



Schizophrenia Ireland
Lucia Foundation

Media Watch Report 2004:

Challenging Stigma



Schizophrenia Ireland (SI)

Schizophrenia Ireland is the national organisation dedicated to upholding the rights and addressing the needs of all those affected by schizophrenia and related illnesses, through the promotion and provision of high-quality services and working to ensure the continual enhancement of the quality of life of the people it serves. SI provides the following support services: counselling, support groups (Phrenz groups and Relatives' groups), information and awareness raising activities, family education courses, social and vocation rehabilitation services, suicide prevention initiatives and an information Helpline.

One way SI believes it can help to prevent the discrimination and exclusion of those with schizophrenia is by challenging the way mental illness is reported or represented in the media. SI considers that de-stigmatising and promoting an educated awareness of mental illness is integral to addressing the needs of people with self-experience of schizophrenia.

What is schizophrenia?

Schizophrenia is a serious mental illness characterised by disturbances in a person's thoughts, perceptions, emotions and behaviour. It affects approximately one in every hundred people worldwide. First onset commonly occurs in adolescence or early adulthood, although it can also occur later in life.

What are the symptoms?

There are a number of signs and symptoms that are characteristic of schizophrenia. However, the expression of these symptoms varies greatly from one individual to another. No one symptom is common to all people, and not everyone who displays these symptoms has schizophrenia (as some physical conditions can mimic schizophrenia). Generally speaking, symptoms are divided into two groups, 'active' symptoms (also referred to as 'positive' or psychotic symptoms) that reflect new or unusual forms of thought and behaviour, and 'passive' symptoms (also referred to as 'negative' symptoms), which reflect a loss of previous feelings and abilities.

What causes schizophrenia?

No one single cause has yet been attributed to schizophrenia. Rather, it appears that several factors may play a role in the onset of the illness. The causes of schizophrenia, like many other illnesses, are likely to be a combination of hereditary and environmental factors. The vulnerability–stress model of schizophrenia states that there is an interaction between the person's biological vulnerability, stress or change in the environment and their ability to deal with these environmental factors in terms of their social skills and supports. Extensive research is now being conducted into the possible causes of schizophrenia. The prominent theories focus on the areas of biochemical and environmental factors, genetics and drug misuse. One thing we do know for certain is that bad parenting, poverty or sinful behaviour does not cause schizophrenia.

What is stigma?

Stigma is not just the use of an incorrect word or action—stigma is about disrespect. It is the use of negative labels to identify a person living with mental illness.

According to the World Health Organization (WHO), stigma is one of the most important problems encountered by people with severe psychiatric disorders. It lowers their self-esteem, contributes to disrupted family relationships and adversely affects their ability to socialise, obtain housing and become employed. Although mental health problems occur in almost every family at some point, people who



experience them still meet fear and prejudice from others and are made to feel ashamed and excluded. The stigma and discrimination associated with having a mental illness are often so devastating that they prevent people from seeking help for fear of being labelled.

Some of the common myths of mental health difficulties include:

“ People with mental health problems are violent and dangerous.”

“ People with mental health problems are poor and less intelligent.”

“ Mental health problems are caused by personal weakness.”

“ Mental illness cannot be treated.”

Why campaign against stigma?

Stigma can be deeply hurtful and isolating. Learning to live with mental health problems is extremely difficult, particularly when someone experiences the prejudice caused by stigma. Stigma can be used to exclude and marginalize people. It is necessary to confront biased social attitudes in order to reduce the discrimination and stigma of people who are living with mental illness.

Effectively reducing stigma and discrimination requires concerted action by everyone—people with self-experience, relatives and friends, professional groups and civil society—with strong government back up. The aim of SI’s Media Watch project is to help ensure that human dignity is accorded to all those who experience mental health difficulties, that they are not discriminated against, and that they are allowed to reach their potential by coexisting equally in society.

What is the role of the media?

According to the World Health Organization (WHO), research over the last 30 years has convincingly demonstrated that the mass media are one of the most significant influences on belief systems. Since people with stigmatised illnesses do not usually announce themselves, people often form their attitudes through the news reports, films and television programmes they see. For that reason, the media have a significant role to play in reducing stigma towards people with mental health difficulties.

What is Media Watch?

In an effort to promote greater awareness and understanding of schizophrenia, SI launched the Media Watch project in 2003.

The Media Watch project highlights both the accurate and inaccurate coverage of schizophrenia by writing a letter to the media source pointing out what was either a correct or incorrect portrayal of schizophrenia. If a piece about schizophrenia portrays it inaccurately, then SI sends the media source a copy of the *Guide for Journalists and Broadcasters Reporting on Schizophrenia*, which was produced by the National Union of Journalists along with Schizophrenia Ireland.

It is hoped that the Media Watch project will help to prevent the use of discriminatory language and inaccurate facts about schizophrenia, while also encouraging those in the press and media who depict it in a true light.

The Guide for Journalists and Broadcasters Reporting on Schizophrenia

The Guide for Journalists and Broadcasters Reporting on Schizophrenia provides information on schizophrenia, including how schizophrenia is diagnosed, treated, rate of occurrence and discusses common myths.

The guide encourages accurate reporting on schizophrenia for the following reasons:

- Loose terminology makes it harder to challenge the stereotypes associated with schizophrenia (“psycho”, “maniac”, “schizo”) and to stimulate a more thoughtful approach to the subject.
- All journalists should endeavour to use the correct and accepted terminology and avoid language that might create public fear, myth, bigotry and distress to individuals affected by the illness. Getting the description right is essential to fair reporting.
- The best way to describe someone with schizophrenia, provided it is relevant to the piece, is just that: “a man / a woman / teacher / Donegal man etc. with schizophrenia”. Calling someone a “schizophrenic” is



dismissive, and has become a derogatory term. Equally, people with schizophrenia need understanding, not pity, and terms such as “sufferer” or “victim of” will not help them in their task of living with this illness.

- The majority of sub-editors and headline writers do not use words like madman, nutter, maniac, psycho or lunatic. These terms play to the worst prejudices of the public and have no real meaning other than as terms of abuse.
- Schizophrenia is not a trivial illness. While humour has its place in some media items, mental illness deserves special consideration. How likely is someone with mental health problems to seek help if the stories they read are about people going barmy, looney, crazy, off their rockers, etc?
- Multiple personality disorder and split personality (Jekyll and Hyde) have nothing to do with schizophrenia. Those who believe schizophrenia involves a split personality see people with schizophrenia as not responsible for their own actions, unpredictable, even violent. This is one misconception that needs to change quickly.

How does SI respond to a positive portrayal of schizophrenia?

To promote the idea of accurately portraying schizophrenia, SI does send letters of congratulations to those who have discussed schizophrenia in a fair and truthful way. Such letters are sent to commend the work of the journalists and thank them for helping to reduce the stigma of mental illness in society.

What types of inaccurate or derogatory portrayals of schizophrenia have SI come across?

SI has repeatedly come across representations of the myth that schizophrenia is a split personality disorder. Often the word “schizophrenic” is used to describe someone having two personalities. This seems to be a very common and recurring misconception of schizophrenia. Unfortunately, derogatory terms for people with mental illness such as “psycho” or “schizo” also continue to be used in the media.

This indicates a very poor understanding of schizophrenia and mental illness. Other letters have been sent trying to encourage the media to use the term “person with schizophrenia” rather than “schizophrenic”, which can be seen as a derogatory term.

How has Media Watch been received?

Even with a generally more sensitive reporting style on mental illness, there continues to be misrepresentations of mental health issues and incorrect language used around schizophrenia in the media. Despite the fact that only one newspaper replied to the Media Watch project indicating that they would endeavour to take on board our concerns, SI believes that the Media Watch project is a valuable vehicle to raise concerns related to the stigmatisation of mental health difficulties.

How does the Media Watch project work?

- SI staff members scan both national and regional papers through an electronic search service, and highlight any other media sources when a complaint has been lodged.
- Papers that have received more than one Media Watch letter between 2003-2004 include: The Irish Independent (7 letters), The Evening Herald (3 letters), The Star (2 letters) and the Irish Times (2 letters).

Please note that the Media Watch project is unable to scrutinize every media piece that discusses schizophrenia and mental illness, however, below is a list of those that have either been scanned by Media Watch staff or brought to the attention of Media Watch. By no means is this list exhaustive, however, it is representative of how mental illness is discussed in the Irish media.

Media sources that have been sent media watch letters include:

The Evening Herald for an incorrect use of the word schizophrenic in the article titled "Striking that old bum note" in the 15th November 2003 edition.

The Evening Herald for an incorrect use of the word schizophrenia in the article "The Zapper" in the 24th January 2004 edition.

The Evening Herald for the incorrect use of the word schizophrenic in the article, "I've found my son – if only I could find a cure for his illness" in the 10th November 2004 edition.

Irish Building Magazine for the article "Is Minister Cullen practising environmental schizophrenia on Kyoto Protocol" in the 1st August 2004 edition.

The Irish Independent for an incorrect use of the word schizophrenic in the article "Billy Keane: King Kong Julian finds you mock Munster at your peril" in the 2nd February 2004 edition.

The Irish Independent for the incorrect use of the word schizophrenic in the article "This week: We're in two minds about driving" in July 2004 edition.

The Irish Independent for the article "Schizophrenic to get electric chair" in a July 2004 edition.

The Irish Independent for the incorrect use of the word schizophrenic in the article "The high street dons a new look" in the 27th October 2004 edition.

The Irish Independent for the incorrect use of the word schizophrenic in the article "Dad flies out to bring ill son back home" in the 10th November 2004 edition.

The Irish Independent for the incorrect use of the word schizophrenic in the article "The grand passion of David Blunkett" in the 4th December 2004 edition.

The Irish Independent for the incorrect use of the word schizophrenia in the article "Cooking for father" in the 12th December 2004 edition.

The Irish Mirror for the incorrect use of the word schizophrenic in the article "I had to kill my uncle...he had the devil in him" in the 24th November 2004 edition.

The Irish Times for an incorrect use of the term schizophrenic in the article "Schizophrenic who killed his mother found guilty but insane" in the 7th July 2004 edition.

The Irish Times for using an incorrect statistic about schizophrenia (1 in 1000 people develop schizophrenia as opposed to the correct 1 in 100) in the article "Man who murdered uncle guilty but insane" in the 24th November 2004 edition.

The Kingdom for the incorrect use of the word schizophrenic in the article "GAA: Minor scare as Laois nearly catch Kerry" in the 2nd September 2004 edition.

Liffey Champion for the headline "Schizophrenic attitude to recycling causes problems" in the 11th October 2003 edition.

The Star for the article " 'Schizo' Attacker will finish sentence in OZ" in the 28th July 2004 edition.

The Star for the article "Plea to help track down missing son" in the 28th October 2004 edition.

The Sun for the headline "Psycho Tells Cops: I've Just Killed My Dad" in the 29th October 2003 edition.

The Sunday Business Post for the incorrect use of the word schizophrenia in an article in the 28th November 2004 edition.

The Sunday World for an incorrect use of the term schizophrenic in the article "Curtain's Life in Booze's Clinic" in the 30th May 2004 edition.

There was a media watch letter sent to the Ian Dempsey Show for an interview with Paul Williams, which aired on 20th January 2004. The discussion referred to criminals as 'vicious and ready to turn on you', and the phrase 'schizophrenia as split personality' was used, which is a myth about the illness.



There was also a letter sent to the marketing department of Volvo for an advertisement that ran in an in-flight magazine for Czech Airlines. It used the term 'schizophrenic' in the advertisement and promoted the idea that schizophrenia is a Jekyll and Hyde condition.

A letter of congratulations was sent to the Sunday World for its article "My Battle with Schizophrenia Makes Most People Think I am Some Sort of Monster but I am Just Like Everyone Else" which appeared in the 27th June 2004 edition.

Response to Media Watch

Volvo Cars Ireland thanked SI for bringing the advert to their attention and forwarded it onto their colleagues in the Czech Republic where the advert originated. They also enclosed a copy of the advert that ran in Ireland. This advert was not the same and had no association with schizophrenia.

The Irish Times noted that the Editor alerted the Chief-Sub Editor to our concerns and passed on our booklet on guidelines for journalists when writing about schizophrenia. According to the response, The Irish Times was in the process of updating their stylebook in the newspaper and they believed it was an ideal opportunity to include SI's guidelines for journalists when writing about schizophrenia.

Contact us:

If you would like to lodge a complaint about how schizophrenia is reported in the media, or to highlight a positive media story that helps to dispel the stigma surrounding mental illness, please contact us at:

Media Watch
Schizophrenia Ireland
38 Blessington Street
Dublin 7

Tel: 01 860 1620
Fax: 01 860 1602
Email: info@sirl.ie
Website: www.sirl.ie

Information Helpline: 1890 621631
Mental illness should not be faced alone.



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