

Misrepresentation of Mental Illness in Pop Culture

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De-stigmatisation of mental illness is still on a long journey but that doesn't seem to be the only problem we are faced with. In attempts to de-stigmatise it and remove the ever present taboo, it is often grossly misrepresented and in some cases glorified to be portrayed as 'cool.'

We needn't look far for an example. Instances of this are all around us – movies, TV shows, books and internet communities on social networking sites. The most blatant are probably posts on Facebook or Tumblr making depression appear as tragically beautiful. Such as the drawing of a young girl hunched over sadly, revealing scars on her arms with the caption 'Her eyes ran out of tears so she forced her skin to cry instead,' portraying insensitive messages about depression and self-harm.

It's ever-present in movies and TV shows as well where characters with mental illness are portrayed as cool individuals, which would be totally acceptable (people with mental illness can of course be cool) unless it is implied that this mental disorder is quirky and it is the sole reason the character is so cool and interesting. These portrayals often trivialise and ignore the most important and troubling symptoms of the mental illness in question. Mental illness can ruin your life; it is not something that makes you cool.

Take *Monk* as an example, a show about an excellent detective with Obsessive Compulsive Disorder (OCD) where his disorder is shown as a sort of superpower and certain overbearing aspects of it are ignored, leaving us to grasp OCD as something quirky and glamorous.

Another example is the TV series *Perception*, where the main character, Daniel Pierce, is a schizophrenic neuroscience professor. Daniel is also an FBI consultant as he has a knack for solving mysterious cases by hallucinating about witnesses and events – an 'ability' arising out of his schizophrenia. His disorder in this case seems to define him and all his actions and on top of that the portrayal is grossly unrealistic (in reality most hallucinations are auditory in schizophrenia and vivid visual ones are very rare).



This isn't to say everything you watch on TV misrepresents mental illness, some examples are rather promising such as the TV series *Girls* (created by Lena Dunham) which accurately represents OCD, and explains the need for getting help and gives us the correct but often overlooked notion that people with mental disorders can get better with the right intervention. *Silver Linings Playbook* also does a somewhat acceptable job.

However, realistic portrayals are scarce. It just so happens that many people, especially the youth, get their ideas about mental disorders from movies and shows rather than say, health magazines. Incorrect representations, as a result, are terribly misleading.

Young impressionable teenagers get a dangerous message out of this. That having a mental illness is necessary to fit in. Pretending to have or wanting to have social anxiety or OCD like your favourite movie character to appear 'relatable' isn't something we want happening, yet it does happen. It also prevents people, who are actually suffering from mental health issues, from seeking and getting the right help. When something as serious as mental illness is either hushed up and not talked about at all or on the other hand thrown around flippantly like a joke, who would be able to take it seriously?

Equally dangerous is the recurring theme (often found in Hollywood) that a mental disorder defines a person and makes them who they are. Yes, people have mental illnesses and it may make up a large part of their lives in some cases, but these individuals are more than their illnesses. They are not defined by it.

Making light of mental disorders such as anxiety and OCD will not help the cause either. Insensitive jokes on Facebook posts or even T-shirts by some well-known companies are an example. A T-shirt bearing the words "I thought I was bi-polar, turns out I'm just a jerk" is all kinds of wrong. A sweater reading "OCD - Obsessive Christmas Disorder" is no better.

Raising awareness about mental health issues, while undoubtedly important, is not the same as glamorisation of it. The need grows for more realistic portrayals of people with mental illness and their everyday lives and stories before the fine line between 'raising awareness' and 'misrepresenting by trivialising and glamorising',

becomes yet more blurred.

The next time you come across a seemingly harmless post about mental illness or find yourself watching a movie after flipping through channels you will hopefully be able to differentiate between stereotyped incorrect representations and reality.

Sources:

- <https://www.the-newshub.com/film-and-tv/the-best-and-worst-portrayals-of-mental-illness-in-film-and-tv>
- <http://www.usatoday.com/story/money/nation-now/2015/11/11/target-accused-trivializing-mental-illness-ocd-sweater/75564422/>

Salma Mohammad Ali fears she is becoming a crazy cat lady and uses writing as a means to grasp on to sanity. Send her your views/hate/love at [fb.com/salma.ali209](https://www.facebook.com/salma.ali209)

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