

# 'It's actually a human person, undergoing real emotions': How podcasts can impact attitudes around mental health

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[Millions of people](#) listen to podcasts each year. Podcast content is diverse, with popular genres including true crime, comedy, and society

and culture.

In our research, we're specifically interested in podcasts that talk about [mental health](#).

People listen to mental health-themed podcasts [for many reasons](#): to understand mental health issues better, to learn self-help strategies to support their mental health, and for inspiration or motivation.

Podcasts can also bring attention to issues faced by marginalized communities.

People living with mental health issues [regularly face stigma and discrimination](#), such as being unfairly treated in workplaces and healthcare settings.

Podcasts have the potential to raise awareness about unfair treatment and challenge myths. There are certain features of podcasts which can potentially impact listeners' knowledge and attitudes around mental health.

In our [newly published research](#), we have explored how podcasts about mental health can be designed in a way that reduces stigma and discrimination in the community.

## **Powerful storytelling**

Podcasts can be "edutainment": a great way to draw listeners' attention to important topics and explore complex issues.

Conversational language, expert interviews, compellingly crafted stories and clever use of sound and music can help make these topics dynamic and interesting.

Podcast listening is intimate. People often listen to podcasts alone via headphones, making the experience immersive. Many [podcast](#) listeners feel very connected to podcast hosts and guests. They also connect with other listeners through online communities.

Podcasters can use these features to connect with listeners around complex topics like mental health. As a result, listeners may absorb and trust messages received through the podcast.

[Researchers argue](#) engaging with personal stories can help people experience empathy—like they are stepping into the shoes of someone else. They can be taken on an emotional journey, which can help them see things differently.

TV host and media personality Osher Günsberg speaks candidly with Todd Sampson about mental illness on Günsberg's podcast Better Than Yesterday. [Across a two-part episode](#) Günsberg dives into his experiences with alcohol use, intense anxiety, psychosis and post-traumatic stress.

The episodes challenge listeners' perceptions about what it means to be unwell, demonstrating how a person can seem to be thriving on the outside, while struggling on the inside. Günsberg also talks openly about how stigma prevented him from accessing therapy and medication when he first needed it.

It's an emotional episode. Both Günsberg and Sampson shed tears by the end—and some listeners probably did, too.

## **Voices that matter**

Contact with people living with mental health issues is an [effective way](#) to reduce stigma. This contact does not have to be face-to-face to be

effective.

Many popular podcasts center around hearing directly from people with lived experience. In the podcast [Mental Illness Happy Hour](#), host Paul Gilmartin explores [mental illness](#), trauma, and addiction through real stories—both his own, and his guests' experiences.

Some podcasters also share lived experience on podcasts which are not specific to mental health.

Author and activist Aubrey Gordon regularly speaks about her experience with eating disorders while co-hosting the podcast [Maintenance Phase](#), which debunks health fads and wellness scams. Her personal disclosures make the episodes even more engaging, and illustrate the real-life impact of these fads and scams.

## **Personal stories**

As part of our research, we have been talking with people who have lived experience of complex mental health issues, media professionals, healthcare professionals and workplace mental health champions.

We looked at the features of podcasts they felt could effectively combat stigma.

Our participants felt real stories from people with lived experience, shared via podcast episodes, are impactful:

"This is mental health, and it's stigma, but at the root of it, it's stories, it's [personal stories](#). It's lived experience and that's what people are resonating with. And that's what connects [with listeners]. And it's kind of from that, the behaviors, the awareness, the behavior change kind of gets a jumping off."

Our participants also told us they appreciated episodes that explicitly talked about stigma and discrimination, rather than just talking about lived experience generally.

"It would be nice to have a podcast that is actually going to deep dive into some of the real issues [...] and why people struggle."

Though stories can be powerful on their own, participants also felt podcasts could also highlight the very real impacts of marginalization and inform listeners how they can make positive change. As one participant told us:

"[With] real stories, they can relate to it more, to the [human face](#) to it [...] it's not just an abstract thing that they see like a statistic or TV or like, things that they cannot really see [...] it's actually a human person, undergoing real emotions."

It makes sense many mental health organizations and [advocacy groups](#) are releasing podcasts—they are popular, accessible, engaging, and a novel way to share real stories. We suspect podcasts will continue to be used in the fight against stigma and discrimination.

Our next steps are to release our own mental [health](#) podcast which we hope will impact listeners' attitudes in a positive way. We have taken on the advice from those we interviewed, and we are currently exploring the impact of listening to this podcast on listeners' attitudes and behaviors towards complex [mental health issues](#). We plan to release it to the public later in 2023.

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