Media reporting on mental illness, violence, and crime needs to change

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The media is a key source of information about mental illness for the public, and research shows media coverage can influence public attitudes and perceptions of mental ill-health. But when it comes to complex mental illnesses such as psychosis and schizophrenia, media coverage tends to emphasize negative aspects, often choosing to focus on portrayals of violence, unpredictability and danger to others.

These portrayals can give an exaggerated impression of the actual rate at which violent incidents occur. In reality, such incidents are rare and are often better accounted for by other factors.

This can generate a skewed impression mental illness causes violent behavior, which reinforces myths, increases stigmatizing attitudes and cultivates fear among the public.

Research also shows the media can play an important role in challenging these stereotypes. Portrayals that are responsible, accurate, informative, and "stigma-challenging" have been found to positively influence public beliefs about mental illness.

Our new guidelines, released today by Mindframe, a program that supports safe media reporting of mental health as part of the Australian government's national suicide prevention program, offers advice to the media about the most responsible way to report on issues related to mental health, violence and crime.

Safe, responsible coverage

Media portrayals in which severe mental illness is linked to violence can be among the most stigmatizing representations of mental illness. So it's important the media cover these stories safely and responsibly.

We developed the new guidelines in consultation with journalists, editors, mental health professionals and people with lived experience of complex mental illness in advocacy roles.

The guidelines offer practical advice to help media when reporting on these issues. Tips include:

- keep in mind complex mental illness is rarely the cause of

violence. Around [96% of violent crimes](link) are committed by people who do not have a mental illness

- consider the impact of media reporting on people living with complex mental illness and their families
- include relevant contextual factors when reporting on a violent crime in which mental illness has been confirmed by authoritative sources to have played a part in the person's behavior
- use appropriate and respectful language when talking about people with a mental illness. Say "a person with schizophrenia" rather than "a schizophrenic."

The new guidelines build on the previous guidelines for media reporting around mental health issues, introduced by Mindframe in 2002. The new guidelines extend the guidance specifically to cover reporting of mental illness and crime.

Since the launch of the original guidelines, Mindframe has implemented a [comprehensive strategy to promote the guidelines](link), including organizing [professional development sessions with media](link), and supporting those who may work with media as experts or sources, such as [mental health](link) workers, police, court officials, and people with lived experience of mental illness.

We have also provided [training for journalism and public relations students](link), and worked with media peak bodies to integrate the guidelines into [media codes of practice and editorial policies](link). The [SANE StigmaWatch](link) program monitors and responds to reports of inaccurate or inappropriate stigmatizing media portrayals.

How does the way media talk about mental illness impact others?

Unsafe and stigmatizing language can affect the way people who disclose their experience of mental illness are treated by others in the community. They can be denied job opportunities, find it hard to maintain safe and secure housing, and experience social exclusion. Families and friends supporting a loved one may find it difficult to seek support for fear of being treated differently.

Even more worryingly, negative media portrayals of mental illness can lead to self-stigma, in which an individual living with mental illness internalizes the attitudes of others. It can mean people choose not to seek help, withdrawing from their social networks for fear of being stigmatized or discriminated against. This can lead to social isolation, distress and even an exacerbation of symptoms.

Taking action to reduce stigma and discrimination towards people affected by severe mental illness is more important than ever during the COVID-19 pandemic. Research overseas has shown during times of economic recession, stigma and discrimination towards people affected by severe mental illness increases, particularly with respect to employment. The media has a vital role to play in ensuring we remain a cohesive and empathetic society during these troubled times.

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