage elicited in an introspective, analytic relationship will put her in harm's way, and in past episodes it has.

Finally, Jennifer acquiesces and discusses a change of therapist with Tony. Then the unthinkable happens. She is brutally raped. The system does not protect her. Her

assailant is released due to a technicality. Jennifer dreams of an attack dog (Tony) who will take control and use power to revenge and protect her. In a compelling scene, Tony tells her he will follow her lead and consult a behavioral therapist. She tells him not to leave her in therapy and breaks down. The compassion on Tony's face is real.

The viewer is left wondering whether Jennifer and Tony are going to have a passionate affair. In their dreams, perhaps, but it won't happen in "life." Or I hope it won't. I hope *Sopranos* creator David Chase has too much respect for the therapeutic relationship to allow the violation of a patient. What we are witnessing is not a prelude to sex, but the quality of connection with a woman Tony has not known before — one that could help him trust, change and love.

So I hope it won't happen. Tony may want a different life for his children, but for him another life can't be in the cards because it won't work in the script. Tony in a witness protection program? Ridiculous!

Any "Can Tony change?" discussions miss the point entirely. Though David Chase is too savvy to admit it, his use of the Mafia is backdrop, fascination, hook and metaphor. *The Sopranos* is about the capacity to hurt, destroy and love in everyone. It is about the world all of us must learn to live in, and raise our children to live in, in spite of inequity, injustice, cruelty, disloyalty and dishonor. Jennifer Melfi's relationship with Tony Soprano is the show's vehicle toward this understanding.

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