

Stigma Matters: Assessing the Media's Impact  
On Public Perception of Mental Illness  
Executive Summary  
May 15, 2000

Most Americans are frequently exposed, through the news and entertainment media, to images of people with mental illness. Three-fourths of the population, across all demographic segments, report that they have seen something about mental illness in the news within the past six months. In addition, a majority of Americans say they recall having seen someone with a mental illness depicted on TV or in the movies. Fifty-seven percent said they have seen someone with mental illness as a character on TV, in movies or in fictional literature. More strikingly, though, a majority (51 percent) also said that depictions of people with mental illness in the entertainment industry tend to be negative.

About half of the respondents said they often have seen people with mental illnesses portrayed in the entertainment media as drug or alcohol addicts or criminals, and only slightly fewer often see them portrayed as violent, sad or lonely, scary or dangerous, homeless, out of control, or as victims of crime or violence. When the numbers of those who see these types of portrayals only sometimes are added, it amounts to seven out of ten Americans. However, when it comes to positive depictions of people with mental illness, only 18 percent said they often see people who are able to function in society, and only 7 percent say they have seen people who have successfully overcome their illness.

More than one-third of Americans said they see news stories involving mental illness often, and three-fourths said they see such stories either often or sometimes. Not only have Americans heard about mental illness in general, but a majority report having heard about an entire range of mental illnesses. Of eight illnesses mentioned, ranging from depression to eating disorders to obsessive compulsive disorders, a majority said they had seen something about seven of them, and almost half had seen something about the eighth illness as well.

The news sources that people chiefly rely on for information about mental illness are TV shows like Dateline and 60 Minutes, as well as newspapers and TV news. Other sources, including magazines like

Time and Newsweek, talk shows on radio and TV, and the Internet are used less extensively.

Slightly less than half (43 percent) felt that overall, news coverage of mental illness was mostly negative. While almost as many (37 percent) felt it has been neutral, very few (14 percent) said it has been mostly positive. In fact, three times as many people said coverage has been negative as positive. At the same time, a very large majority of the public said they think news portrayals of those with mental illness are somewhat accurate. Only 7 percent said they are very accurate, but only 16 percent felt they are basically inaccurate.

The topic of news stories about mental illness that Americans report seeing most often is medications such as Zoloft or Prozac. Almost half said they see these types of stories often, and four out of five see them either often or sometimes. Two other types of stories also seen often by almost half the public were about children with emotional disorders and about people with mental illness who have committed violent acts. Other issues such as the psychological impact of trauma or abuse, over medication of children, health insurance issues and others were seen somewhat less often.

In contrast to mental illness in general, most of those who have seen stories about medications for mental illness have heard a combination of positive and negative messages about medications. Among the positive ideas that a majority have heard are that medicines can help people recover, can save lives and can keep people out of mental hospitals. On the negative side, many say medications were portrayed by the media as having serious side effects, used too frequently as a treatment, not providing a cure, and addictive.

Despite these conflicting and often negative portrayals of those with mental illness, most people believe that news coverage has helped improve public understanding of mental illness. In addition, a large majority said the information they have seen on the news concerning mental illness has made them more likely to encourage someone with a mental illness to seek treatment, including one-third who are much more likely to do so.

In spite of the majority saying entertainment provided negative portrayals of people with mental illness, more than half also say that what they have seen in the media has not changed their impressions

about people with mental illness, and about one-third say their impression has become more positive.

However, based on what they have seen in the news and entertainment media, only one-third believe that most people can be helped with treatment, and less than half, 42 percent, think about half of those with mental illnesses can benefit from treatment. One in four believe that relatively few can be helped by treatment.

While people with mental illness are often shown negatively by the entertainment media, mental health professionals are depicted more positively. Two-thirds said that mental health professionals are generally portrayed as *smart*, *experts* and *caring individuals*, and half said they are shown as *trustworthy*. However, about half also said they see psychiatrists and other mental health professionals shown as *manipulative*, *interested primarily in money or power*, or as *having as many problems as their patients*. More than one-third also said they are shown as either *quacks* or *people who are unable to help their patients*.

Although these impressions reflect perceptions of how the media covers people with mental illness, most people have some direct experience with people who suffer from these types of problems. A majority (57 percent) said they know someone who has been diagnosed by a doctor or psychologist as having a mental illness.