Making a drama out of a crisis
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In this report Time to Change explores how mental health problems are being portrayed in today’s TV dramas. From big budget box sets to homegrown soaps, mental health is being covered more frequently on the small screen. What impact are these storylines having on the viewing public, the media industry and our attitudes towards mental health problems?

Television soaps and dramas have the ability to both entertain and inform. Storylines about mental health problems can have a tremendous impact on raising public awareness. For viewers who don’t have first-hand experience, it can be their first and only insight into mental illness. The depiction can inform viewers about what it is like to be diagnosed with a particular illness, the symptoms, treatment options and road to recovery.

Over the years portrayals of mental health problems have not always been fair and accurate. Stereotypes such as the ‘violent lunatic’ or ‘mad genius’ can mislead viewers and reinforce myths about mental health problems.

Time to Change worked with Glasgow Media Group to review three months of TV drama to identify themes in the way that mental health problems are being portrayed. Building on similar research undertaken in 2010, they found encouraging signs that mental health depictions have become more positive. They found that more storylines have attempted to ‘normalise’ mental health problems and fewer characters with mental health problems are portrayed as violent. They also observed the growth of a relatively new type of narrative, focusing on the damaging stigma a character with a mental health problem faces, and noted some alternative stereotypes about tragic victims and medication.

This report also includes feedback from the general public about their response to mental health storylines and the actions that they have been prompted to take as a result. Time to Change supporters with personal experience of mental health problems give their views on how mental health plotlines affect the way they are treated by others. Leading writers, actors and producers also share their thoughts about the challenges of bringing mental health problems to life on screen.

Stephanie Waring who plays the character Cindy Cunningham who is diagnosed with bipolar disorder in Hollyoaks said:

Mental health can be difficult to diagnose and hard to recover from, which is why support is so essential and why we have to stop the stigma surrounding mental health problems, because being able to talk about it is the first step.

STATISTICS

Our survey asked viewers who recall seeing storylines about mental health problems in the last year how they felt characters were depicted:

- 77% said characters often experience discrimination due to their mental health.
- 57% said characters are often likeable.
- 45% said characters often pose a risk to others.
- 39% said characters are often violent.

1 Glasgow Media Group studied soaps, dramas and sitcoms broadcast in the UK from January 1st to March 31st 2014, between 4-11pm, on BBC One, BBC Two, BBC Three, BBC Four, ITV, Channel 4 and Channel 5. Some programmes from other channels were included if they had attracted attention or engendered public debate.

2 SHIFT, the Department of Health programme to tackle the stigma and discrimination associated with mental illness, worked with Glasgow Media Group to study trends about mental health in drama in 2010.

3 Populus interviewed a random sample of 2,004 GB adults aged 18+ from its online panel between 24-26 October 2014. Surveys were conducted across the country and the results have been weighted to the profile of all adults. Populus is a founder member of the British Polling Council and abides by its rules. Further information at www.populus.co.uk.

4 872 supporters of Time to Change responded to a survey in October 2014 questioning their views on the portrayal of mental health problems in TV soaps and dramas.
Stigma

The stigma surrounding mental health problems has become a major theme in storylines. Reactions from a character’s friends, family and employers can sometimes be negative, reflecting the discrimination real people face, and the need to challenge stereotypes in everyday life.

For example, an episode of the BBC One legal drama Silk showed a defence lawyer making some very pointed comments about stigmatising language: “Detective Chief Inspector Fitzpatrick chooses to call the defendant, and I quote, ‘a psycho’. I am going to give him the contact details of one or two mental charities who would like to have a word with him about this kind of stigmatising.”

Writer and creator of Silk Peter Moffat said: “Drama can make a huge difference in the struggle to get people thinking about mental health properly and without prejudice. It doesn’t need to be polemical or campaigning, it only needs to be truthful. Homeland has set the standard for complex and honest writing about mental health and we all need to follow its lead. In a television era when too many documentaries are essentially freak shows written, shot and edited to ask an audience to laugh at people with mental health issues, writers of television drama have a special responsibility to work against stereo-typing and to create characters who are complex and engaging. Let’s do it.”

Producers at BBC medical drama Holby City took the decision to explore stigma in detail after learning that many doctors experience alcohol, substance misuse and mental health problems but do not seek help due to fears about confidentiality and concerns they will be perceived as weak.

Kate Hall, senior story producer of Holby City said: “In an NHS report questioning 2,500 doctors in Birmingham, 87% said they would self-medicate or seek informal advice. I felt that we could blow this subject open through our character, Zosia – an A-type young, female doctor, whose father is an eminent neurosurgeon, with little time for psychiatry. This allowed us to explore the issue of stigma, from both a professional and a familial point of view.”

Viewers are alert to this new trend too. Over three-quarters (77%) of respondents to our public opinion survey who recalled seeing a character with mental health problems in a soap or drama said that characters often experience discrimination due to their mental health.

One Time to Change supporter said: “I believe that the storyline of Aaron in Emmerdale when he was self-harming was a fantastic storyline that made people see that absolutely anyone can be affected by mental health issues and that there is still stigma attached to mental health as portrayed by the fact he kept silent about the fact he was cutting himself.”

Donna Francheschild, who wrote the BBC series Takin’ over the Asylum about a hospital radio station in a psychiatric hospital said: “Scriptwriters have realised that in order to be truthful and to write good characters, people with mental health problems need to be three-dimensional. And as soon as they become three-dimensional, you have to let go of the stigma.”

A Time to Change supporter said: I think Stacey in the EastEnders storyline was really well written and acted out. She portrayed bipolar very well.

STATISTICS

Among those surveyed about seeing storylines about mental health problems:

- 54% said that it helped to improve their understanding of mental health problems.
- 48% said it helped to change their opinion about the kind of people who can develop these problems.
- 31% said it actively inspired them to start a conversation about the storyline with friends, family or colleagues.

Writer and actor Stephen Fry said: The media, in all its glorious incarnations, has enormous power to influence people’s perceptions of mental health, not least in being able to challenge the stigma that sadly still surrounds it.
False accusations

Another emerging theme sees characters falsely accused of crimes due to their mental health problems, and the viewer rooting for them as a result. An example of this was found in Orange Is the New Black, the US prison drama on Netflix.

The character Vee attacks another inmate and then pins the blame on a prisoner known as ‘Crazy Eyes’ who hears voices. Vee had previously befriended and manipulated Crazy Eyes, and knew that Crazy Eyes would automatically be a suspect. In the end, Vee’s other supporters turned against her, defended Crazy Eyes and eventually exonerated her.

A Time to Change supporter recalls American drama Homeland: “I think Carrie in Homeland is pretty good. It’s sensationalised, of course, but people try to discredit her because she has bipolar disorder, but actually she’s very shrewd even when manic.”

Violence

Research by Glasgow Media Group in 2010 found that many TV characters with mental health problems were portrayed as violent. Their latest study has started to see a move away from the simplistic ‘mad and bad’ stereotype. This is a welcome development, as it helps to challenge the commonly held assumption that there is a link between mental ill health and violence.

However, a few examples of the violent stereotype could still be found in 2014. The character Moriarty in BBC One’s Sherlock is shown being held in a padded cell, wearing a straitjacket. Although Moriarty’s evil villainy is based on a character from another era, this series was set in the present day and such outdated images about mental health can damage and misinform.

In Australian soap Home & Away, one plot line involved a female teacher who set fire to her school and planted a bomb attempting to murder another character, killing someone else by mistake. There is no clear diagnosis of a mental illness but the character is labelled as ‘crazy’ and that ‘she’s a psycho’. These non-specific but insinuated examples that use derogatory mental health language imply that someone with a mental health problem should be feared and mistrusted.

Viewers are also aware of the continuing link between characters with mental health problems and violence. 45% of people who could recall a mental health storyline said characters often pose a risk to others and 39% felt that they were often depicted as violent.

Tragic victims

Portraying people as victims to be pitied can also contribute to unhelpful stereotypes. 68% of people who had seen mental health storylines said that characters were shown as victims.

Glasgow Media Group observed how there can be different perspectives within one storyline about a mental health problem and that at times this involves depicting people as tragic. For example, Ian Beale’s depression in EastEnders was, on the whole, positively and sensitively handled, but scenes that showed him crying and hugging himself on the kitchen floor presented a common stereotypical image of a ‘breakdown’.

One Time to Change supporter said:
There’s still a massive oversimplification of the issues and behaviours associated with mental health.

A respondent to our Time to Change survey said:
It makes me angry when bipolar disorder is used as an ‘explain all’ for violence, e.g. murder and arson.
Medication myths

When characters ‘come off their meds’, this is routinely given as an explanation for troublesome or drastic behaviour soon afterwards. Often the timeframe in the programme does not accurately reflect how long it usually takes for medication to have an effect – or for the effects of withdrawal to manifest themselves, if there are any. More importantly, it contributes to the idea that medication is the only treatment that can ‘control’ people with mental health problems.

ITV’s Law and Order: UK featured a young man who had come off his medication, and because of this was made a murder suspect when his psychiatrist was found dead.

Balanced storylines regarding medication were found in an episode of Home & Away which showed a doctor giving the following advice: “Have you given any more thought about how you’re going to control your bipolar? As the doctor I recommend a course of medication to help stabilise your mood. There are a number of avenues of psychotherapy that can help, but these usually work in addition to medication. You need a treatment plan, it’s dangerous to ignore your condition. Have a think about your choices.”

Kate Hall, senior story producer of Holby City said:

“We wanted to realistically pace a storyline in which a young woman, recently bereaved and in the first, high-pressure year as a trainee surgeon, starts to evidence symptoms of bipolar disorder, and who fears and rejects this diagnosis initially, but comes to accept and deal with the issue.”

In EastEnders, the following dialogue between characters Kat and Max focuses heavily on Stacey’s use of medication.

Kat: They were trying for a baby, that’s why she’s come off her meds...
Max: What’s she doing back here?
Alfie: The usual you know, she is hiding out, spinning out for a fella, come off her meds...
Max: So what, has she come off her meds? They will be lynching her if they find her here.
Kat: Go away Max...
Max (to Stacey): You need to get back on your meds, and get off the square.
Positive portrayals

An encouraging number of storylines about mental health problems made attempts to normalise them, and present them as one of a number of challenges that people face in their everyday lives. These storylines explore how characters manage their illnesses, and show them living productive and valued lives.

A good example of such a character is Rae Earl from the E4 comedy drama My Mad Fat Diary. Her journey of recovery from her mental health problems and body image issues inspired Time to Change supporters to comment: “She fell in love, and fell out with people, like anyone else” and that she was “a completely normal teenager... with mental health issues”.

48% of respondents who had seen a storyline in a soap or drama involving a character with a mental health problem said it changed their opinion about the kind of people who can develop mental health problems. 57% said that characters with mental health problems are likeable.

Stuart Blackburn, producer of Coronation Street said: “A particular challenge we faced with Steve and his depression is the audience’s fear that the Steve they loved is gone for good. What viewers love about him primarily is the comedy - he’s affable, hapless Steve, the bloke next door. But I’ve told the writers his DNA hasn’t changed. His head might be taking a battering at the moment, but he still has the same wit, still has good days and bad days. And you can’t rush the story. We’ve got to find a way to tell the truth about this, warts and all, AND entertain the audience.”

Rebecca Front, who starred in The Thick of It said: “As an actress, if the character has any kind of health problem - mental or physical - you have to research it thoroughly. It’s incredibly important to get it right, and a bit insulting to people who have that condition if you don’t. I think there are more open discussions in life as well as in drama about the widespread nature of mental health issues, and the fact that you can be a fully functioning member of society while still dealing with a problem within yourself.”

Bryan Kirkwood, Executive Producer of Hollyoaks said:

“We felt it was a really important message for Cindy’s character to suffer from mental health problems because she is someone who ‘has it all’. She is a popular, vivacious character, a loving mum with a supportive family and we wanted to show that mental health issues can affect anyone at any time without warning.”

STATISTICS

- 25% of those surveyed who had personally experienced a mental health problem were encouraged to seek professional help after seeing a character with similar issues.
- 25% of those surveyed who know someone with a mental health problem felt prompted to contact a loved one, friend or colleague who has a mental health problem after seeing a storyline on the issue on TV.
- 12% of those surveyed who have experienced a mental health problem or know someone who has were prompted to call a helpline following the programme. This behaviour was much more pronounced among men (20%) than women (8%).

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Impact on the public

Soaps and dramas are having an important impact on wider public debate about mental health problems. Over half (54%) of respondents who recall seeing a character with mental health problems on TV say that this helped to improve their understanding of such problems, and nearly a third (31%) say that it actively inspired them to start a conversation about the storyline with friends, family or colleagues.

Dual-screen behaviour is also becoming more common with viewers actively engaged in the soap or drama by live tweeting or posting on Facebook throughout the programme. 15% of respondents had talked about a mental health storyline on social media. Talking about mental health plotlines online provides an opportunity for people to speak about how the issues raised relate to their own lives and to share this with a much wider community.

A quarter of respondents who have a loved one, friend or colleague with a mental health problem felt prompted to contact that person after seeing a mental health storyline on TV. Interestingly, men appear more persuaded to do this than women; 35% vs 20%.

Among all those respondents who have personally experienced a mental health problem, a quarter said that seeing a character with similar issues encouraged them to seek professional help or support for their own mental health (e.g. from a GP, psychiatrist or counsellor).

The Steve McDonald storyline has been welcomed by viewers who support Time to Change, with one person commenting: “I hope it encourages more men to talk about their feelings, and I also like how he thought for weeks it was just the blues, and his doctor diagnosed depression. I hope it encourages people who do feel low to talk about how they feel. And makes people who don’t understand depression more aware of what depression can do to a person.”

Just over one in ten (12%) respondents with mental health problems themselves, or who have friends or family experiencing these problems, were prompted to call a helpline following the programme. This behaviour was also more pronounced among men (20%) than women (8%).

Bryan Kirkwood, Executive Producer of Hollyoaks said: “At Hollyoaks we are very aware that mental health problems will have affected a lot of our audience in some way and when we cover stories like Jason’s Body Dysmorphia or Blessing’s self-harm it is about making the audience feel that they are not alone, that they have a friend. For our younger skewed audience if they are struggling to confide in their peers we can help to guide them in that direction through our online support that runs alongside the issue storylines that Hollyoaks has made central to the show.”

Stuart Blackburn, producer of Coronation Street: You hope a show like Corrie can genuinely make a difference to tens if not hundreds of thousands of people, who’ll be watching with different eyes or thinking ‘Maybe I should go to the doctor’.
Conclusions

• There are encouraging signs that we are moving away from outdated ‘mad and bad’ stereotypes in TV drama and moving towards more authentic, sympathetic and complex characters.

• New storylines that address stigma and false accusations show that TV writers are acutely aware of social debates about mental health prejudice and discrimination and are keen to reflect people’s real experiences.

• There are still some overly simplistic portrayals of mental health problems and misinformation about medication.

• Viewers take direct action as a result of watching drama about mental health, from discussing storylines with friends and family to seeking medical help.

A Time to Change supporter said:

If it’s a realistic drama I feel identified and better with myself to keep fighting the problem. If it’s ridiculous I feel angry and speak about it with others to help them understand that’s not close to reality.

Time to Change Media Advisory Service

Time to Change is England’s most ambitious programme to end the discrimination faced by people with mental health problems. It is led by the mental health charities Mind and Rethink Mental Illness. Through our free Media Advisory Service we offer support to drama researchers, writers and producers to help achieve realistic and sensitive portrayals through their work.

What we can offer:

• Consultation and advice including fact-checking and research.
• Background information about symptoms, treatments and tips for fictional portrayals.
• A script-checking service for drama and soaps.
• Advice on tone and language.
• Contact with media volunteers to advise on scripts or provide consultation for programme-makers.

www.time-to-change.org.uk/media-advice