

Stigma in the media assignment



Stigma in the Media Most people gather what they know about mental illnesses from television and film. Unfortunately these media portrayals are inaccurate and create stigma. They depict people suffering from mental illnesses as different, dangerous and laughable. Characters are often addicted to drugs or alcohol, are violent, dangerous, or out of control. Horror film characters like Norman Bates in Psycho, Jack Torrance in the Shining, or Hannibal Lecter in Silence of the Lambs associate the typical ‘psycho-killer’ with people who suffer from a mental illness.

But dramas and horror films are not the only film genres that create stigma. Comedies like What About Bob and many others not only stigmatize, they also make fun of mental illnesses and the people who suffer from them. This paper will discuss how the film Me, Myself & Irene is an inaccurate, offensive and stigmatizing portrayal of an individual suffering from schizophrenia. It also discusses what can be done to counteract the stigma created by these types of films. Me Myself & Irene The film Me, Myself & Irene was a blockbuster hit released in 2000.

The comedy stars Jim Carrey as a Rhode Island state trooper who is portrayed as having two personalities: Charlie and Hank. Charlie is a sweet, mild-mannered, non confrontational character who is too nice for his own good. Hank is his maniacal alter-ego being the complete opposite of everything he is in manner. When ‘mild’ Charlie forgets to take his medication for schizophrenia, he turns into the ‘aggressive and violent’ Hank. Complications arise when he’s assigned to escort a woman named Irene played by Renee Zellweger back to New York and ends up falling in love with her.

Me, Myself & Irene reinforces the many common stereotypes and often destructive media images about mental illness, associating it with sustained violence, abusive language and gross sexual behavior. It promotes misinformation either out of ignorance or to make for a more entertaining story by identifying Carrey's character as schizophrenic versus the correct diagnosis of multiple personality disorder. It stereotypes schizophrenia as a battle within us between good and evil. Hanks character exaggerates the perception that people with mental illness are violent even though violence is not a symptom of schizophrenia.

Even the movie's tagline reads " From Gentle to Mental" and again equates mental illness with violent behavior. What I found most troubling is how the movie portrays schizophrenia, its symptoms and treatments as a joke. In one scene Carrey's character is diagnosed as having " advanced delusional schizophrenia with involuntary narcissistic rage. " It also should be noted that Fox marketers distributed white jelly-bean " pills" that supposedly cure schizophrenia at the film's premiere. The bottle's label warns that side effects include " genital elephantiasis. "

The effect of this film could seriously affect the lives, behavior and medical compliance of those with existing conditions. The film also targets age groups that are most at risk from showing early signs of illness. But who would want to seek help for any distressing feelings they have when they know that mental illness is the object of ridicule and believe it to be embarrassing or shameful. Because of the stigma created by films like Me Myself and Irene, it is important to find ways to combat these stereotypes especially as medical professionals . Combating Stigma

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One of the first steps in combating stigma is to examine our own attitudes towards mental illnesses. As nurses we must consider how these might affect our clinical practice. Maintaining up to date knowledge of mental illness leaves less room for stereotyping and prejudice. All nurses should understand that schizophrenia is not split personality or multiple personality disorder. It is an illness that impairs a person's ability to think clearly and relate to others. The vast majority of people with schizophrenia are not violent and don't pose a danger to others but are more often victims of violence themselves.

As individuals, we can also challenge stigma by discouraging the use of negative language regarding those who have a mental illness. Certain words can be extremely offensive to those who suffer from a serious mental disorders. Words like 'psycho' or 'schizo' have negative connotations and are usually used inaccurately. Describing a patient as a "schizophrenic," rather than as someone with schizophrenia, reduces them to a stereotype and robs them of personal identity. We must be extremely sensitive and careful when addressing those with mental illnesses.

We should remember that they are people first and deserve to be treated with dignity and respect. Another important step is to watch our own behavior. For effective health care to be delivered, it is crucial that health professionals are not effected by prejudiced attitudes. The majority of those with mental illnesses are regular people who just happen to have biological and chemical dysfunctions of the brain. They have family and friends, jobs, homes, interests, hobbies, likes and dislikes as much as everybody else does.

They need to be treated no differently than someone without a mental illness. Stigma and negative stereotypes can also be reduced by learning more about mental illnesses. We should educate ourselves through the use of research, on-line resources, and contact with mental health professionals. By interacting directly with those who have been diagnosed with a mental illness we will better understand what that person is struggling with. As nurses we should be advocates for vulnerable individuals who have to cope with both their illness and the daily effects of stigma.

We can take action in the fight against stigma by speaking up against negative media portrayals through the use of protests, letter-writing, public events, and advocacy. We can offer specific suggestions and remind people of appropriate language. We can also educate others about the negative effects of stigma on those with mental illnesses. Joining an advocacy organization is helpful. If we are comfortable enough to speak up, we may be able to help educate people about the hurt that results from stigmatizing mental illnesses.

It is clear that presently there are no effective constraints upon the media from using grossly discriminatory portrayals of people with mental illness. Therefore as nurses we should encourage policy makers to introduce clear voluntary guidelines to shape and reduce such media misrepresentation. Conclusion People with schizophrenia are inaccurately portrayed in the offensive and stigmatizing film *Me, Myself & Irene*. The only way to prevent the stigma associated with these films is to get involved. Watch your own attitudes and behaviors and educate yourself and others as much as you can.

Comedy and fantasy have their place in film but not at the expense of children and adults who struggle daily to overcome mental illness. A comedy that similarly made fun of cancer or AIDS would never be tolerated. The entertainment industry must learn that this exploitation of mental illness is unacceptable. Unfortunately, the entertainment industry continues to present people with mental illness in a negative light. They have wide ranging consequences for the lives of those with mental illness and for the ways people act towards others with psychiatric disorders.