Mental Health Issues Can be Misrepresented on Film, TV

Mental health issues are prevalent in today’s society. According to the National Institute of Mental Health, about one in four adults, suffers from a diagnosable mental disorder. But, when portrayed in film and television shows, mental health issues are often depicted erroneously.

Devin Byrd, associate professor and chair of the Department of Behavioral Sciences at South University — Savannah, says the misrepresentation of mental health issues in the media is fairly common and is due, in part, to a misunderstanding of mental health disorders and how they present themselves.

“What tends to happen is symptoms are trivialized,” he explains. “People are not taking seriously what is occurring. Or symptoms can be blown out of proportion. We, as professionals, have a duty and responsibility to advocate for the profession.”

Whether it is obsessive compulsive disorder, schizophrenia, or post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), mental health and addiction issues are frequently fodder for some of our favorite shows and movies. There is even an annual New York City mental health film festival. But as Bob Corolla, director of Media Relations for the National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI), says, television and films aren’t reality.

“The key issues are accuracy, whether a portrayal is stereotyped or the butt of a joke, and whether a television show or film is stigmatizing overall,” he says. “Few are perfect. In some cases, we can overlook some inaccuracy if the overall portrayal is positive and helps to eliminate stigma.”

For those in the entertainment industry interested in accuracy and reducing the stigma often associated with mental health issues, groups exist to help them get it right.

The Entertainment Industries Council “is a resource for creative professionals, from writers and directors to producers, researchers, actors, and other players in the creative community,” according to its website.

Hollywood, Health & Society is a program of the USC Annenberg Norman Lear Center that “provides entertainment industry professionals with accurate and timely information for health storylines,” according to its website.

“We’re a bridge between the public health community and the entertainment industry,” says Hollywood, Health & Society Director Sandra de Castro Buffington.

Buffington says her program is a free resource for writers and other members of the entertainment industry who want to accurately portray any health issue in their product, including mental health, which is a popular choice for many.

“One of the things writers look for when they’re developing a story is conflict to resolve,” she explains. “Mental health has a lot of conflict to resolve.”

The Hollywood, Health & Society program also performs a monitoring project to map the frequency of health topics on television. Buffington says in 2004, slightly more than half of the top 20 scripted shows on television had health storylines. Today, that number is 80%.

Because of that high interest in depicting health conditions as well as the sway that television and movies have on the public, it is important to portray mental health issues correctly.

“News, entertainment, and advertising media have tremendous power,” Corolla says. “They reach millions of people.”

And the experts say there has been progress made toward improving the portrayal of mental health issues on television and in movies, which has helped to reduce the stigma surrounding mental health.

“A lot of progress has been made, but it’s been slow,” Byrd says. “People tend to think of mental health issues as something that people have ultimate control over, and as a sign of weakness. We are overcoming that with certain types of disorders.”
Byrd says that in recent years, the public has become more accepting of some psychological disorders, discussing them more openly and reaching out for help more often. Those include depression, PTSD, and attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD).

“The more people are aware of how other people are coping with these issues, the more we begin to understand what is really taking place,” Byrd adds.

And experts think the situation is only going to improve as awareness of mental health issues continues to grow.

“Writers tend to write about what's important to them and what they know,” Buffington says. “As the stigma decreases, writers feel freer to address a full range of topics, especially mental health. It’s easy for them to get informed.”