

The media is an important source of information for many people about mental illness.

## Harmful reporting

- ⌚ A 2006 German study found that students who read negative articles about mental illness expressed more negative attitudes toward people with a mental illness.
- ⌚ A 1997 study found that media accounts of mental illness that instil fear have a greater influence on public opinion than direct contact with people who have a mental illness.
- ⌚ A number of international studies (1983, 1989) demonstrated that exposure to negative stories, both fictional and nonfictional, had a direct effect on attitudes which was not altered by subsequent exposure to positive stories
- ⌚ Research undertaken in 2007 by Mindframe found that 10.6% of stories in Australian media about mental illness were stigmatizing and 5.8% of reports used inappropriate or negative language.
- ⌚ An Australian study (1991) found that electronic and print media coverage often reflects and perpetuates the myths and misunderstandings associated with mental illness
- ⌚ A survey by SANE Australia from 2005 found that 95% of consumers believed that negative portrayals of mental illness had an effect on them and 80% reported that the effect was negative.

## Reporting that can have a negative impact:

- ⌚ Highlights tragedies involving untreated mental illness, contributing to community fear and isolation for those affected by mental illness
- ⌚ Does not provide balance. People with a mental illness are not inherently violent, unable to work, unpredictable, untrustworthy, weak or unable to get well
- ⌚ Implies mental illness is a life sentence that cannot be treated - most people are able to recover with treatment and support
- ⌚ Exaggerates a person's illness or the affect mental illness has on their behaviour
- ⌚ Implies all mental illnesses are the same. The term 'mental illness' covers a wide range of symptoms, conditions, and effects on people's lives
- ⌚ Mocks or trivialises mental illness by using medical terms (such as bipolar) out of context
- ⌚ Features negative terms such as 'mental patient', 'nutter', 'lunatic', 'psycho', 'schizo' and 'mental institution', which stigmatise mental illness and perpetuate discrimination.

## Responsible reporting

- ⌚ A 1999 American study also found that the media is an important source of information about mental health issues.
- ⌚ SANE research from 2007 found that inaccurate and prejudiced assumptions about people with a mental illness could be reduced through increased accurate and helpful reporting in the media.
- ⌚ A 2007 study which tracked reporting of suicide and mental illness in the Australian media found the majority of items about mental illness did not stereotype people affected as violent, unpredictable, unable to work, weak, untrustworthy or unlikely to get better.
- ⌚ The same study found media items about mental health/illness had increased two-and-a-half-fold in volume between 2000/2001 and 2006/7.

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## Reporting that can have a positive impact:

- ① Breaks down myths about mental illness and allows people who have experienced mental illness to tell their own stories
- ① Highlights the complexity of mental illness. The term 'mental illness' covers a wide range of symptoms, conditions, and effects on people's lives
- ① Highlights stories about successfully managing a mental illness
- ① Provides accurate information about mental illness and specific mental disorders
- ① Bases information on reliable sources such as recommended experts
- ① Encourages people in distress to seek help, for instance by providing helpline numbers
- ① Uses appropriate language and avoids victimising words such as 'afflicted' or 'suffers'
- ① Follows media codes of practice on privacy, grief and trauma.

## Guidelines

Guidelines about reporting suicide and mental illness for media are available via the Mindframe National Media Initiative: [www.mindframe-media.info](http://www.mindframe-media.info).

## The SANE Media Centre

The SANE Media Centre is supported by Mindframe to work with, advise and support media professionals to portray mental illness and suicide accurately and responsibly. Contact 03 9682 5933 or visit SANE Media Centre.