Media Guidelines

Drama
About Time to Change

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, and funded by the Department of Health and Comic Relief.

We work with the media to encourage realistic and sensitive portrayals of people with mental health problems.

Why read these guidelines?

Mental illness will affect one in four of us any one year – with such a high proportion of your audience being affected by the issues, it’s worth taking the time to get it right.

When you devise a mental health related character or storyline, it doesn’t have to be dull and worthy – but it doesn’t have to be explosive either.

If it’s true-to-life, featuring characters with mental health problems in dramas and soaps can help audiences to recognise when someone is unwell, and when to seek help.

However getting it wrong can have a negative effect and may also reinforce stereotypes of people with mental health problems as being ‘mad, bad and dangerous to know’. It also risks annoying or alienating your audience.

This leaflet offers a step-by-step guide to creating realistic and effective mental health storylines in soaps and drama.
Step 1
Creating realistic characters

Here are our top tips for writing realistically for characters with mental health problems:

• **Authenticity is key:** make sure your character’s situation and experience is authentic by researching symptoms, treatment options and relevant services available.

• **Think about body language:** non-verbal communication is just important as a character’s speech.

• **Show the ups and downs:** like most people, characters with mental health problems will experience good and bad days, depending on what is going on around them.

• **Consistency is important:** symptoms, behaviour and emotions should not vary wildly between scenes or from day-to-day.

• **Medication is not a miracle cure!** Your character could begin to recover through peer support, alternative therapies or talking therapies.

• **They’re still the same person:** Just because your character has a mental health problem, it does not necessarily mean their personality will change completely. It’s better to represent them as the same person they’ve always been, who just happens to be ill.

• **Life goes on:** a character is more than their mental health problem. People have many other roles in life that do not just stop when they get ill.

• **It’s not always obvious:** people often try to hide it when they have common conditions such as depression or anxiety. Subtle indications such as loss of appetite, sleeping problems or increased irritability can provide the audience with clues.
Step 2
Creating dramatic storylines

Here are some of the key things you may want to think about - and things to avoid - when you’re creating a storyline around your character’s mental health problems:

• **Do your research.** Speak to as many people who have experienced mental health problems as possible to make a storyline plausible and accurate.

• **Listen to people’s stories.** Real life experiences can inspire fictional portrayals.

• **Give the storyline enough time to develop.** Symptoms of mental health problems often manifest over a period of time and build in intensity, rather than develop and explode overnight.

• **Recovery can also be a long process.** Generally people don’t start feeling better the moment they see a doctor or start taking medication.

• **Think about how other characters react.** Stigma and discrimination can be as bad as the mental health problem itself for many people.

• **Plan your dramatic climax carefully.** Most people with mental health problems are not violent so it is unrealistic for a storyline to always end in violence or suicide.

• **Be realistic.** Don’t resort to ‘sectioning’ a character as the only option in a crisis. This is unrealistic as only a small fraction of people with mental health problems will be sectioned - most will be treated in primary care. There are also alternative treatments that are just as interesting.

• **Humour can be helpful.** Programmes do not need to be entirely serious - you can address mental health issues with humour and warmth.

• **Mental illness doesn’t make people bad.** Don’t ‘use’ a mental illness just to try and explain bad or strange behaviour.
Final tips

Remember you can help improve public understanding and attitudes towards mental illness by:

• Providing accurate and sensitive portrayals of characters with mental health problems.

• Encouraging people in distress to seek help, for instance by providing helpline numbers.

• Consulting people who have experienced mental health problems, making your storyline more authentic.

• Remembering that anyone can get a mental health problem. They are not ‘someone else’ – it could be you, a friend, a relative or a colleague.

• Taking care over how you portray suicide or self harm. Studies say that this can prevent copycat suicides and save lives.

• Breaking the link between violence and mental health by not showing characters becoming dangerous because of their mental health problem.
What can we do for you?

We can offer a variety of support, from advice over the correct use of language, to in-depth consultation over characters and scripts. We offer a free service and are here to help.

• We can provide some background information about what the common symptoms of a mental health problem may be and how they may appear on screen.

• We provide a script checking service to make sure your portrayal is realistic and accurate. This can include advice on symptoms, treatment and how your character interacts with others.

• We can provide ideas on story arcs, character development or even brainstorm ideas around storylines. It’s never too early to get in touch!

• We can also put you in touch with media volunteers who can provide unique emotional insight into your character and storyline. We will try to find someone of a similar age, location or background to your character.

• We have a website with resources for programme makers, including a film that offers some top insider tips for anyone working on dramatic storylines involving mental health.

Contact us to find out more

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