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MENTAL HEALTH IN THE MEDIA: ITS STIGMA AND STEREOTYPES

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OBJECTIVES

- Define mental health and stigma
- Understand harmful stereotypes perpetuated by the media
- Recognize sensationalism
- Explore positive examples

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WHAT IS MENTAL HEALTH?

Our mental health describes our personal wellness as it relates to our ability to lead happy, healthy, and successful lives that meet our personal needs

Peggy Swarbrick, 2006

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WHAT IS MENTAL HEALTH?

THINK • FEEL • DO

It describes how we think, feel, and interact with the world

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WHAT IS MENTAL HEALTH?

It is fluid and can change over time

Mental health spectrum

Healthy   Coping   Struggling   Unwell

Adapted from Centre for Mental Health

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LIFE EXPERIENCES VS DIAGNOSABLE CONDITIONS

• Life experiences can cause short-term feelings of:
  • **anxiety**
  • **stress**
  • **feeling lost or depressed**

These are all normal human reactions
when temporary and manageable

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LIFE EXPERIENCES VS DIAGNOSABLE CONDITIONS

Conditions are marked by negatively affecting quality of life and ability to function

Diagnoses are based on:

- Duration
- Severity
- Life aspects affected
- Insight and self-awareness

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1 in 5

People live with a diagnosable mental health condition

WHO states depression is the leading cause of disability worldwide

Yet less than half people seek treatment

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Stigma

#1 reported reason why people do not seek services for their mental health or substance use disorders

Barriers of insurance, availability, transportation

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WHAT IS STIGMA?

- A negative or discriminatory depiction with a certain membership or characteristic
- Often labelled as different and are excluded and devalued by society
- People who experience mental health and substance use disorders often live with high levels of stigma

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TYPES OF STIGMA

PUBLIC

INTER-PERSONAL

SELF
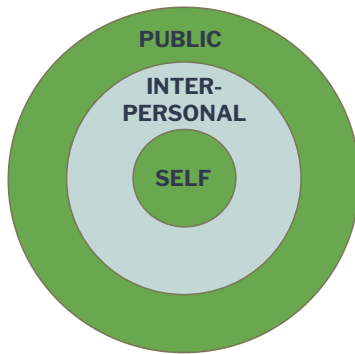
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COMMON STEREOTYPES

Some negative and inaccurate stereotypes focus on:
Unintelligent
Loners
Unstable
Lacking ability and autonomy
Strange
Thought to feel less or be less human

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DEPICTIONS IN THE MEDIA

Often, depictions of mental health and addiction
are negative and one-sided:
• Illness is their only personality trait
• Often utilized as a punchline
• Drama to move the plot forward
• Violent aggressors

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ROLE OF THE MEDIA

To inform
To entertain
To suspend reality

IMPACTS OF MEDIA COVERAGE AND ACCESS

PROS

- Educates and exposes new topics
- Provides free information access
- Offers entertainment, relaxation, and enjoyment

CONS

- Isolates or polarize an issue or idea
- Disrupts perception of an idea if taken out of context or ill-applied
- Can be incorrect or harmful

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WHY IS THIS PROBLEMATIC?

- Primarily for entertainment
  - Whether comedy, horror, or thriller
- Incorrectly over-represents the frequency of certain diagnoses and symptoms
- Sensationalizes without showcasing reality
- Not a human-first perspective

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Eastern State Hospital, Williamsburg, Virginia

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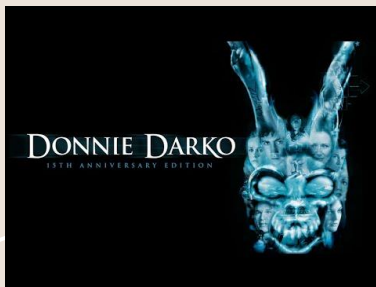## PSYCHIATRIC HOSPITAL DEPICTIONS

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DEPICTIONS OF INSTABILITY

Can often portray individuals as:
• Slovenly
• Incapable of making their own decisions
• Dangerous/wild card
• Emotionless and without insight

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UNSTABLE

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VIOLENT VILLIAN

Individuals with severe mental illness (such as schizophrenia and bipolar disorder) are 2.5x more likely to be victims of crime versus perpetrators

Depictions of violence tied to mental instability promote further fear and ostracization

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VIOLENT VILLIAN

DEPICTIONS OF PUNCHLINES

- Reduces a character/person to one quality that exists to entertain others
- Low hanging fruit
- Does not showcase the reality of a diagnosis
- Laughing at vs with character

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PUNCHLINE

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PUNCHLINE

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Coprolalia

- Most common depiction of Tourette Syndrome, despite how infrequent the symptom is
- Fewer than one third with TS will experience it in their lifetime
- Heavily stigmatized and ostracized
- Does not represent how distressing this can be for the individual

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CULTURAL CONSIDERATIONS

These depictions, however inaccurate and in poor taste, showcase one type of experience
There are far less depictions of people of color, those with disabilities, different gender identities, and sexual orientation

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CULTURAL DEPICTIONS AND STIGMA

Various other cultures experience
mental health and addiction differently
• People of color are less likely to
experience treatment
• LGBTQ

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WHY IS THIS DANGEROUS?

• Can be someone's introduction to the topic
• Dramatized depictions promote apathy and misinformation
• Reduces empathy and acceptance
• Normalizes subliminal messages

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WHY IS THIS DANGEROUS?

- Promotes negatives thoughts and ideas towards this population including:
- Fear
- Ridicule
- Avoidance

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WHY IS THIS DANGEROUS?

Reduces:
- Self-esteem
- Relationships
- Help-seeking
- Recovery

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ROMANTICIZING MENTAL ILLNESS

On the spectrum of understanding mental health:

Awareness

Stigma

Sensationalism

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Sensationalizing

- Increase of this trend in various years and with the onset of social media accessible to younger audiences
- What this looks like:
  - Believing mental illness to make you cool, edgy, unique, or special
  - Treating illnesses as aesthetic
  - Makes people feel better than society and those who mistreated them
  - Glorification of substance use, self-harm, and dangerous decision making
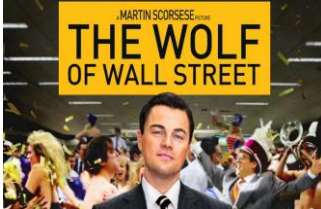
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NORMALIZING VS ROMANTICIZING

There is a difference between normalizing the experiences of mental health vs making them seem attractive and appealing.

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ROMANTICIZING

Glorifies substance use

Glorifies involuntary psychiatric treatment

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PERSONAL IMPACTS

- Self-esteem and self-perception
- Sleep
- Attention span
- Mood
- Patience
- Relationships with others

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DEPICTIONS THAT GET IT RIGHT

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HOW THE MEDIA IS GETTING IT RIGHT

- Utilizing person-first language
- Avoiding derogatory words and phrases
- Including diverse perspectives
- Including personal perspectives
- Including multi-faceted characters and depictions

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