

The Smiling Mask

Dianne Ouellett, prod.
Regina, SK: To the Core Consulting. DVD.

Reviewed by Sarah J. Duncan

The Smiling Mask, a documentary film produced by Dianne Ouellette in association with *To the Core Consulting*, offers a personal look at post-partum depression and its impact on young families. The To the Core Consulting team includes Tania Bird, Carla O'Reilly, and Elita Paterson; they are also the three women interviewed in the documentary about their experiences following the birth of their respective children. The 40-minute film gives these three women the opportunity to speak out about their own experiences and those of their spouses, while shedding light on a subject that is rarely addressed so directly, openly, and honestly.

The three couples in the film tell their respective stories, starting with their romance and weddings. This sets the stage for a seemingly happy narrative, which is initially confusing for the viewer. In fact, the documentary's focus on post-partum depression should be made explicit at the outset.

These women once shared the stereotypical dream of the happy home surrounded by the proverbial white picket fence, and they appeared to have achieved their dream up to birth of their children. Their experiences of labour and delivery varied. One woman experienced extreme challenges that hint at the greater difficulties to come. Another woman is alone and admits that difficulties ended her marriage. Gradually, the picture comes into focus: young couples, with everything to look forward to, gradually experience the devastating shift in psychological health, public perception, and relationship stress that accompanies post-partum depression. These three families—not at all unique—slowly fall apart due to misdiagnoses, extreme isolation, and unbearable stress accompanied by fragile mental health.

What is most striking is not the stories of the interviewed women, but the implied indictment of the western medical community. Though not stated explicitly by either the women or their spouses, it becomes acutely obvious that, in all three cases, these families were left largely to suffer in isolation or ignorance. All three women suffer needlessly as a result of inadequate assessment and follow-up after the birth of their babies and, even after one spouse commits his wife to a mental health unit, the family continues to struggle alone.

It is commendable that fathers are included in this film. *The Smiling Mask* is not only for and about women who suffer post-partum depression; it is

also about the effect of post-partum depression on spouses. Many men are so deeply affected that they can no longer stay in the marriage. Others feel completely helpless and do not know where to find help for their wives or themselves. The result, which this film seeks to highlight, is a young family suffering silently and trying to put on a brave face for the outside world. Behind closed doors, however, the family is often unraveling.

This film is an admirable attempt to address a taboo subject. It should be available in women's health care centres, midwifery clinics, hospitals, and public libraries where families often seek information and the support they need to deal with post-partum depression. More information is available on the website <www.thesmilingmask.com>.