

The Afflicted — A Netflix series painting people with little-understood illnesses as mentally sick



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The Netflix television series *Afflicted* is about seven people who are struggling with chronic illnesses that mainstream medicine is unable to effectively treat. They therefore have to try navigating the jungle of experimental treatments as they have few other options.

The seven people were unpaid volunteers who believed that their participation in the program would help create awareness about these little-understood illnesses. Instead, *Afflicted* is a slow, insidious assault on the legitimacy of the sick people and all others with these ailments. This can cause actual physical harm to a lot of people.

This review is written by someone who has had MCS and EHS for more than two decades. I have visited the homes of nearly one hundred people with these illnesses and have lived through much of what is shown in *Afflicted*, though I don't know any of the people featured there. I watched the entire series three times to write this review, as it is easy to miss many details with just one viewing.

The people featured

The series features seven people with chronic diseases that are poorly understood by today's science:

- Carmen:** electrical hypersensitivity (EHS)
- Bekah:** mold sensitivity
- Jamison:** chronic fatigue/myalgic encephalomyelitis (CFS/ME)
- Jake:** chronic Lyme disease
- Star:** dystonia
- Pilar:** multiple chemical sensitivity (MCS)
- Jill:** multiple chemical sensitivity (MCS) and mold sensitivity

In the first episode we meet Carmen, who lives in Virginia Beach with her husband and child. She has electrical hypersensitivity, EHS.

Carmen comes across as demanding, irritable and restless. We see her obsessively turning off lights in the house and complaining about radiation from the camera crew's equipment. Her husband makes various statements that are not supportive of his wife and a psychiatrist makes some general statements about psychosomatic disorders.

Anyone new to EHS would quickly conclude that Carmen is a nut case. There is nothing said or shown to suggest otherwise.

We meet Carmen again in the third episode, where she travels to the National Radio-Free Zone at Green Bank in rural West Virginia. The zone protects a giant radio telescope by banning all wireless devices since they would interfere with the sensitive instrument

Carmen is welcomed by the community of people with EHS who have moved there. The difference in her face and her demeanor from the first episode is striking. She appears calm, radiant, and doesn't complain about anything. She doesn't even complain when another person discovers that the camera crew uses a wireless microphone.

It is common that people with EHS become restless and irritable when exposed to radiation from mobile devices, but that is not mentioned in the program. Viewers easily miss the change since it happens between episodes. The series frequently uses banners to point out various things, but it does not tell the viewer any of this. We just hear Carmen say she feels calm there.

We also meet Bekah, who is a young woman from New York. She is extremely mold sensitive and had to move to a remote part of the Mohave desert with her boyfriend. Here they live in a van stripped of its interior panels, two steel garden sheds and a shade structure. A small house apparently serves as a utility building.

The couple drives long distances to see one doctor after the other in Los Angeles, San Diego and Tucson, with the hope of finding one that can help.



There are two people with multiple chemical sensitivity (MCS). One is Pilar, who had a thriving career appearing in television commercials until she got sick. The cause of her illness may be a gas leak that went undetected for years in the apartment she shared with her husband.

Pilar gets sick when near her husband, so he stays with his parents. He works two jobs to pay for her treatments and brings her groceries as she gets sick in the

stores. His father has no sympathy for his daughter-in-law and states that “she’s gotta learn to toughen up.”

The other person with MCS is Jill, who is a psychotherapist. She is also mold sensitive and together with her partner is doing major mold remediation on the house, besides looking for doctors and treatments. There is an interesting scene where she goes into a grocery store without a respirator and gets quite out of it from the exposures. People familiar with MCS will understand, but there is no explanation so the incident will seem weird to outsiders.

Jamison used to be a fitness instructor. We see old videos of him lifting enormous weights in a fitness center. Now he has chronic fatigue so badly he doesn’t leave his bed for weeks at a time. He also has periods where he is extremely sensitive to light and sound. The illness started after a bad traffic accident where the other driver was killed and Jamison injured his chest and neck.

He is unable to travel to a doctor, but finally they find a specialist who is willing to travel the 3½ hours to come to his home. The doctor says Jamison is handling the situation better than most patients he sees, and emphatically states “this is not an emotional problem, okay?” One of the rare times we hear such a statement.

Star has dystonia, which is a neurologic ailment that makes her muscles spasm and become painful. Her husband is super supportive of her efforts and they are quite wealthy so they can afford the most fancy treatments. That makes a tremendous difference.

We see five of her friends, who are equally gorgeous and upper-class looking. Star is the only one who is not portrayed in a freakish light.

Then there is Jake, who has chronic Lyme disease that has left him gaunt and frail. He is so sensitive to light and noise that he is confined to a semi-darkened room. He is trying homeopathy, sauna, lymphatic massages and several nutritional supplements. Eventually his girlfriend drives him to another state for an intensive five-day program at a clinic. The trip is difficult with his light and sound sensitivity, and he has to wear dark glasses and ear protectors.

The treatments

In episode 2 we hear a little about how they have become disappointed with mainstream medicine, which has very little to offer. Star says that she has had

doctors laugh at her. Bekah's boyfriend says: "Medical society has just abandoned us."

In episode 3 we meet Jake, who says "To be told that you're well by a medical professional when you're clearly sick, that completely changed my outlook on modern medicine."

For such a fundamental issue, it is surprising how little is said about it, so viewers may wonder why these people are not seen going to regular doctors.

People who are not helped by mainstream doctors become desperate and look for other possibilities. That is not at all new. Some of the prominent examples were the tuberculosis patients a hundred years ago, the AIDS patients in the 1980s and 1990s and even today there are many Alzheimer and cancer patients who go through the same process.

Most of the alternative treatments the *Afflicted* seven undergo are actually performed by M.D. physicians. These physicians have come to the same realization that mainstream medicine leaves a lot of people out in the cold and try to do something about it.

All this is not explained.

We see many kinds of treatments, such as hyperbaric oxygen, ozone, yoga, sauna detox, homeopathy and a lot of high-tech equipment. The treatments are described very briefly, if at all. That is clearly not the focus here.

We see a lot of nutritional treatments. There are no reliable guides through this enormous jungle of folk medicine, remedies, herbs, vitamins, potions, and snake oil. There is so much to try, so much dubious advice on the internet, with some claims of real success. It's enticing to try, since the cost is usually relatively low.

The desperate need to reclaim health can drive people to go overboard trying these things. There is a scene where a skeptical friend questions Jill's extensive inventory of nutritional supplements and procedures. She sees the criticism as betrayal.

There is clearly a lot of experimentation with these treatments. To someone who has never found themselves in such a situation, it looks rather nutty. The series doesn't try to overcome that impression.

The Afflicted Seven are actually lucky

These seven people are some of the luckier ones with these illnesses. They are all middle-class or more (Star, and her perfect-looking friends, seem upper class.) They all have access to money to make renovations or move to a house in the desert and go to doctors who are not covered by insurance. At least three of the patients have spent more than \$100,000.

Other than Carmen's husband and Pilar's father-in-law, they all have supportive families and friends.

Many are not so lucky. Those with no assets and no help from friends and family are in dire straits. Their lives often involve homelessness, such as living in a vehicle parked somewhere in a driveway, a church parking lot or on public land. And little hope of recovery or a better life.

Many people in these situations end up with severe depression and other mental ailments as a result of the hardship. Some commit suicide.

Pushing psychosomatic

The series constantly pushes the idea that these people are really all just sick in their heads. It's just psychosomatic. Early in each episode we have some sort of psychiatrist making general statements, such as:

It's got to be in your head because I can't figure it out.

Some cases of unexplained chronic illness can originate from the mind.

You can be deluded that you're sick.

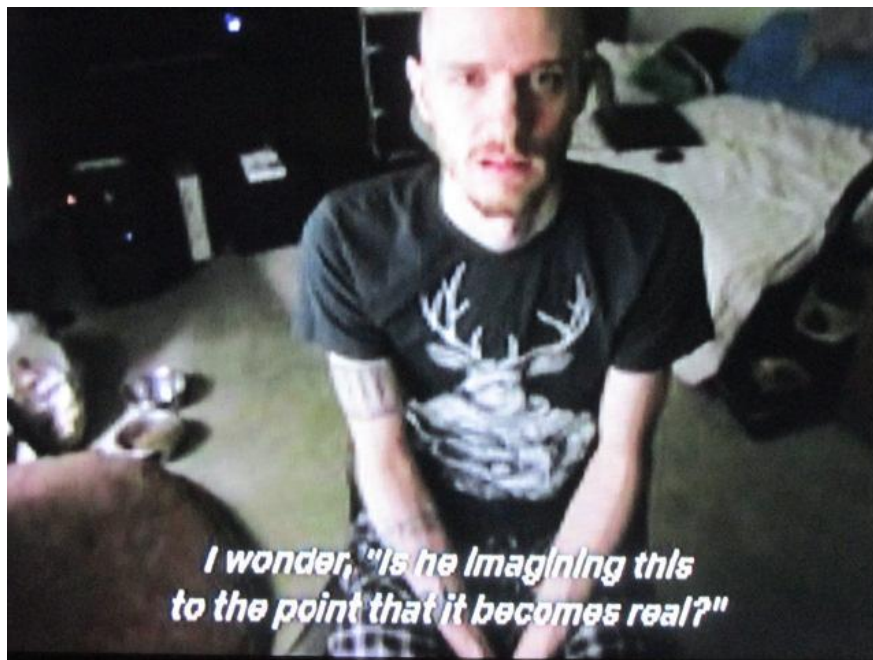
There are plenty of people who have physical symptoms that are generated by the brain.

Is he imagining this to the point that it becomes real?

Is it a cry for help or attention?

I've had a few patients who became so identified with their illness that they really weren't willing to be cured.

We very rarely see any opposing viewpoint. The only patient who is allowed to say anything about it is Jill, who is upset about a friend's comments. This demonstrates how one-sided and manipulative the series is.



Another clue is that from time to time a friend or family member is asked if they think it's all in their head and they all say "yes" or "maybe." Nobody says "no." At closer inspection it is clear that several of the family members are not shown responding to that question — those are probably the ones who didn't think it could be psychosomatic.

We don't hear what Star's husband or Bekah's boyfriend or Jamison's father and sister think. Or Jake's mom, sister or girlfriend. Or Pilar's mother and sister. Or the four of Star's friends that we don't hear from.

It is natural to wonder when faced with a seemingly bizarre illness your local doctors has no clue about. But wondering is not the same as concluding.

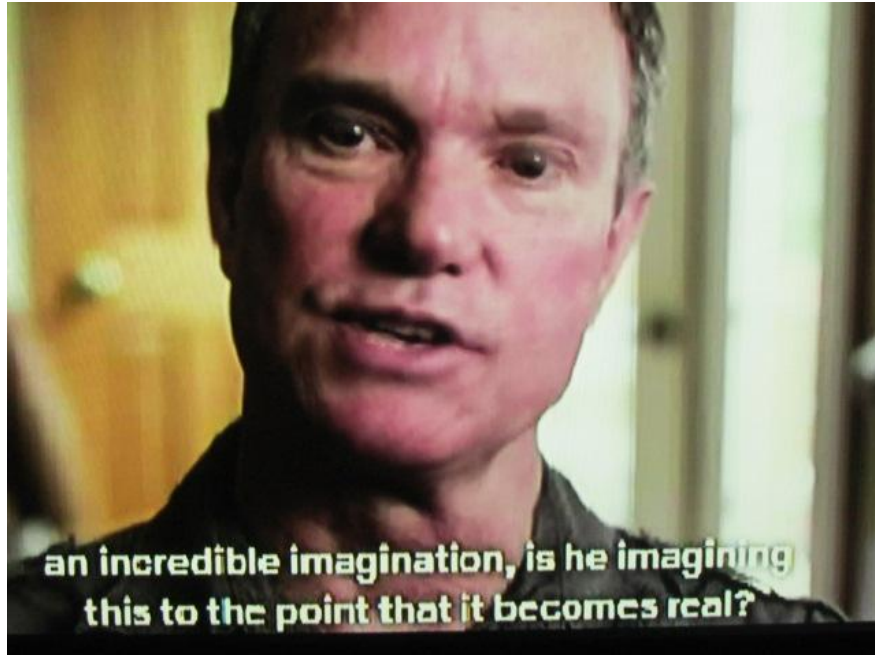
Bekah's brother and mother both say that Bekah had severe emotional problems when she was a teenager and was committed to a psychiatric hospital. That's about the only specific statement about her mental health. Nobody suggests she has any current mental illness. Jake is the only one who states he has a current medical diagnosis. (About 6 percent of American adults will have a severe mental illness in any given year. About a quarter of the population will have some diagnosable mental disorder at some point in their lives.)

Out of the many doctors we see treat someone, only three make mental health statements. One says clearly "no," the others seem to say "yes." What about all the others?

None of the psychiatrists that pop up in each episode appears to have examined any of the seven people. They are just making general statements, cut up into brief sound bites to fit the agenda.

We are told that Jamison probably got sick because of the emotional trauma from his car accidents and Jill got sick because she got divorced. But without any evidence, without a psychiatrist actually talking to them about it, that is just speculation presented as fact.

These little jabs at the sick people's credibility come in drips throughout the series. It is very clear what the intended message is. The same method of mentioning something so many times it becomes accepted "truth" is also used effectively in politics, advertising and other places.



The series does not tell the viewers that mainstream medicine has a long history of being dismissive of patients with illnesses that were not well understood at the time — even in recent decades — such as migraines, asthma, fibromyalgia, endometriosis, and TMJ (temporomandibular joint). If this series was made 25 years ago, they could have included patients with all these illnesses in the program and it would have been much the same.

They could have gotten psychiatrists to say that those illnesses might be emotional, too. Hopefully in thirty years people will laugh at how ignorant shows like *Afflicted* really are.

The last episode

The seventh and final episode was filmed some months later to see how it went with our group of seven. Some did get a lot better, some got a little better, some had no improvement.

The “pop up” psychiatrists appear to make the bizarre conclusion that getting better is proof that the illness was all in their head. Again without examining the persons or elaboration. Just the usual sound bite.

The final episode is more positive and not as condemning of the sick people. We even get statements like:

Nobody wants to be sick.

and

We don't know what's going on, but these people need help.

But this is much too little and too late.

What is the purpose of *Afflicted*?

The purpose of *Afflicted* seems simply to make money as quickly as possible. It is just another tabloid-style program in the form of medical voyeurism, pumped up controversy and sensationalism. Unfortunately, that gets the most eyeballs and thus the most money.

They chose one of the very few minorities it is still “acceptable” to pick on.

Public television stations like PBS do not have shows like *Afflicted*. As a result, they have far lower ratings than channels that thrive on controversy and are less interested in fairness and accuracy.

The Afflicted has no lasting value and will hopefully soon be forgotten.

Monkeys with chainsaws?

Video is a very powerful media. Viewers subconsciously think something like “I see it with my own eyes, so it must be true” and it takes up so much of our attention that it is difficult to think independently. People feel they are informed, even though the actual information presented is minuscule compared to books.

Making an informative and objective program about complicated illnesses will require a lot of time to understand things. It took four years to make the documentary *The Sensitives* (which Netflix declined to carry). Such an effort is not feasible for an operation that needs to make as much money as possible. It doesn't look like they even tried.

The credits for *Afflicted* do not list any medical consultants or other people with specialist knowledge as part of their team. The producers apparently just relied upon interviewing some doctors and on the sick people to explain themselves. If there had been consultants involved, as is done on some film projects, the result could have been better and some “mysteries” explained.

Carmen's husband says that it makes no sense to him that some breakers in the house must be off, while others are okay to leave on. He was obviously not aware that common wiring errors causing stray electricity could be the explanation, and had not had the house checked by a specialist.

They also do not seem to be aware that Carmen's restlessness and irritability are common symptoms of EHS, when exposed to radiation.

We are told that Pilar doesn't “tolerate” her husband and see her stay at a distance from him when he brings her groceries. There is no explanation of this, so it is easy to dismiss it as nutty. For people with MCS it is a common problem and could be as simple as changing his personal hygiene or laundry products, or it could be nearly impossible to solve if he works as a car painter or pesticide applicator.

The scene with Jill getting upset from exposures in a grocery store is another case of missing explanation. So is the scene where Jill's friend says that at one visit with her his clothes bothered her and at another they didn't, even though they were about the same as far as he could tell. (There are many reasonable explanations, such as whether he entered a stinky store that contaminated his clothes.)

It is much more appealing for people to blame what they do not understand on the victims rather than on their own ignorance. This apparently includes the producers.

Does it harm anyone?

It has real life consequences when people with these illnesses are painted as mental cases on powerful media.

First of all, people who get these illnesses may themselves think that they need psychiatric help and waste their time and money. People have done that and continued getting worse since the real illness was not addressed, so that detour can be quite harmful.

There are actually very few successes where people tried psychiatric treatments. *Afflicted* is irresponsibly promoting psychiatry.

The families may see these shows and decide not to help their sick, or insist on useless psychiatric treatments. Unable to work, sick and without money or support, the result is too often homelessness and sometimes even suicide.

Medical personnel of all kinds may be persuaded by *Afflicted* to deny reasonable accommodations in clinics, hospitals and nursing homes. There are many horror stories.

Those who decide on funding medical research are human too. They'd rather fund things that are not controversial, in case it might harm their reputation. There are plenty of other worthy projects to choose from. This perpetuates the vicious cycle of little research to prove the diseases are "real," which means they will continue to be controversial.

During the 1990s the American Broadcasting Corporation aired several anti-MCS programs. People who had MCS at the time reported that these programs made people hostile towards those with MCS.

So yes, *Afflicted* is quite irresponsible and harmful.

But is it balanced?

Imagine someone making a show suggesting that women are less intelligent than men. They show some women who say that it is not true and some psychiatrists

who point out that women's brains are actually smaller than men's (true, but irrelevant).

Would that be balanced? A few men may think so today. Fifty years ago many men, women and psychiatrists might.

Afflicted is not balanced either, it just may seem like it to outsiders right now. Hopefully that will eventually change.

What is the educational value?

This is not an educational program. The *Afflicted* is so loaded with impressions, odd looking scenes and so many people that it all becomes a jumble so the few educational moments are drowned out. And they are not highlighted or explained.

There is so much emphasis on the controversy and visual effects that viewers have a hard time relating to the sick people, thus the series will not generate sympathy — much the opposite.

The descriptions of the symptoms and the treatments are brief and specific to just one person, so they have limited value.

It helps to watch the series a second time, since then the stark images will be familiar and it is possible to notice the more subtle information hidden in the jumble. But consider watching *The Sensitive* instead. It is about chemically and electrically sensitive people who are portrayed with more sympathy and without the hype.

Why did the sick seven participate in this?

People who participate in documentaries rarely get to see or approve the result before it is released. And it is impossible to know how the program will be from the filming. A film crew makes many many times more footage than is actually used. The editors then decide what to show and what not to show, what to mix in from other sources, and in what order.

This makes it really easy to present whatever message is desired. There is no doubt that editing the same footage differently could result in a series with a radically different message of acceptance and empathy with these sick people. It is all a matter of how the producers want it to come out. Calling it a “documentary” is misleading.

Several of the people featured in *Afflicted* spoke out against it in the days after its release in August 2018. A summary was posted on themighty.com.

They explain that they felt deceived and misled about the content and intention of the series. Jill's friend Janine stated that "we were assured that this series would shine the light on misunderstood and unknown conditions and illnesses," through a "compassionate lens," as Jamison wrote.

Jill wrote "Had I known, I would never have signed up."

Several of them stated that they had to be examined by a psychiatrist and present medical evidence to be accepted for the show, so the producers knew they were working with legitimate patients. And yet, they chose to keep insinuating it was all in their heads.

The cast also had many objections to what was left out or altered regarding their medical and personal histories.

They received no payment for their efforts. It was all voluntary. Several expressed that they had hoped the series would help gain acceptance of their ailments. Obviously, they were disappointed. The cast called on Netflix to remove *Afflicted* from their service, but it never did (as of three years later).

They are certainly not the first to be snookered into participating in such a thing. Another example is the 2016 article and video about people with MCS and EHS in Snowflake, Arizona published by the *Guardian*. They too complained, but all they were able to correct was a banner that accused them of being "self-diagnosed," when they all actually were diagnosed by physicians.

It is too early to cover the topic of these experimental treatments. It must wait until the illnesses are all accepted so there is no controversy to pounce on and no harm to the people with these diseases.

The 2014 Oscar-winning film *Dallas Buyers Club* is about the alternative treatments tried by gays during the AIDS epidemic in the 1980s. If it had been made back then, it would have been very different and probably harmful to their struggle to get funding for medical research.

What we need is a series about the people who make “documentaries,” to expose their methods and how easy it is to manipulate viewers. But why would they tell the truth about themselves?

One season only

The program is clearly marked as “Season 1.” Fortunately there is no season 2. We can only speculate why they did not continue. Was it because of the uproar? Did they try to recruit another batch of people – with nobody willing, after they watched the first season? Did the first season just get too few viewers? We’ll probably never know.

The makers of *Afflicted*

The series was filmed by Docshop Productions, with Dan Partland and Peter Logreco as the executive producers. The rest of the producer and editor team was Maureen Hoban, Kurt Schemper, Nicole Zien, Erin Haglund, Julio Pason, Ashley York, Erik Christensen, Caton Clark and Doyle Esch.

There were no medical consultants or other people with specialist knowledge of these diseases listed in the credits.

More information

Other articles about media hostile to chronically sick people, and the real consequences that has, are available on www.eiwellspring.org/media.html.

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