

IPSO Editors' Code Committee announces consultation

Submission by Mind, Rethink Mental Illness and Time to Change

Mental health charities [Mind](#) and [Rethink Mental Illness](#) and our joint anti stigma campaign [Time to Change](#) are pleased to have the opportunity to respond to this consultation.

Our many supporters frequently draw our attention to what they perceive to be negative, damaging and stigmatising newspaper coverage. The voice of people with mental health problems is one that sadly is all too often missing from the press, and we hope that our submission will address some of the main issues concerning the large group of people we represent.

Mind and Rethink Mental Illness are both registered charities.

About us

Mind believes no one should have to face a mental health problem alone. We listen, give support and advice, and push for a better deal for everyone experiencing a mental health problem. We provide advice and support to empower anyone experiencing a mental health problem, and campaign to improve services, raise awareness and promote understanding.

Rethink Mental Illness is a charity that believes a better life is possible for millions of people affected by mental illness. For 40 years we have brought people together to support each other. We run services and support groups that change people's lives and challenge attitudes about mental illness. We directly support almost 60,000 people every year across England to get through crises, to live independently and to realise they are not alone. We give information and advice to 500,000 more and we change policy for millions.

Mind and Rethink Mental Illness also jointly run Time to Change, England's most ambitious programme to change the way the public thinks and acts about mental health problems. The programme is funded by the Department of Health and Comic Relief.

A key part of our remit is to work with the media to improve standards of reporting and representations of mental health issues.

Context

One in four people will experience a mental health problem in any one year, and the World Health Organisation predicts that by 2020 depression will be the second most common cause of ill health.

A Time to Change survey of nearly 3,000 people with mental health problems revealed that 9 out of 10 people report facing stigma because of their mental illness.¹

A later survey revealed that 60% of people said that stigma and discrimination are either as damaging and distressing as, or more damaging than, the symptoms of their mental illness. Thirty five per cent reported that stigma had made them give up on their ambitions, hopes and dreams, and 27% said stigma had made them want to give up on life.²

¹ Time to Change 'Stigma Shout', September 2008, survey of 3,038 mental health service users and 661 carers by Rethink Mental Illness's research department

² Time to Change 'The State of Stigma', October 2011, survey of 2,770 Time to Change supporters, conducted online using SurveyMonkey via social media

A further survey of young people echoed this last statistic, with 26% of under 25 year olds with mental health problems reporting that the stigma attached to their mental illness has made them want to give up on life.³

A recent study⁴ compared coverage of mental illness in UK newspapers between 2008 and 2014. The authors selected 27 newspapers and on two randomly chosen days of each month they checked for stories relating to mental illness.

They amassed nearly 5,000 suitable articles, which they then analysed. Each article was coded as stigmatising, anti-stigmatising or neutral, where stigmatising meant pejorative language or the suggestion that people with mental illness were a danger to others, and anti-stigmatising articles promoted mental health or covered injustice or stigma.

The researchers found that while the overall number of articles increased significantly between 2008 and 2014, showing the huge increase in media appetite for stories about mental health, there was no improvement in the balance of stigmatising to anti-stigmatising coverage.

Newspapers are a key source through which people see stories and reports about mental health. However, only 59% of people think that newspapers report on the issue realistically while 43% think they do so sensitively, compared to 72% and 66% who believe the same for TV News. The figure drops to just 54% and 38% respectively for people who have, or have ever had, a mental health problem.⁵

A survey in of 515 people with mental health problems conducted by Mind in 2000 found that 50% of all respondents reported that media coverage had a negative effect on their mental health, with 24% saying that they had experienced hostility from their neighbours and local communities as a result of media reports. Almost a quarter (23%) who were employed or volunteering, or had been within the previous three years, has experienced discrimination or harassment from their employer or work colleagues, that they blamed on media coverage of mental health issues.⁶ While this survey provides old data, we believe that the findings are still highly relevant.

We frequently hear from our supporters about the effect that negative media coverage can have on an individual. One such example of this anecdotal feedback, from an anonymous Facebook fan, reveals the realities of this:

"I was hugely reluctant to see a doctor. I had been badly depressed for four years and feeling suicidal for three months before I finally saw a doctor. My reluctance must to a certain extent be due to the media representation of mental illness. You don't want to seek treatment, because you don't want to be seen as a lunatic."

³ Time to Change Children and Young people survey, conducted online using SurveyMonkey. The survey was publicised via social media between 25 May and 8 June 2012 and was completed by a total of 1,132 young people in the UK who are under the age of 25 and who have experienced a mental health problem

⁴ Rhydderch D, Krooupa A-M, Shefer G, Goulden R, Williams P, Thornicroft A, Rose D, Thornicroft G, Henderson C. (2016) [Changes in newspaper coverage of mental illness from 2008 to 2014 in England \(PDF\)](#). Acta Psychiatr Scand 2016; 134 (Suppl. 446): 45–52 DOI: 10.1111/acps.12606

⁵ Survey of 2,050 UK adults by Populus for Mind, November 2011

⁶ Mind 'The Daily Stigma', February 2000, survey of 515 mental health service users conducted by Mind

Dangerousness

Looking specifically at newspaper headlines rather than body copy, the most common message communicated in the headlines of UK newspaper coverage about mental health is a "risk of violence", while almost a third of newspaper coverage on the subject focuses on violence and homicides. This has a clear effect on readers, with 1 in 4 people saying their belief in a link between mental illness and violence stems from the media.⁷

In reality, this perceived link between dangerousness and mental illness has been grossly exaggerated. A study looking at the 5,189 homicides to have occurred in England and Wales between 1997 and 2005 revealed that approximately 1 in 10 (510) were committed by individuals known to have mental health problems at the time of the offence.⁸ It has been estimated that around 1 in 6 people will have a significant mental health problem at any one time⁹.

In contrast, there is far more evidence suggesting a link between drink and drug abuse and violent crime. According to the British Crime Survey almost half (47%) of the victims of violent crimes believed that their offender was under the influence of alcohol and about 17% believed that the offender was under the influence of drugs.¹⁰ Another survey suggested that about 30% of victims believed that the offender attacked them because they were under the influence of drugs or alcohol. In contrast, only one per cent of victims cited mental illness as the cause of the violent incident.¹¹

Someone with a mental health problem is not only far more likely to be the victim of a crime than the perpetrator, but they are more likely than people without a mental illness to be a victim of crime. One study found that more than 1 in 4 people with a severe mental illness had been a victim of crime in one year.¹² Mind's Another Assault campaign in 2007, which explored the extent to which people with mental health problems are exposed to crime, fear and victimisation, further revealed that:

- 71% of respondents had been victimised in the last two years
- 22% had been physically assaulted
- 27% had been sexually harassed and 10% sexually assaulted
- 41% were the victims of ongoing bullying
- 26% had their homes targeted
- Nearly 90% of respondents living in local authority housing had been victimized¹³

⁷ <http://www.gresham.ac.uk/lectures-and-events/press-coverage-of-mental-health-and-suicide>

⁸ Large M, et al., 2008, 'Homicide due to mental disorder in England in Wales over 50 years', *British Journal of Psychiatry*, vol. 193, pp. 130–133.

⁹ The Health & Social Care Information Centre, 2009, *Adult Psychiatric Morbidity in England, 2007, Result of a household survey*

¹⁰ Home Office, 2009, *Crime in England and Wales 2008/09, Vol. 1, Findings from the British Crime Survey and police recorded crime, Statistical Bulletin, 11/09, vol. 1.*

¹¹ Coleman K, Hird C, Povey D. 2006, 'Violent Crime Overview, Homicide and Gun Crime 2004/2005', Home Office Statistical Bulletin

¹² Teplin L, McClelland M, Abram K, Weiner D, 2005, 'Crime victimization in adults with severe mental illness', *Archives of General Psychiatry*, vol. 62, pp. 911–921.

¹³ Mind survey of 304 people with experienced of a mental health problem alongside focus groups featuring 52 different people who also had experience, conducted between Jun – Sep 2007

Anecdotal comments from our Facebook supporters gives a flavour of how this type of coverage affects people living with a mental health problem:

"Just last night on the TV the word 'psychotic' was used freely to refer to an archetypal mass murderer rather than the literal meaning. The word has become hijacked by the press, media, TV and sadly society as a whole to denote evil, rather than suffering."

"I'm sick of the media scaremongering everyone into thinking we are all monsters when a good percentage of people with mental health issues are very kind and loving human beings, who are being denied the chance to lead a fulfilling life due to ignorance and stigma."

Our recommendations

We would like to feedback specifically on the following clauses:

1. Accuracy

We believe there is a need to strengthen the language in this clause and strongly advise replacing the words 'must take care' to 'must make every effort' in order to reinforce the message that the highest standards are expected and journalists must be able to demonstrate the steps they have taken to meet them.

The casual use of stigmatising language, particularly in headlines, only perpetuates inaccurate stereotypes about people living with mental health problems, especially as this relates to the reporting of violent crime. The choice to highlight someone's mental health problem in the headline when a causal link is only speculation or indeed where their mental health is immaterial to the crime committed only fuels prejudice.

The murder of MP Jo Cox is a clear example of this with early headlines speculating that Thomas' Mair's mental health issues were behind his violence, something which was not born out in his subsequent trial.

For example:

- CLEANED HIMSELF WITH BRILLO PADS 'Mental illness' of loner arrested over murder of MP Jo Cox – The Sun, 16 June 2016
- Jo Cox murder: Thomas Mair asked for mental health treatment day before MP died – The Telegraph, 17 June 2016

3. Harassment

The code currently states that 'Journalists must not engage in intimidation, harassment or persistent pursuit.' We are concerned that this clause is not rigorously adhered to at present. We urge the Committee to give consideration to the distress such behaviour causes to the individual and the damaging consequences for the individual's mental health and wellbeing.

We also believe that when the individual concerned lacks capacity due to a mental health problem to make representations for themselves to request the media to desist, consideration should be given to requests made on their behalf from relatives, friends, guardians or groups representing mental health.

5.Reporting Suicide

We understand that Samaritans has also made a detailed response to this consultation and we support their submission.

In particular, we believe that newspapers should not publish speculation or simplify the motives of suicide. Every suicide is a tragedy and the reasons someone takes their own life are many and complex.

Evidence shows that copycat suicides can occur as a result of extensive media coverage. We strongly advise journalists to avoid drawing over simplistic conclusions about the reason for suicide in their reporting.

12. Discrimination

We believe there is a need to strengthen the language in this clause and strongly advise replacing 'must avoid' with 'must not make prejudicial or pejorative reference' Our view is that the current language does not send a strong enough message about the damaging impact of such reports on both the mental wellbeing of people living with a mental health problem and social attitudes towards mental health.

We also believe that the reference to an 'individual's mental illness or disability ...' should be broadened to include 'individual's and group's mental illness or disability ...' . In some cases, negative media reporting around mental health will not specifically reference a named individual e.g. reports which make prejudicial or pejorative reference more broadly towards people living with a mental health problem or a particular condition/diagnosis. Under the present code such reports, which can have a highly stigmatising impact on the broader community of people living with a mental health problem, cannot be challenged.