Narrator: Many scholars have debated whether mental illness is a biological fact or a socially and thus culturally constructed concept. One of these scholars, Dr. Thomas Szasz argued for decades that mental illness was not a disease per se, but that patients were playing a social role that allowed them to act and behave in certain manners that were inconsistent with the cultures in which they lived.

He stated that irrationality was simply a point of perspective, and also suggested that we consider others irrational when they did not adopt our viewpoint on important issues.

The following video clip is taken from a famous debate in 1977 between Dr. Szasz and Dr. Albert Ellis, another international authority on mental health, about whether or not mental illness was fact or myth.

William Simon: I’m Dr. William Simon, Administrative Director at the Island Consultation Center in Baldwin, New York. On October 30th, 1977 in Rockville Center, New York, two internationally prominent authorities in the field of mental health, Dr. Thomas Szasz and Dr. Albert Ellis met to debate an issue of crucial importance: Mental Illness; Fact or Myth? Dr. Thomas Szasz, a psychiatrist, took the position that mental illness is a myth. Dr. Albert Ellis, a psychologist, took the position that mental illness is a fact.

What ensued was an extremely interesting, entertaining and informative two and a half hour exchange between two of the great minds of the twentieth century. The edited video tape you are about to see contains some of the highlights of this debate. It begins with an opening statement by Dr. Albert Ellis and is followed by Dr. Szasz’s opening statement. These opening statements in turn are followed by rebuttals, a question and answer period in which Dr. Ellis and Dr. Szasz take questions from the audience, and finally by an open discussion period in which Dr.’s Ellis and Szasz talk directly to each other.

Dr. Albert Ellis: I want to talk today against some of Dr. Szasz’s extreme positions regarding the myth of mental illness. To show that he often throws out the baby with the bathwater; to indicate that many of his stands lead to more harm than good; and to try to induce him and his followers to stick with their good points — and to abandon their extremism in favor of a more middle-of-the-road view that would truly help minimize human disturbance.

Let me start off by saying that although I agree with Dr. Szasz that mental illness is in part mythological, I strongly disagree with his extreme views that it is only a metaphor and not a reality. I agree that to say a person is mentally ill constitutes an overgeneralized and partially false statement. For even when that person has an extreme chronic degree of disturbance, the phrase is mentally ill implies that he or she will always be disturbed, is totally disturbed, and is completely different from less, or non-disturbed people. These (video cuts out)

For Dr. Szasz to claim, therefore, that mental illness is only a metaphor and does not really exist is a gross misstatement of fact, and a misstatement that does a distinct disservice to seriously disturbed people and to the society in which they resort.
Dr. Thomas Szasz: ...in a very large part we are, for better or for worse, talking about words. So let’s get some things down on record about words. Uh... how are we going to use words? Now I am going to use words primarily in the sense of operational linguistics, which is a fancy term for saying that the word doesn’t mean what it says in Webster’s, it doesn’t mean what it says in some textbook of psychiatry or psychology means, ladies and gentlemen, its social consequences. That’s what it means.

Mental illness in this sense means, that it is for example, an excuse for crime. Pneumonia is not. Cancer of the brain is not. Psychosis is. Schizophrenia is. So, in this sense, these words mean there are consequences. This is very important because the extent to which you change the consequences, which Dr. Ellis allows. Some of them ought to be changed and there are obviously large areas of agreement between us, to the extent of which you change the consequences you change the meaning. The word “Jew”, the concept “Jew” is a very different meaning in Berlin in 1941 than in Tel Aviv in 1977. Now this is rather obvious. It’s the same word on a piece of paper but it doesn’t mean the same thing. So I’m going to use mental illness more or less in the sense in what it has meant... what it meant and what it has meant.

Now why do I say that mental illness is a myth, and a metaphor? Metaphor is really is a... best way of... now obviously you all know what a metaphor is. It’s an important concept in rhetoric, but to understand what a metaphor is though, you first of all have to understand the literal meaning of the word. Unless you have a sense of language... uh this is why small children and foreigners, until they know the language well, don’t understand jokes... don’t understand proverbs often... they’re kind of dull about using language because fine points of language, especially jokes, some (unintelligible) depend upon careful use of metaphors. You all know what the cutting remark is. You all understand that you can’t draw blood with a cutting remark, no matter how cutting. It’s just not the kind of thing that draws blood. Alright, it’s a metaphor.

Now, to understand the metaphoric sense of mental illness, we have to have an agreement on what the literal meaning of the word illness is. Unless we have an agreement of what literal illness is we cannot have metaphoric illness. That's obvious. So I’ll tell you what literal illness is. Literal illness is what real doctors diagnose and treat. Here my source is traditional scientific medicine from the middle nineteenth century beginning with... but essentially is the conventional definition that an illness is something which happens to the human body, could happen to animal body too but we’re talking about humans, which is basically an anatomical, physiological, metaphysiological anatomical disturbance of the body like cancer, like diabetes, like heart disease.

Now for the sake of simplicity this is almost entirely true perhaps not 100 percent but realistically this is true... and I like to put it this way: Regular, literal illnesses ladies and gentlemen, are those diseases which you and I can have as patients, and should we die we can have them as cadavers. Cadavers, corpses... I’m not trying to be cute about it. Cancer of the liver you can have and I can have and our corpse can have. Syphilis we can have. Cancer of the brain we can have. Pneumonia we can have. The only diseases corpses don’t have are homosexuality, agoraphobia, hysteria, schizophrenia, and so on. Can a corpse have schizophrenia? Can a corpse be homosexual? Can a corpse be phobic? See it’s funny, it’s funny because jokes and metaphors are very closely connected.

Now, this set is the literal meaning of disease. But my argument goes further than this and takes advantage of something which, if we had a blackboard I could put it on the blackboard but it’s very simple. Just try to follow me. Obviously, and Dr. Ellis himself has alluded to this, very correctly, very fairly... we are dealing with certain empirical issues here and certain civil rights; political issues. Now let me show you what I think (unintelligible). We have to enlarge our vocabulary at this point a little. Just ordinary terms. You have to have another term besides illness, disease and so on. You know what that term is? That term is patient role. There are two independent variables, and I’m not talking about illness in a medical sense, let’s say cancer of the breast, a broken leg. You can have your disease and you can be a patient. Now it’s conventional, ordinary wisdom, medical wisdom now this is how medical students are taught and this is how it is so poorly understood, that people are called patients who have diseases and people who have diseases are patients. That’s ridiculous! The connection between being a patient and having a disease is about the same order as being married and loving one’s partner. They’re independent
variables. They have virtually nothing to do with each other. It is a lucky coincidence if they go together. Most patients are not sick and a lot of people who are sick are not patients. It's obvious. Hold on… now…

The ideal model in medicine... the ideal model... there are four possibilities. This is strict matter of logic or permutation. You have two independent in my opinion independent variables. Diseased, (unintelligible), and patienthood. Being a patient is a social role. It's like being a horseman, or a (unintelligible) or a lecturer or a member of the audience. It's a social role. How are you a patient? You complain of being sick, go to the doctor or register in a hospital. Sign pieces of paper. You register as a patient just like you register democrat or republican. It's a social role. You make contact.

Now let's go through the four permutations. The ideal model or ideal situation is there is a patient, the patient role, and he is sick, let's say he or she has breast... cancer of the breast or a broken leg. That's simple. You got a patient, you got a disease. That's what doctors like... that's what lawyers like, and if the disease is curable patients like it too. I mean it’s not bad. If you have pneumonia, you know, that's ok…

Now let's take the opposite of the roles you see... you have two interesting cases in between. You can serve two positives; patient and disease. Both are positives. That's a normal patient so to speak, medical patient. Let's assume you haven't got a patient. There is no patient then there is no disease. Well, that's what we call a healthy person. He doesn't have a disease then he doesn't play the patient role. Alright.

Now we've got two situations left. We've got the first situation where we've got a disease, the person, we can't call him patient, has a disease. Let's say it's cancer of the breast, cancer of the liver. It's obvious, you know, pneumonia, tuberculosis, syphilis. But he is not a patient. Now you can say how is he not a patient. Well, he says "I don't want to be a patient." Now let me give you... since obviously I could spend the whole lecture on this...The limiting case of this... the limiting case of this is as I say... in the afternoon I didn't talk about this... is actually in the first amendment of the constitution. The first amendment of the constitution says we have freedom of religion. Now it so happens that there is a religion which if you really believe in you can never be a patient. Just like if you really believe in Judaism you can't be a gourmet on pork cooking. If you really are an honest priest, you can't be a husband. They're incomparable. Now I refer to Christian Science. If you're a Christian scientist you can't be a patient. You can be sick, you can die, but you can't be a patient. Now this is extremely important because the major psychiatric diseases are characterized by the fact that society insists that the person's a patient and the patient says that he's not. This is a most important, empirical content. And they insist that this is more obvious than any speculation about physiology. This is obvious. People say he's a patient. And the patient says “I'm not a patient. I'm fine. Leave me alone.”

But then we come to the next class and that is that we have got patients, but there isn’t anything wrong with them. That, ladies and gentlemen, is what made Freud a famous man. It used to be called malingering, faking, gold bricking, pretending. Moliere wrote a beautiful piece about it. I am not being (unintelligible 13:03) about it. I am trying to describe the fact that it’s in the nature of the human condition that any role can be faked. Being a doctor is a role. It's possible for somebody to fake a medical certificate and fake the role of doctor. And then sometimes these people have discovered that they practiced successfully in a mental hospital for years. And nobody knew that he was a doctor until he applied for a promotion. Then they discovered that he was a faker. They don't call it hysteria. They call it practicing without a license. So hysterics fake illness just like the psychiatrist fakes doctoring. It's a completely symmetrical pain.

This is why I say that mental illness is by definition so to speak, a metaphor.

End of Presentation