# Mental Health and the role of media

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**ABSTRACT:** *Media plays an important role in shaping the perception and attitudes of people. Numerous studies show the connection between the media's portrayal of mental illness and the stigma of mental illness. Media can be a two-edged sword, depicting negative stereotypes of mental illness but can also be a powerful tool for addressing the stigma of mental illness. If used properly media can help in normalizing talking about mental health and asking for help. If done in a sensible manner, without sensualizing the mental health cases, it is the most powerful platform to sensitize people about mental health and helping them change their negative attitudes towards a person with mental illness.*

**KEYWORDS:** *Media, Mental Health, Suicide, Stigma, The role of media.*

### INTRODUCTION

Its been months since the death of Sushant Singh Rajput and people have started talking about "suicide", "mental illness" frequently. Since then the media's "role" and its depiction of mental illness are what started to question. The discourse on mental health started after his death and news reporters, actors and almost everyone started spilling "do's and don'ts" of mental illness. People started sharing their opinion on how he did not look depressed. And this is where we all fail as a society in terms of understanding mental health.

The use of media nowadays is well known. People are using various forms of media to be in touch with people and to know national and international events as well. In the last few decades, an ample amount of research has done to understand how mass media influences our belief systems (Wimmer, 1991). The studies have shown that in today's society, media holds a strong power to influence people, their beliefs so media is becoming one of the strongest influencers in today's time (Edney, 2004) The daily life of people is impacted by what they see and hear from the media. This influence is both prosocial and antisocial (Philo, 1994). The conception and understanding of mental health are synthesized by media. The over-exaggeration and inaccurate portrayal of mental illness in media even in the movies are perfect examples of how media plays a role in stigmatizing mental illness even more!

A very captivating observation by Kalpana Shrivastava (Srivastava, 2018) in 2018 was about the linking of social

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theories to the role of media in increasing the stigma of mental illness. The cultivation theory proposes that those who spend more time on "virtual platforms" might assume it as reality. So depicting inaccurate mental illness through social media platforms as well as the news will make people believe in a false understanding of the mental illness (Gerbner, 2002). The social learning theory proposes that individual learns not only from experience but also from observation which means how the mass media depicts mental illness, a person with mental illness, the treatment also influences people's understanding. So even if the person has not seen any person with mental illness but the depiction of a person with mental illness through mass media as violent, always suicidal will make them believe it as "reality" (Bandura, 2001).

### UNDERSTANDING OF MENTAL ILLNESS

A lot of times, people do not have an understanding of mental illness and what mental wellness is. It is very important to understand that mental health is a spectrum. Depending on the social reality, life experiences, own coping strategies sometimes we are on positive side of spectrum and sometimes can be on the negative side. Mental health, rather mental illness is not so simple which you can just tell by looking at a person "Dekhne mai to nahi lagta depressed"(He does not look depressed). Depression depending on symptoms can look different for different people. Gross generalization of mental illness by media is cancerous. The media's understanding of mental health is not only simplistic but reductionist. Having depression does not necessarily mean that the person might think about dying every time, which is falsely pictured by the mass media.

Mass media can play a huge role in sensitizing people about mental health which unfortunately currently is failing to do so.

Media also fails to address the holistic approach of looking at mental health. Instead of understanding that there are a lot of factors influencing the mental health of a person like caste, class, gender, socioeconomic situation, religion, it focuses only on biological factors. And this ultimately targets an individual questioning their capacity to cope up with difficult situations. Understanding different reasons for mental illness will help people's way of looking at mental illness and people with mental illness as well.

## NEGATIVE STEREOTYPES AND STIGMA

It gets even scarier when we look at the image of a person with mental illness that has been created by the mass media. It is very common to see in movies or on TV shows that a person with mental illness will be violent, will commit murders, and will be incapable of holding a job (Caputo, 2011). But the media does not make it clear to the public that very few of people with severe mental disorders commit severe crimes which are actually very less than the violence created by so-called "normal" people (Angermeyer, 2001).

(Rose, 1998) rightly points out when he also talked about treatment options. In mass media, the treatment for mental disorders is considered to be psychiatric medicine. But the media fails to uncover the other mental health professionals and other kinds of treatment therapies as well. Many people do not even know the different fields of mental health and different mental health professional because of the media's preference for depicting psychiatry as the dominant one. The unmet needs of people because of the lack of mental health professionals in India is also because of stigma, and people's lack of understanding of different mental health professionals. Media's preference for psychiatric treatment as the ultimate option for mental illness has negatively impacted the de-institutionalization and community mental health programs all over the world.

**MEDIA AND SUICIDE:** How do media portray suicide also affects the understanding and perception of people about suicide. Studies have shown that the mode of discussing suicide in mass media can affect vulnerable populations (Williams, 2001). From the number of research, a guideline has been formulated for reporting suicides which suggest that overgeneralization of mental illness, glorifying it for the sake of publicity should be avoided while reporting suicide (World Health Organization, 2008) But do mass media really follow these guidelines? The role of media when it comes to reporting suicide should be "sensitization not sensationalism."

In case of celebrity death especially the details of how the death occurred and other detailing should be avoided. But what happened about Sushant Singh Rajput's case? The photos of his dead body were all over the media, media started telling their own conspiracy theory about his death, about mental health, media showed every little detail about his death which might be a trigger for someone who is having mental health concerns. Who will be responsible for its consequences?

It's very important not to oversimplify the reason for suicide. As mentioned earlier this is complex phenomenon. People cant and should not see as mere "suicide" but understanding various factors associated with it. After farmer suicide, media shows how the government was helping and how the person should have tried once but who knows the reality? Without examining the social reality it is impossible to understand mental health. Media plays an important role in this. The reporters as correctly said are not simply reporting the news, but are also educating the masses and shaping perceptions.

## MEDIA - AS A RAY OF HOPE

As the increasing use of media is well known, it can be used as a strong tool to sensitize people, create a safe space for everyone to talk about mental health, changing the negative attitudes, and reducing the stigma of mental illness. When media have been a front leader in spreading stigma about mental illness, it can also be an efficient tool to destigmatize mental illness (Stuart, 2008).  It can also be used as a platform to talk about mental health and making it normal to ask for help.

An integrative approach can be used in mental health where media can become a powerful partner. The media should empathize with people with mental illness. Emphasizing that mental illness is real as well as treatable and featuring stories about mental health and mental illness is responsible, accurate way can help overcome the prejudices about mental illness.

Movies, TV shows should also be sensible while depicting mental illness. The media should portray success stories of people who have won this battle of mental illness which might be inspiring for people. Also, from a huge platform like news channels or newspapers to platforms like blogs, social media different approaches of looking at treatment should be promoted. So when media shows psychiatric treatment as an option then counseling, taking therapy, focusing on community models, deinstitutionalization should also be promoted. At the same time, normalizing ask for help for mental health concerns is something media can play significant role in.

Reporters, editors working in the media should have proper mental health sensitization training in which the guidelines about reporting suicide, ethics, holistic approach of looking at mental health should be promoted. And the role of media, reporters should also be promoted in such training. This is important when people say "hasta rehta tha, to aise kar hi nahi skta". In such cases providing "correct" information

regarding mental illness, emphasizing the fact that mental health is a spectrum and mental illness have wide range of conditions, symptoms are important to discuss and express on available platforms. SO media holds a big responsibility of not only giving information to people but sensitizing them correctly on topics like mental health.

## CONCLUSION

Media plays a significant role in shaping people's beliefs as well as their attitudes. The negative portrayal of mental illness through media enforces negative attitudes and false beliefs about mental illness as well as a person with mental illness. This gets serious when media forgets their role of sensitizing people and gets carried away with the sensationalism. Media has capability to change people's perception of mental illness, it has potential to break the chains of the stigma of mental illness. First sensitization of reporters about mental health should be done. Attempts should be made to convey the right information about mental health and efforts should be made to create a safe space for everyone to talk about mental health. Now its responsibility of media to show stories of recovery, stories of hope, and pass on the mic to people with mental illness.

## DECLARATIONS

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