

*The Emmy award-winning actor is on a crusade to destigmatize mental illness*

**Joe Pantoliano:**

# Feeling

*“The Sopranos” star talks about his battle against depression*



**J**oey “Pants” Pantoliano was a mess. The wiry character actor, best known as the hotheaded mob lieutenant Ralph Cifaretto in the HBO show “The Sopranos” was losing weight he didn’t need to lose. And at night he was tossing, turning, and having dark dreams about his volatile, chain-smoking mother, who’d been dead for 25 years.

Pantoliano—often referred to as Joey Pants because people find it hard to pronounce his surname—was in the midst of making the movie *Canvas*, which opened in New York last October. In the film, he plays John Marino, an ordinary man struggling to hold his family together after his wife develops schizophrenia. Actress Marcia Gay Harden’s vivid performance as a woman out of control reminded Pantoliano of his own mother, who, he now recalled, often “hit herself and screamed for tranquilizers.”

To add to his woes, just a few days before they started work on *Canvas*, one of Pantoliano’s closest friends had committed suicide. It came as a total shock; none of his friends had known that anything was wrong. His friend’s death and the terrible memories set

Connecticut and made an appointment with his doctor. His doctor examined him and then asked how he was doing. Finally, Pantoliano let down his guard and confided just how bad he’d been feeling. The doctor sent him to a psychiatrist, who diagnosed Pantoliano with clinical depression and started him on a treatment regimen that includes exercise, nutrition, talk therapy, and antidepressant medication.

## “One day during a rehearsal I started banging my head on the stage floor”

With treatment under way, things started clicking into place. For one thing, Pantoliano realized that his bout of depression during the making of *Canvas* wasn’t his first. “I remembered doing a play when I was 21—it was *Rats* by Israel Horowitz. I was in Vermont, but I didn’t like it there, and one day during a rehearsal I started banging my head on the stage floor. I scratched my face and drew blood; they had to come and grab me from the stage. I felt like I was having a heart attack; I couldn’t breathe. I was also paranoid; I felt like the director was out to get me.”

The memory of that breakdown, and others, made Pantoliano see that he had actually been battling depression for many years—and that it had taken a heavy toll on his life. “When you’re not diagnosed, you self-medicate,” he says. “With me it was alcohol. It took care of the pain temporarily, but it created its own problems. I almost lost my entire family. When I’d come home, the dogs were the only ones who would greet me. As they were running out to say hello, my

children were running upstairs to their rooms because they didn’t want to see me. One time my wife said I’d put up a wall, and the wall was getting so high, they could no longer climb over it.”

As Pantoliano’s state of mind improved, he was able to stop drinking. “I came off the booze and got involved in a 12-step program. I’d been afraid of getting involved in organization-type things, but I went to a meeting with some friends, and the people there embraced me. It was where I belonged.”

### Remembering his mother

As he started to learn about mental illness, Pantoliano became convinced that his mother had spent her entire adult life with undiagnosed bipolar disorder, a cyclic disease in which sufferers periodically exhibit manic and depressive episodes.

Several years earlier, he’d written *Who’s Sorry Now* (Dutton, 2002), a tragic-comic autobiography about his childhood in Hoboken, N.J., with his first-generation Italian-American parents, Dominic “Monk” Pantoliano, a hearse driver and factory foreman with ties to the mob, and his mother, Mary, whose temper was so violent she once broke her husband’s collarbone. “You never knew what you were going to get with her,” says Pantoliano. “But at the time, I’d thought my mother’s behavior was her choice.”

### Destigmatizing mental illness

Pantoliano also learned how stigmatizing mental illness can be. Whenever he was hired to work on a movie he had to get a physical exam for insurance purposes. “When I started taking antidepressants I realized I was being discriminated against by the insurance companies,” he says. “Two days after an exam, I would get a call from my lawyer saying, ‘they won’t cover you if you have a nervous breakdown on the set.’”

When Pantoliano countered that he took medication for high cholesterol and asked why that was so different, the insurance companies said, “We’ll

# Good

the actor, 56, into a downward spin; he was so upset, he began to think that he might be better off dead. “When I was at my bottom, I was taking pills hoping that I wouldn’t wake up the next morning,” he said during an exclusive interview with *Health Monitor*. “But I wasn’t sharing any of this. I was embarrassed by the thoughts bouncing around in my head.”

### Letting down his guard

As soon as *Canvas* was finished, Pantoliano returned to his home in