



Media guidelines:

# **Mental health on screen**



# Mental health on screen

Mental health affects us all. In any one year, 1 in 4 of us will experience a mental health problem.

In these guidelines we will explore how mental health is portrayed in soaps, dramas and documentaries. We'll consider how these storylines can impact our understanding of mental health and look at ways to improve on screen depictions.

It's never been more important to create authentic and accurate storylines about mental health.

These guidelines will help you do just that.

## If you need support, contact our Media Advisory Service

Mind's Media Advisory Service provides end-to-end advice for producers, researchers and writers on how to dramatised mental health. We can advise on initial concepts, story outlines, and feedback on scripts. We also involve people with lived-experience to share their journey with story makers.

To work with us contact: [scriptadvice@mind.org.uk](mailto:scriptadvice@mind.org.uk). We're here to help.

## We offer insight into:

- The emotional and social experience of living with a mental health problem
- Diagnosis and treatment
- The journey through the mental health care system
- Recovery
- Suicide and self-harm
- Language and avoiding stigma or stereotypes

# Why are mental health storylines important?

When storylines are done well, they can be powerful in influencing us to seek help or help others.

## Well informed storylines can:

- Be more relatable and therefore more powerful, enhancing the drama of the story
- Positively influence individual behaviours and actions
- Raise awareness and challenge outdated attitudes and myths
- Give insight into mental health problems and signpost support available



## Our research found, for adults:

**1 in 4**

of those who had seen a mental health storyline realised they had a mental health problem or had experienced one in the past.

**1 in 5**

felt encouraged to seek help from a medical professional for their mental health, after seeing storylines involving characters experiencing a mental health problem.

## For young people (aged 18-24) the influence of mental health stories is even more powerful:

**1 in 5**

said that after seeing a mental health storyline in a soap or drama, it led them to speak about their own mental health on social media.

**2 in 5**

said that after seeing a mental health storyline in a soap or drama, viewers felt prompted to look for information and support online.

# Mind's top tips

1

## Remain true to character:

Make sure a character who's struggling with their mental health doesn't 'change' when they are unwell. One common mistake we see when a character is in crisis, is that they become an 'evil' version of themselves. Mental health problems make it harder to behave as you normally would, but they don't change who you are. Nor do the symptoms of any diagnosis crowd out your underlying personality, values and approach to life.

2

## Show consistent symptoms over time:

Avoid sporadic depictions of lots of different symptoms over a short period of time. This is unrealistic and doesn't allow audiences to connect with the character. So, if your character has bipolar disorder, show them experiencing the most common symptoms like mania and depression more often and over time. By doing this, you're improving the audience's understanding and helping to make a diagnosis less 'scary' or unknown. It also helps those with similar experiences to understand their own mental health.

3

## Avoid myths and stereotypes around violence:

Having a character with a mental health problem attack or mistreat others, or act dangerously, perpetuates harmful and inaccurate stereotypes. This may be because of outdated depictions on TV or film, or from overly sensational newspaper headlines that often link mental health to crime and violence. The fact is that people with mental health problems are far more likely to be victims of crime – or to harm themselves – than to harm someone else. The evidence also clearly shows that factors like drug and alcohol misuse are much more likely to play a part in violence than mental health.

4

## Depicting crisis:

This is where we see the most tired and inaccurate depictions of mental health. Often a character in crisis will be seen experiencing a range of symptoms all at once – even symptoms from a completely different diagnosis. Psychosis is often portrayed, but with little or no understanding of when or how this would happen. Remember our media advisory service is here to help with how to accurately depict crisis on screen.



Being a well-rounded character does not mean they have to be 'perfect' and never do anything wrong. A great example of this is Channel 4's 'Pure O' whose main character Marnie (pictured) is consistently a 'mess' and makes poor relationship decisions and lies. But she is also funny, caring, and charming. When a character's mental health experience is more nuanced it helps the audience to understand how their mental health impacts them on a daily basis and empathise with the character.

# 5

## **Create well-rounded characters:**

When characters are likeable and experience a mental health problem on screen, audiences are more likely to root for them, relate to their experience, and sympathise. If a well-rounded character develops a mental health problem this can help depict a more authentic and responsible portrayal of someone's mental health.

# 6

## **Road to recovery:**

Too often mental health is portrayed as being a hopeless affliction where treatment is pointless and the outlook is bleak. Those of us with mental health problems can and do lead rich and rewarding lives with the right support. Depicting a character's recovery can be incredibly powerful, and at times inspiring. If a character seeks help for themselves, it will encourage us to do the same in real life. Similarly, when we see a character receive support from their doctor or the NHS, we better understand the help available, and how to access it. These factors can drastically change how a person lives with their mental health diagnosis. Some of the most powerful stories around mental health are about how we can rebuild our lives and take control after traumatic events.

## 7 Mental health doesn't have to define characters

We want to see more authentic and responsible fictional representations of mental health. But it's important to remember that someone's mental health doesn't need to be the lead storyline, climax, or reason for a story arc. Someone's mental health doesn't always need to define them. Instead it can be nuanced and threaded through an episode or programme authentically. Allowing someone's mental health to bear little narrative significance helps normalise mental health, mental health diagnoses and treatments.



Darren Osbourne from Hollyoaks (centre). The character was shown experiencing depression and had considered suicide in a 2019 storyline from the Channel 4 soap opera.



“If that storyline hadn't happened, I would not be here. I'd be dead. That's the reality of it. You have saved my life.”

**John Junior, Mind Media Volunteer** reflecting on a Hollyoaks storyline around depression and suicide. At the time they were watching, John planned to take their own life. The storyline persuaded John to stop and seek help.

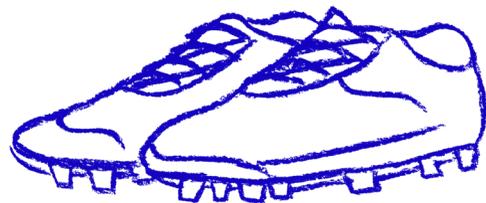
# In practice

Let's look at an example of how to depict a character's mental health problem with both accuracy and impact on screen.

Sarwan is a sociable, articulate and caring person who loves football. He has also had a diagnosis of bipolar for ten years. Sarwan has been managing his mental health well with support from friends and family.

Recent life stresses such as losing his job and a relationship breakdown have contributed to the pressure he is now feeling. As a result, Sarwan is struggling with sleep, not eating properly, and losing interest in his usual hobbies. This is having an impact on the way he interacts with those around him and therefore his relationships.

The temptation for scriptwriters might be to rush to a crisis point – where Sarwan is depicted as suddenly being in distress, including being a risk to others. For example, he might be depicted as being violent towards his boss who has just made him redundant. This is unrealistic and above all, is not true to Sarwan's character. As we know - he is caring, gentle and well supported by loved ones.





If for dramatic reasons a crisis point must be reached, a better approach would be to take the time to show Sarwan's journey to crisis and then the potential for recovery afterwards. Maybe during a depressive episode, Sarwan stops playing football and rejects offers of support from friends as he begins to feel increasingly down. Why not give a sense of the impending climax through showing him experiencing muddled thoughts or disordered language. He may rely on destructive coping strategies such as excessive drinking (if he is a drinker) or irresponsible spending.

Many of us manage our mental health without somehow having to reach an inevitable crisis. This however is often what we see on screen, which can reinforce tropes around those with mental health problems being hopeless or beyond repair.

Remember what makes Sarwan who he is, is exactly what will shape how he experiences any crisis point.

We don't become different people because we have a mental health problem. We are who we are, always. That's as true of Sarwan, as it is you or me. We know depicting a mental health crisis is a key moment in any story arc. That's why we are here to help support so that any depiction is made more powerful by being authentic and true to character.

# If you need support, contact our Media Advisory Service

We help producers, researchers and writers of soaps and dramas to create accurate and sensitive on screen depictions of mental health. If you'd like support with a soap, drama or documentary contact [scriptadvice@mind.org.uk](mailto:scriptadvice@mind.org.uk).

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