

MEDIA REVIEW

Broken Open— ABC TV Compass

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Danielle Elisha

On Sunday 31 July 2005 ABC's Compass program screened "Broken Open", a documentary based on the experiences of Craig Hamilton, an ABC Radio broadcaster who has bipolar disorder. "Broken Open" charts the journey that Hamilton took from denial of his illness, misdiagnosis, becoming unwell through to eventual acceptance and treatment.

One of the strengths of the documentary is that it explores the onset of his illness with great honesty. Hamilton reflects with, as he puts it, 'hindsight's 20-20 vision' on the heavy drinking sessions and excessive partying that he indulged in. His realisation that it was as a way of feeding his mania, which was spiralling out of control, is the kind of simple insight that typifies the documentary, and indeed Hamilton's 'no nonsense' approach to his illness.

Work is also a theme that is central to "Broken Open". Hamilton was waiting to go by train to the 2000 Sydney Olympics as part of his job for the ABC when he became psychotic and was hospitalised. A poignant moment in the documentary occurs when Hamilton goes back to the train station to relive what happened. While Hamilton's work may have been a trigger for becoming unwell it has since played a fundamental role in helping him get better. Hamilton also spoke about how his workplace stood by him and allowed him the time off he needed to get better and then welcomed him back when he was ready to return to work and the significance this has had on helping get him back on his feet.

Perhaps the most unique aspect of "Broken Open" is that it explores the difficulties Australian men traditionally experience in getting help for mental health problems. As a former top sportsman, farmer's son, coal miner and sports broadcaster living in the conservative town of Singleton in New South Wales, Hamilton ignored many of the warning signs that he was becoming unwell. For a while Hamilton chose to ignore the extreme feelings of powerlessness and unhappiness he was experiencing believing it would taint his masculine image. This leads to one of the

most important messages Hamilton imparts—mental illness is real and not even the 'top Aussie bloke' is immune to it.

Another unique angle of the documentary is that it explores an issue interwoven with mental health but often overlooked—that of spirituality. While Hamilton receives medical treatment for his illness, he is quick to champion the role that a renewed sense of spirituality has played for him in getting better. This is perhaps most evident when Hamilton takes us to his study and shows us his bookcase. He explains that the bottom shelves consist of books he read prior to his diagnosis (sports books) and the top shelves of what he has read since his diagnosis (books on spirituality and eastern philosophy). He also goes on to add that yoga has been critical in helping him to focus and cope with his illness.

Though this is a sufficiently complex and gruelling tale in and of itself, Hamilton's story does not end there. Hamilton has subsequently gone on to write a book detailing his journey, which is also called *Broken Open*. He has also become a strong advocate of and spokesperson for the importance of early detection and treatment of mental illness.

As a documentary "Broken Open" is a thorough, sympathetic and insightful look at a man whose message that mental illness is treatable is not just evident through his words, but perhaps more importantly his actions.

Craig Hamilton's autobiography *Broken Open* is available through SANE Australia on 1800 688 382 or at www.sane.org. A program transcript is available at <http://www.abc.net.au/compass/s1427515.htm>

Danielle Elisha is the Helpline Manager and Research Officer at SANE Australia, a national charity helping people affected by mental illness through campaigns, research and education.