

Media Creates Stigma About Severe Mental Illness

Media portrayals linking mental illness to violent crime creates stigma about people with severe mental illness, according to Melbourne University researcher Anna Ross.

“There really needs to be a big cultural change amongst newsrooms in how we report on mental illness,” said Ms Ross, who works for the Mental Health Centre at the University of Melbourne.

Ms Ross said there is an overrepresentation of violent incidents caused by mental illness in the news media.

Four to six per cent of violent incidents that occur are caused by mental illness, according to Ms Ross.

“It’s only a very small percentage of violent crimes we see that are actually attributable to mental health,” said Ms Ross.

Ms Ross developed new Mindframe guidelines to help journalists and the news media report about mental illness in a more “accurate, balanced and informed way”.

“The guidelines are really the first stepping stone in overhauling how we report on such incidents,” said Ms Ross.

Mindframe is a national program funded by the Australian Government to encourage safe media reporting about suicide, mental illness, alcohol and other drugs.

Psychiatric nurse Eloise Golby said she is frustrated by inaccurate portrayals of mental illness in the news media and the stigma it creates.

“Is anything the media shows accurate? Absolutely not,” said Ms Golby, who works at Portland District Hospital.

The media focus on periodic anxiety and depression and do not discuss chronic mental illnesses openly, according to Ms Golby.

Ms Golby said journalists and media professionals portray chronic mental illnesses as “scary and aggressive”.

Mounting pressure on journalists to produce articles under strict timeframes can lead to speculation and inaccurate portrayals, according to Ms Ross.

Ms Ross said, "People want to know why, and I think that is very much a part of human nature."

"There is pressure on journalists and other media professionals to have those answers."

Ms Ross encouraged journalists to avoid speculation and wait for confirmation from an authoritative source before claiming mental illness was the cause of violent behaviour.

Taking drugs, abusing alcohol and having a history of violence or aggression are examples of factors that are more likely to cause violent behaviour, according to Ms Ross.

"Hold back from saying it was mental illness. Because a lot of the time it isn't," said Ms Ross.

When people suffering from mental illness become unwell or are under the influence of alcohol and other drugs, it can sometimes affect their behaviour violently, according to Ms Golby.

"It frustrates me that that people think mental illness means violence," said Ms Golby.

Ms Golby suffers from Complex Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (C-PTSD), generalised anxiety and depression.

Ms Golby said she has become comfortable enough to share her journey openly, but the media and the public have made those that suffer from mental illness feel "ashamed" and "unwanted".

"People are often scared to share their recovery and journey with their loved ones and employers as they fear judgement," said Ms Golby.

Ms Golby takes anti-depressants and mood stabilisers and often receives judgmental comments about her medication.

"My medication isn't a fix. It doesn't solve my problems. It's not what keeps me alive. It keeps me at somewhat of a baseline where I feel safe," said Ms Golby.

Education in all areas, not just the news media, will help to improve community understanding about people with mental illness, according to Ms Golby.

“We need to start in our own home, and educate those around us,” said Ms Golby.

Ms Golby said opening conversations about chronic mental illness at schools, workplaces, churches, sports clubs and other community organisations will help to ease stigma about mental illness.

“As an advocate and someone on my own journey, I will shout from the rooftops to advocate for my patients and people like me,” said Ms Golby.

The introduction of new Mindframe guidelines will encourage a better community understanding about mental illness through more accurate portrayals of mental illness, according to Ms Ross.

“We are hoping that this will help to increase community understanding of mental illness and help to give a better understanding of factors that influence violent behaviour, rather than the public potentially being left with an inaccurate understanding that mental illness causes violence,” said Ms Ross.

If you or anyone you know needs help, contact:

Lifeline on 13 11 14

Headspace on 1800 650 890

Beyond Blue on 1300 22 4636

SANE Australia 1800 187 263

Alcohol and Drug Support Line on 08 9442 5000

Contacts:

Anna Ross

Email: anross@unimelb.com.au

Eloise Golby

Mobile: 0429 908 758