

## Video Guide

# Ordinary People (video, 1980, PS3557.U345071980)

### Introduction:

The Jarretts are the “Ordinary People” who experience a crisis. Cal is the father; Beth is the mother, and Conrad is the youngest son who are attempting to deal with the recent death of Buck, the older son. We see through flashbacks that Conrad and Buck were out on the water when a severe storm came up and Buck could not hold on and drowned. Later Conrad attempted suicide by slitting his wrists and then spent four months in a psychiatric hospital.

Conrad felt responsible for the death of his brother Buck and became depressed. He had tried to commit suicide and is now home from the hospital. Conrad experienced nightmares and had trouble sleeping at night. Loss of appetite and withdrawal from his friends were other clues that he was still depressed.

Each of the three surviving family members deals differently to Buck’s death and getting on with life. The film focuses primarily on how Conrad struggles to grow. Keep in mind that the two parents also suffered from Buck’s death and that Conrad’s growth impacts how they individually and as a couple deal with stress.

The film begins in the fall with our listening to a high school chorus singing a very joyous song. The camera finds Conrad who has left the psychiatric hospital and is now back attending his high school.

### Main Characters

#### Conrad

Conrad appeared tired and worn out and dressed accordingly - tired and worn out. He tried to win his mother’s love and attention but seemed to fail. He quit the swim team because he found it difficult to concentrate and participate, but he continued in the choir.

#### Buck

Buck was the oldest son. He was popular, well-liked, an outstanding swimmer, and captain of the swim team. He made his mother laugh and she was very proud of him. She seemed to favor him with love and affection.

#### Beth (Mother)

Beth had difficulty showing Conrad love and affection. She wanted to go on with life and avoid the painful reality of the loss of her son and the attempted suicide of the other which was embarrassing. She refused family counseling and had a hard time dealing with Conrad because of her pain. She valued the opinions of others and was a neat person who kept things “in order.” As the movie progresses, viewers discern that Beth is not “in order” and the obvious pain and lack of ability to deal with the tragedy causes her to leave home at the end.

**Cal (Father)**

Cal was a lawyer. He was concerned for Conrad and felt guilty about the attempted suicide. Cal encouraged Conrad to go to the psychiatrist. Although at first he appeared to be handling the crisis well, towards the end of the movie changes through therapy occur causing him to stand firm and take control of the family situation. Cal was caring and aware of Conrad's sleepless nights and troubles but had difficulty meeting his wife's needs.

**Dr. Berger**

The psychiatrist who helped Conrad and his father.

**Karen**

A friend of Conrad's who had met him in the mental hospital.

**Jeanine**

She is in the high school choir with Conrad. Conrad and Jeanine start to become interested in each other.

**Several Males**

Friends from Conrad's high school.

## The Scenes in the Film

1. View of lake (theme music).
2. High school choir sings “Hallelujah.” Conrad and Jeanine both sing in the choir.
3. Conrad wakes from a nightmare.
4. The play seen by Cal and Beth. “It really was a comedy, wasn’t it?”
  - Mom walks by Conrad’s door. Dad asks about therapy and encourages him to follow the plan for therapy.
5. The next morning at breakfast.
  - Conrad looks shabby and tired and does not want breakfast.
  - Beth dumps the French toast down the drain too quickly (she takes it personally, but says nothing).
  - Dad thinks it’s great someone is picking him up for school.
6. The drive to school with male friends.
  - Didn’t take finals - see train and flashes back to the graveyard.
7. In English class. Students are asked questions. Note the topic.  
“Powerless in the grips of circumstance” - or could he have helped himself?
8. Eating lunch at track alone. Calls Dr. Berger.
9. Swim practice - slams locker.
10. Dinner table with the Jarretts
  - This scene is austere and formal. Dad sits between Conrad and Beth.
  - Mom makes small talk: “Is that shirt ripped?”
11. Dream of the accident when Buck died.
12. Dr. Berger’s office. **First Therapy Session.**  
“I’d like to be more in control...so people will stop worrying about me.”
13. Dinner table.
  - Conrad told his parents he went to the psychiatrist’s
  - Mom asks - “Did Mort’s sister die in Idaho or Kansas?”
14. Swim practice.  
“There’s no point if you are not having fun,” states his coach who comes across harsh and unsympathetic. “I’d never let them put ECT in my head.”
15. Meets a girl, Jeanine Pratt.  
“You stand behind me in choir and have a lot energy,” says Jeanine.

16. Halloween
  - Mom wants to take a vacation at Christmas to London; Cal feels it's not the right time.
17. Conrad surprises Beth in Buck's old room.
  - Beth ignores Conrad's apologies for scaring her and talks about golf (strangely).
18. Conrad and mom try to converse.
19. Mom and Dad at party.
  - Beth makes small talk and Cal tells a friend about Conrad starting therapy and Beth overhears. She later tells Cal she was embarrassed.
20. **Second Therapy Session**
  - Conrad is jumpy - "I'm supposed to feel better, aren't I?"
  - "Not necessarily."
21. Conrad meets with Karen at soda shop.
  - "That was the hospital; this is the real world."
22. Beth and Conrad talk in the backyard.
  - Conrad talks about Buck; Beth walks away.
23. Conrad tries to help set the table.
  - Phone rings and she says she is doing nothing - implying talking with Conrad is nothing.
24. Flashback to Buck and Beth laughing in the backyard.
25. **Third Therapy Session**

"Mom and I don't connect."  
 "What would John Boy have said at the funeral?"
26. Cal talks with his business associate, but he is preoccupied.
27. Flashbacks to Dad as intermediate between Buck and Conrad's problems.
28. Flashback to Conrad's suicide attempt.
29. Conrad quits the swimming team.
  - Coach is unaware of what Conrad is going through.
  - A friend calls Conrad "a flake."
30. **Fourth Therapy Session**

"I won't feel anything today, sorry."  
 "Sorry won't work."  
 "Feeling doesn't tickle."

31. Picture session with grandparents.
  - Mom doesn't want a picture with Conrad.
  - Conrad blows up. He expresses his feelings.
  - Mom states, "Smile - who is hungry?" because she doesn't know how to deal with Conrad.
  - "Nice clean break," Mom says after breaking a plate.
32. Choir sings, "Hallelujah."
  - "You're a terrific tenor," says Jeanine.
  - Jeanine walks home with Conrad.
  - Jeanine is direct, honest - the opposite of his mother.
  - Conrad sings. First sign of relief and peace for Conrad?
33. Phone call to Karen
  - "Feeling great," says Karen.
34. Conrad calls Jeanine for a date.
35. The Christmas tree.
  - Mom finds out Conrad quit swim team without telling his parents. He is deceiving them. She is upset.
  - "Everything is jello and pudding to you, dad."
36. **Fifth Therapy Session**

"Do you think I am going to forgive her? Is she going to forgive me?"  
 "Don't blame her for not loving you enough."
37. Cal and friend jogging. Cal runs till he falls.
38. Cal goes to Dr. Berger.
  - Cal sees himself as "sitting on the fence" with Beth and Conrad on each side.
39. Cal talks to Beth in garage. He is puzzled.
  - "Blue or white shirt and shoes at the funeral. Why?"
40. Shopping at the mall.
41. The date with Jeanine at the bowling alley.
  - Conrad starts to open up and his friends come in and distract Jeanine.
42. Conrad's parents vacation in Houston.
43. Conrad watches the swim meet alone.
  - One friend says, "He's crazy" after a fight.
  - Friend in car says, "I miss him, too..." (Buck)
  - "It's hurt too much to be around you," says Conrad.
44. Karen kills herself. Conrad finds out when he calls her.

45. Flashback to the boating accident. Conrad is in a panic.
46. Conrad at Dr. Berger's office in the middle of the night.
- "What was the one thing you did wrong?"
  - "I held on."
  - Conrad asks Dr. Berger to let him feel bad about Karen committing suicide.
47. Sunday morning outside Janine's house.
- It is not someone's fault. Bad things happen. He made a mistake. Life isn't fair.
48. Back in Houston
- Beth and Cal fight.
  - Beth states, "I can't be happy after losing a son."
  - "You can't handle a mess," states Cal to Beth.
49. Flight back from Houston. Neither speaks.
50. Conrad hugs a paralyzed Beth.
51. Cal and Beth talk.
- Cal was up from bed crying in the dining room at night.
  - "Maybe the best of you was buried with Buck.. I don't know if I love you anymore, and I don't know what to do without that."
52. Beth packs and goes away to Houston (theme music).
53. Cal and Conrad talk.
- "Your mother is going away for a while."
  - Conrad: "It's my fault."
  - Cal: "It is not your fault."
  - Cal (father) thinks he should have been more there for Conrad.
  - "You were always so hard on yourself."
  - "I love you."
  - "I love you, too."

Thanks to Shirley Del Rosso and Todd Elzinga for their help with this study guide.