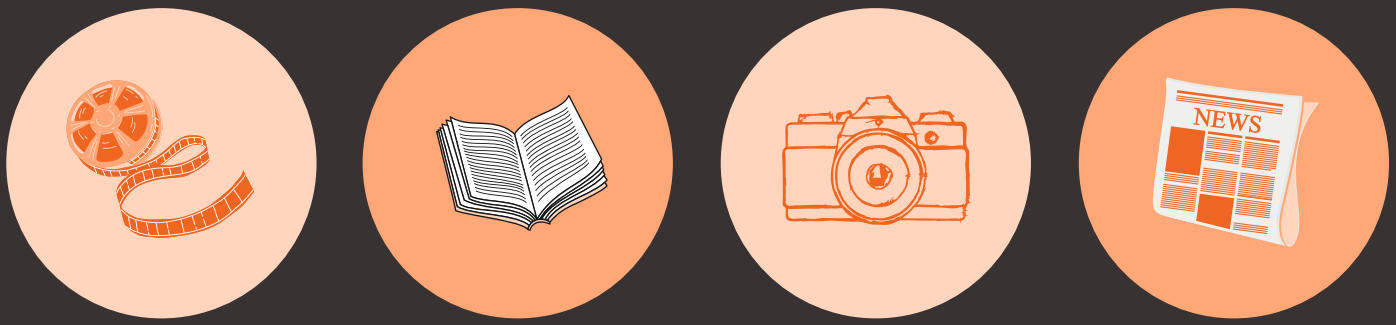
MENTAL HEALTH IN MEDIA

AN EDUCATIONAL GUIDE CREATED BY To Be Honest



ABOUT TO BE HONEST

To Be Honest aims to reduce the stigma surrounding behavioral health among youth, young adults and their families through education that ultimately normalizes mental illness and substance use issues. We strive to provide youth with a basic understanding of behavioral health, ways in which to maintain it. In addition, To Be Honest provides creative platforms, including an art contest and podcast, for young people to express themselves and share their own behavioral health stories.

Visit tobehonest.today for more mental health resources and information.

CONTENT WARNINGS

Content within this guide addresses serious, and potentially triggering, content including suicide and derogatory language about people with mental illness.

WHY IS **MEDIA** IMPORTANT?

The term "media" encapsulates a variety of mediums: art, film, news, literature, social media, and more! At its core, **media is a form of communication.** We may engage with media to see our stories reflected and validated, or to expand our worldview by interacting with unfamiliar stories.

Media has a big impact on our knowledge and attitudes, especially about topics with which we may not have personal experience. So, fair and accurate portrayals of mental health in media are key to reducing the stigma surrounding mental health, which can further isolate individuals with mental illness and discourage them from seeking help.

"On a typical day, 8 – 18-year-olds are engaged with some form of media about 7.5 hours" (NEDA).

MEDIA'S PORTRAYAL OF MENTAL ILLNESS

Vilification of individuals with mental illness

Generally, **entertainment and news media characterize people with mental illness as dangerous, unpredictable, and cruel** (Stuart, 2006).

A 1998 content analysis of television found that "[characters with mental illness] were found to be nearly 10 times more violent than the general population of television characters, and 10 to 20 times more violent (during a two week sample) than [people with mental illness] in the U.S. population (over the course of an entire year)" (Diefenbach, 1998).

In reality, **people with mental illness are more likely to be a victim of violent crime than the perpetrator** (Ghiasi et al., 2022).

Characters with mental illness were also "judged to have a negative impact on society and a negative quality of life" (Diefenbach, 1998). Along with these harmful portrayals of people with mental illness, studies have shown that media tends to "model negative reactions to mental illness, including fear, rejection, derision and ridicule" (Stuart, 2006).

Distorted depictions of mental health care

Historically, entertainment media has not promoted clinical treatment or counseling to help with one's mental health, as illustrated by the trope of psychiatric hospitals as "insane asylums" (Bosch, 2011).

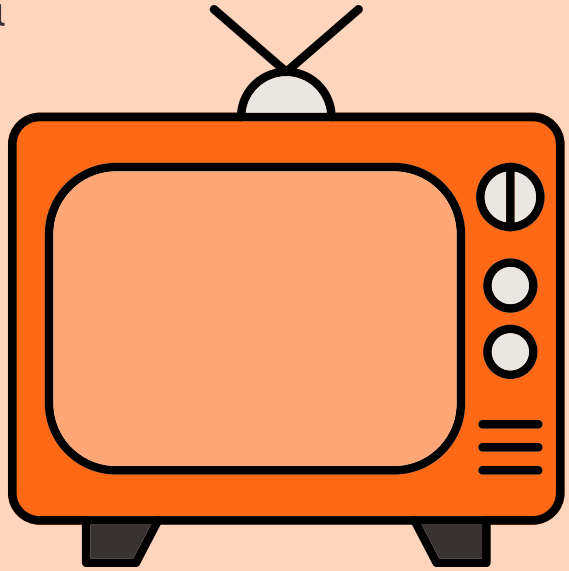
Psychologist Dr. Michael Fleming explains that mental health hospitals "are supposed to be sanctuaries. In movies, they are usually the opposite. Instead of places where healing takes place, they are houses of horror from which there is no escape" (Neary, 2005).

Because mental health care services are often portrayed as being grim, ineffective, and corrupt, the media does not promote help-seeking behaviors for people struggling with their mental health.

Glamorization of dangerous behavior

Some studies have shown that detailed reports from news media on celebrity deaths by suicides correlate to an uptick in deaths by suicide in the local population; this phenomenon, known as the "Werther Effect," can lead to suicide clusters in a community (Fahey et al., 2018).

More research has to be done to confirm the Werther effect, but research suggests that the Werther Effect applies to entertainment media (Pirkis et al., 2019).



Media allows for connection and empathy between the viewer and the characters they see in (entertainment) media: if a vulnerable viewer relates to a character who later dies by suicide, the viewer might consider suicide as a reasonable option rather than seeking help from a mental health professional (Ouellette, 2021).

THE IMPORTANCE OF FAIR, NON-DRAMATIZED PORTRAYALS OF MENTAL ILLNESS IN MEDIA

Given that mental health education is not robust in most schools, **media plays an important role in forming societal attitudes toward mental illness.**

Individuals' true battles with mental illness are often hidden from sight due to the intangible nature of mental illness, which allows stereotypical portrayals from the media to dominate. This phenomenon can lead to individuals with mental health problems feeling isolated and stigmatized.

Portraying mental illness as an untreatable personality trait may discourage viewers from seeking help for mental health. Additionally, this depiction may cause viewers to feel hopeless about ever overcoming their mental health challenges (and encourage them to consider dangerous alternatives, such as suicide).

RECOGNIZING DISTORTED PORTRAYALS OF MENTAL ILLNESS

Mental illness has a spectrum of varieties, symptoms, and causes, but here are some red flags when it comes to portrayals of mental health in media:

- A character's mental illness is their sole defining characteristic

- Violence and/or incompetence is the norm for characters with mental illness

- Mental illness is treated as a permanent character trait rather than a treatable condition
  - People with mental illness are unable to recover through help-seeking behavior

- Derogatory language is condoned and used to describe characters with mental illness
  - Ex: "crazy," "insane," "crazed," "deranged," "nut."

ADDRESSING PROBLEMATIC PORTRAYALS OF MENTAL HEALTH IN THE MEDIA

We can:

- Shift our language as not to perpetuate the problem (and encourage others to do the same)

- Encourage others to shift their language, too + have open conversations about depictions of mental health in media

Person-first language:

An individual is not defined solely by their mental health, so strive to use person-first language when describing someone who lives with mental health conditions.

For instance, **rather than calling somebody a "schizophrenic," describe them as "someone living with schizophrenia."** This way, the individual's humanity is emphasized before their illness.

Other types of stigmatizing terminology include language that associates mental illness with illegality and shame.

For example, the commonly-used phrase "commit suicide" conveys criminality because the same verb is used in expressions such as "commit murder." This language can further stigmatize people who have died of suicide or who struggle with suicidal thoughts.

See the table on the next page for more examples of respectful language to use when discussing mental health.

SAY THIS, NOT THAT

“The mentally ill” →	"People with mental illness"
"Committed suicide" →	"Died of suicide"
"Depressive" →	"Person with depression"
"Getting clean" →	"In treatment"
"Addict/junkie" →	"Person with a substance use disorder"

Information from the Suicide Prevention Resource Center and the Chicago Healthcare System Coalition.

WORDS + SAYINGS TO AVOID USING

When used **casually**, the following expressions perpetuate stigma surrounding mental illness. So, it is best to steer clear of them.

"I can't believe what happened – that's insane/crazy/nuts!"

Although these words are commonly used to describe behavior that seems strange or eccentric, they have a history of being used to stigmatize individuals with mental health conditions. So, these words can be hurtful to people struggling with their mental health today.

"That makes me want to kill myself!"

Some people use this phrase to describe their frustration after a mildly unfortunate or annoying occurrence. However, this expression diminishes the pain of people who have been affected by suicide, as suicide is almost never the result of one single event.

"I'm so OCD."

Others may casually employ this phrase to describe their quirky organization or cleaning habits. In reality, obsessions and compulsion can be debilitating. The nonchalant use of "OCD" minimizes the severity of obsessive-compulsive disorder and further warps the public's understanding of this mental illness.

A good rule of thumb is to **avoid casually using the names of mental disorders/illnesses as adjectives**, as this diminishes their severity and can further isolate individuals with these disorders/illnesses.

ADDRESSING PEOPLE WHO USE STIGMATIZED LANGUAGE

- Explain the history of how mental health has been depicted in media to show the person how normalized stigmatizing language has been

- Explain why the language is hurtful to individuals with mental illness (regardless of the speaker's intention) and offer an alternative -- see the previous "Say This, Not That" page for examples

HOW THE MEDIA CAN REDUCE THE STIGMA

Although news and entertainment media is a powerful influence in our lives, by **committing to critically analyzing portrayals of mental health in media and shifting our language surrounding mental health, we can work towards creating a culture that offers dignity and respect to people with mental illness.** With a foundation of support, individuals who struggle with their mental health may feel empowered to seek help from professionals rather than suffering in isolation.

Along with revolutionizing our interpersonal interactions, we can speak out about how media must protect individuals with mental illness: the media should work to combat the stereotype that mental illness makes someone inherently evil and dangerous. Furthermore, media should portray a broad array of experiences with mental health to better inform the public and validate experiences of people who have been affected by mental illness. Finally, to show that mental illness is treatable and not a permanent character trait, media should promote and normalize help-seeking behaviors.

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