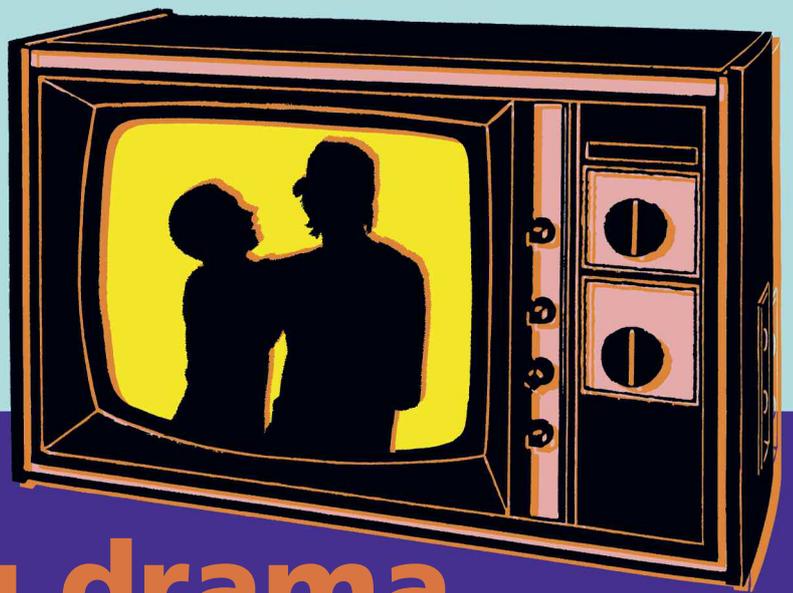


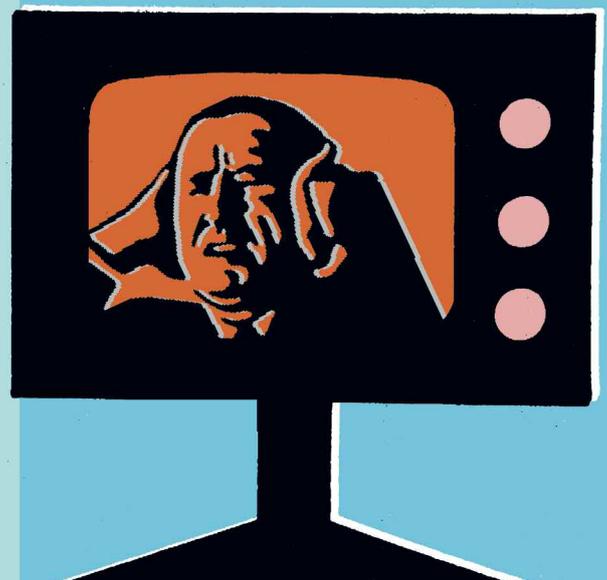
**SHiFT...**

Shifting attitudes  
to mental illness.



# Making drama out of a crisis

Authentic portrayals of mental illness?





### Emmerdale, ITV

Sally – known as ‘Psycho Sally’ in the Press – is obsessed with church minister Ashley and throws herself under his car in a twisted bid to gain his affections. She is later sectioned under the Mental Health Act.



## Television drama has enormous power to shape public attitudes towards mental illness – a subject still shrouded in ignorance and misunderstanding. But is it the job of the industry to challenge these popular myths? Or does it have a responsibility at least not to mislead? Is using pejorative dialogue about people with mental health problems any more acceptable than broadcasting racist language?

This report is intended to encourage writers, producers, directors and commissioners of television drama to enter into a debate about these issues and how they portray mental illness on TV. People with mental health conditions, the charities that represent them and mental health professionals are all keen to join this discussion.

The report is based on research into what viewers – with and without mental health problems – think of portrayals of mental ill-health in TV drama, an analysis of representations and an examination of the challenges faced by programme-makers developing these storylines.

It is not intended to be an exercise in finger-pointing. It is clear programming has made great strides over the last decade or more. Rather, the research encourages the industry to see the potential for making great TV, based on the real-life experiences of people with mental health problems – and to seize the opportunity to turn tired, old stereotypes on their head. The report also makes it plain that mental illness is a feature of the human condition and the experience of the many, not the few.

This summary report is based on research led by the Glasgow Media Group at Glasgow University and commissioned by SHIFT, the Department of Health programme to tackle the stigma and discrimination associated with mental illness.

**There’s always someone murdering somebody and they always seem to have a mental health problem.**

Focus group participant

Researchers studied references to mental health in three months of drama programming on UK terrestrial channels between 4pm and 11pm from 1 January 2010. Content analysis found 74 episodes from 34 different programmes contained mental illness-related storylines and a total of 434 references to mental health were made.

Negative and positive portrayals were identified. Interviews with those working in the industry, and the mental health consultants who advised them, were undertaken. Finally, audience reaction, of general viewers and people affected by mental health problems, was explored through focus groups.

## Key findings

### Content analysis

- 63% of the references in dialogue were pejorative, flippant or unsympathetic; terms included ‘crackpot’, ‘a sad little psycho’, ‘basket case’, ‘Where did you get her from, Care in the Community?’ and ‘he was looney tunes’
- 45% of programmes featuring mental illness storylines portrayed people with mental health problems as dangerous. For example, bipolar Karen McGuire in *Shameless* on Channel 4 attacks her partner in a fit of rage as she is about to be sectioned
- 45% of programmes had sympathetic representations. For example, in *EastEnders* the market stall manager gives Stacey her stall back after her friend Becca pretends to be a council lawyer and threatens to take him to court for discrimination on grounds of her mental ill-health
- Key themes in the characterisation of those with mental health problems included representations as:
  - > Dangerous outsiders. For example, *Emmerdale’s* Sally Spode, known as ‘Psycho Sally’ in *The Press*, is obsessed with the local minister Ashley and is

## Hollyoaks, Channel 4

Newt is admitted to hospital and diagnosed with schizophrenia.



## EastEnders, BBC

In a traumatic scene, Stacey is sectioned and taken to hospital against her will after struggling with police.

- eventually sectioned after burning down his church in a bid to kill his wife
- > Tragic victims but deserving of sympathy
- > Alternative accounts, which showed mental illness more as a normal feature of human life

### Interviews with producers, writers, and heads of drama

- The industry feels a special responsibility for producing authentic, responsible drama on this topic
- Writers talked of getting stuck in a 'cul de sac' with maintaining and developing such characterisations, seeking to balance dramatic pace and realism.
- Commercial pressures demand simple ideas and dramatic events to boost viewing figures. This puts writers under pressure to write to formulae, which makes it hard to find room for nuanced storylines about mental health
- The process by which a character becomes increasingly distressed and falls ill is often handled extremely well, according to mental health charities
- The level of consultation by programme-makers with people with experience of mental health problems and experts varies enormously

### Focus groups

- Participants thought portrayals in film and TV of 'the mentally-ill' posing a threat, with Hitchcock's 'Psycho' often mentioned, contributed to exaggerated public fears of people with mental health problems
- These portrayals caused great upset to participants with mental health problems and those with relatives who had experienced mental ill-health
- Participants with mental health problems were critical of the absence of characters with positive experiences – and praised the depiction of a highly successful doctor with OCD in the American series *Scrubs* on Channel 4
- There was strong support for programmes seeking to educate and inform and for characters that seemed well-researched

- Viewers felt some storylines were 'over-dramatised', expressing an interest in seeing the full, fluctuating journey from diagnosis to recovery
- They admitted laughing at jokes on TV about mental health, but said they felt guilty later, realising they were in bad taste

**They always show someone with schizophrenia as really violent and frightening, but my daughter isn't like that. She's really soft and caring.**

Focus group participant

## Conclusion

- Television drama has enormous potential to challenge stigma and improve public understanding – witness the huge increase in calls to bipolar helplines on the back of the Stacey storyline in *EastEnders*
- Unsympathetic portrayals and references to mental health still predominate
- The over-representation of portrayals of violence, with nearly half of programmes suggesting people with mental health problems pose a threat, contributes to the public fears of the 'mad axeman'. By contrast, only 17% of newspaper articles imply this, suggesting they may in fact paint a less unrealistic picture of mental illness than TV drama
- Mental health professionals, charities and people affected by mental illness are all keen to work with the industry to help create authentic programmes, rooted in reality



**Coronation Street, ITV**  
Claire Peacock having been admitted to Psychiatric Hospital for severe post-natal depression.

## Ten key facts about mental health

### Conditions

- One in four people will experience some kind of mental health problem in the course of a year<sup>1</sup>
- Symptoms of anxiety and depression are the most common, with nearly one in 10 meeting the criteria for diagnosis<sup>2</sup>
- Severe mental illnesses are less common with up to 4% having either bipolar disorder or schizophrenia<sup>3</sup>

### Stigma

- 11% still say they would not want to live next door to someone with a mental health problem<sup>4</sup>
- Nine out of 10 people with mental health problems say they have been discriminated against<sup>5</sup>
- 77% of adults think that the media does not do a good job educating people about mental illness<sup>6</sup>

### Violence and mental illness

- One in four people say their belief in a link between mental illness and violence has come from TV and film<sup>7</sup>
- The vast majority of people with mental health problems pose no threat and live normal lives in the community<sup>8</sup>
- Drug and alcohol abuse is a much bigger risk factor. About 360 of the 600 killings every year are by people with drug and alcohol problems, compared to just 50 – mostly of loved-ones – by people with mental health problems<sup>9</sup>
- There are only about five homicides a year by strangers with a mental health problem<sup>10</sup> – you are more like to be murdered by a drunk man outside a pub

This summary report was launched at a workshop for leading figures from the TV drama industry on 7 October 2010. The event was organised and hosted by BBC Headroom in conjunction with SHIFT, the Department of Health-funded programme to tackle the stigma of mental illness, and the Broadcasting and Creative Industries Disability Network.

The full report is available at [www.shift.org.uk](http://www.shift.org.uk)

**BCIDN**  
Broadcasting & Creative  
Industries Disability Network

**SHIFT..**  
Shifting attitudes  
to mental illness.

1 The Office for National Statistics, Psychiatric Morbidity report, 2001

2 Ibid

3 Ibid

4 Department of Health, Public Attitudes to Mental Illness Survey, 2009

5 Time to Change, Stigma Shout, 2008

6 Priory Group, Crying Shame, 2007

7 Shift, YouGov poll, 2008

8 Shift, What's the Story, Reporting Mental Health and Suicide, 2007

9 Royal College of Psychiatrists, Rethinking risk to others in mental health services, 2008

10 National Confidential Inquiry into Homicides and Suicides, 2009