The media and stigma

Picture the image of a building on fire. The building is a hospital – a psychiatric hospital. Innocent sick people are displaced as their temporary home is set ablaze. The 2002 headline covering this tragedy: "Roasted Nuts."

Stigma in the media

While watch groups such as the National Alliance for the Mentally Ill (NAMI) condemned The Trentonian newspaper and the newspaper issued an apology after the outcry, the damage was done. Yet another headline stigmatizing and devaluing people with a mental illness was written into history. And this, at a time when the Surgeon General implored people with a mental illness to seek help, while admitting that stigma is one of the greatest barriers to treatment.

As noted by the Canadian Mental Health Association:

"The 1999 Surgeon General's Report on Mental Health identified stigma as one of today's foremost obstacles to improved mental health care, noting that 'stigma tragically deprives people of their dignity and interferes with their full participation in society.' Stigma in relation to people with mental illness is often a combination of a lack of relevant knowledge (ignorance), attitudes (prejudice) and behaviour (discrimination). Simply put, stigma refers to an attitude. The resultant discrimination is the behaviour that exemplifies that attitude."

Various media have been found to be the most influential way of shaping attitudes about mental illness.

News media and stigma

From building fire to car crash to murder, the news media have been guilty of sensationalizing every type of news story to catch the attention of the reader or viewer. As the old saying in the news business goes, "If it bleeds, it leads."

A recent Canadian study on print media found that criminality and dangerousness to others were the most common news images at 47.3% and 61.3% respectively. Positive depictions occurred only 27% of the time.

Statistically speaking, a person with a severe mental illness is much more likely than the average person to be a victim of crime or violence, while studies show that they are not more prone to violent behaviour than any other group of people. In spite of this, headlines like the following are used:

- Terror, mentally ill threaten Games (Headline, Toronto Sun, 5 November, 2008 (Toronto)
- Knife maniac freed to kill. Mental patient ran amok in the park (Front page headline, Daily Mail, 26 February, 2005 (England)
- Violent, mad. So Docs set him free. New 'Community Care' scandal. (The Sun, 26 February, 2005 (England)

The sensationalized reporting of crimes involving people with a mental illness can hurt an entire group of people who have done nothing to deserve it.

Entertainment media and stigma

Many people remember the shock therapy scene in One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest. Despite the fact that it has been 50 years since the publication of the book and almost 40 years since the release of the movie, these images continue to be the way people think of the lifesaving treatment now known as electroconvulsive therapy. In fact, this intervention has a demonstrable success rate for major depression that has not responded to other treatment, and yet is routinely referred to as "barbaric" and "inhumane", based on the way it has been portrayed in entertainment media.

People with mental illness are also commonly depicted in television shows and movies as drug addicts, homeless, friendless and psychotic, when this is only true for a tiny fraction of all people with a mental illness.

Effects of media on stigma

Studies on mental illness and stigma have been conducted since the 1940s. While it's obvious that people's understanding of mental illness has increased over the decades, the stigma around mental illness also appears to have increased, particularly in the area of perceived violence. Largely thought to be a result of the media, stigma affects many aspects of a person's life:

- Help-seeking – the more stigma people feel, the less willing they are to get help for a mental illness
- Employment – both working in the workplace as well as entering the workplace is negatively impacted by stigma
- Self-worth – individuals who experience greater stigma have lesser self-worth and poorer treatment outcomes
- Families – families report stigma creating a "guilt by association" mentality

Using the media to reduce stigma

While the media can be the cause of mental illness stigma, they can also help turn the tide on these inaccurate and unfair perceptions. To accomplish this, accurate and positive messages about success in living with mental illness need to be commonplace, and stories of recovery need more coverage. And, of course, sensationalistic headlines pertaining to mental illness must be eliminated altogether.

Entertainment media can work on creating more three-dimensional and true-to-life characters with mental illness, instead of subscribing to the common stereotypes. The media have a huge opportunity to make a difference in the lives of millions of people in North America; now they need to have the courage to step up to their responsibility in combating stigma.