

... barking ... barmy ... bonkers ... crazy ... deranged ... few  
sandwiches short of a picnic ... frenzied ... funny farm ... ga-  
ga ... head case ... insane ... loon ... loony left ... lost her  
marbles ... lunatic ... mad as a hatter ... madman ... maniac ...  
mental ... not the full shilling ... nutcase ... nutter ... nutty as  
a fruitcake ... off his back ... off his rocker ... paranoid...  
pervert ... petty ... psycho ... psychokiller ... murderous  
psychopath ... raving ... raving right ... round the twist ...  
schizo ... schizoid ... screwball ... sicko ... stark staring

## **A GUIDE TO COVERING MENTAL HEALTH ISSUES FOR MEDIA PROFESSIONALS IN THE HIGHLANDS**

Words can hurt. And the words used to describe people suffering from mental illness can be the most hurtful of all.

This guide is intended to help media professionals in the Highlands to cover mental health issues fairly and sensitively, and to ensure that they have access to accurate and unbiased information.



## **The Highland Users Group: A Voice for Users of Mental Health Services**

***This guide has been produced by HUG, the Highland Users Group, a network of users of mental health services across the Highlands. HUG campaigns to improve the rights, services and treatments of people with mental health problems, and to challenge the stigma surrounding mental illness***

### **Introduction**

We hope that you, as media professionals, will accept '**Sticks and Stones - A Good Practice Guide to Reporting on Mental Health Issues**' in the spirit in which it has been produced, and regard it as a helpful source and guide, rather than something constraining and critical.

HUG's experience of the Highland and Scottish media has been very positive and we have received great support from individual journalists who have written with tact and sensitivity about our work. An aim of this guide is to build upon this solid foundation, encourage responsible reporting through raised awareness of mental health issues amongst media professionals.

## **Why A Good Practice Guide?**

Quite simply, the media plays a crucial role in forming our attitudes towards mental illness. Many users of mental health services have identified unfair, unbalanced and negative UK media coverage as one of the key factors in the discrimination they experience.

‘The Commission is concerned that editors should avoid the use of such epithets as “basket case” and “nutter”... Not only can such language cause distress to patients and their families, by interfering detrimentally with their care and treatment, it can also create a climate of public fear and rejection.’

### **Press Complaints Commission Report No. 38, June 1997**

**This guide is intended to help media professionals in the Highlands and across Scotland to cover mental health issues fairly and sensitively and to ensure they have access to accurate and relevant information.**

## **What Are Mental Health Problems?**

Mental health is something that we all have: for some of us it is good, for some of us it is bad. For all of us, it is something that moves between good and bad throughout our lives.

Mental health problems - like physical ones - can range from mild to severe, from short-term to long and enduring. Most

mental health problems respond well to treatment and many people find ways of dealing with their illness and continue to lead full and active lives.

## **Mind Your Language**

**The glossary below sets out definitions and explanations of the main vocabulary used in reference to mental illness:**

**PSYCHOTIC** does not mean violent or aggressive. It describes the experience of psychosis, a term for conditions affecting the ability to distinguish between reality and imagination.

**SCHIZOPHRENIA** has nothing to do with split personality. It refers to a serious mental disorder which interferes with a person's ability to recognise what is real and what is not. It is usually described as a psychosis or psychotic illness.

**MANIC DEPRESSION** is another psychotic state, characterised by swings of mood between elation and depression. Periods of depression can last weeks or months before swinging into elation.

**DEPRESSION** and **ANXIETY** are by far the most common mental health problems, affecting one in ten people at any time.

**DEMENTIA** is a physical problem caused by changes in the brain, which cause confusion and memory loss.

**PSYCHOPATH** is an out of date term for someone with a severe anti-social personality disorder. It has nothing to do with schizophrenia or any other severe mental illness.

**VIOLENCE** is very uncommon among people experiencing mental distress. The risk of them being involved in violence is only

marginally greater than among other people, and then only if they are experiencing acute, untreated symptoms.

**MANIAC, LOONEY, NUTTER, BASKET CASE** and other pejorative words convey a scary and unsettling image of people with mental health problems. Studies have confirmed that the stigma promoted by this kind of coverage can increase hostility towards people experiencing mental distress and make it less likely they will seek help. Even in a jokey context, please think carefully before using words like this.

### **SERVICE USERS/USERS/USERS OF MENTAL HEALTH**

**SERVICES** – these are useful terms in describing people who access mental health services.

**Many argue that positive alternatives to negative terms must be offered and find their way into mainstream vocabulary. The following are examples of alternative terms, which could be used:**

### **Dispelling Myths and Misunderstanding – The Fundamental Facts about Mental Illness**

#### **Negative term:**

A person who is  
crazy/crazed/mad/loony/nuts/  
mentally handicapped  
A schizo/ A manic depressive

Madness/ Insanity

A person freed/released from  
hospital

#### **Alternative:**

A person who is in mental  
distress/a person with a mental  
health problem  
A person with schizophrenia/manic  
depression/  
a person with a diagnosis of  
schizophrenia/ manic depression  
A person in mental distress  
Mental health problems/ mental  
distress  
A person discharged from hospital

## **Prevalence of Mental Health Problems**

**Over 1 in 4 people in the UK** will experience emotional and mental distress during the course of a year.

*D. Goldberg & P Huxley, quoted in Finding a Place: a review of mental health services. Audit Commission 1994*

**Approximately 1 in every 100 adults** will experience either manic depression or schizophrenia at some time in their lives.

*Cited in The Fundamental Facts - all the latest facts and figures on mental illness. Mental Health Foundation 1999*

Estimates for the lifetime prevalence of depression are calculated at between **1 in 6 - 1 in 4** of the population.

*National depression alliance in Hartley, E. 'High depression rate triggers new campaign'. Healthcare Today May 1998*

## **Children and Young People**

Depression affects 1 in every 200 children under 12 years old and 2-3 in every 100 teenagers.

*Royal College of Psychiatrists*

## **Suicide**

**75%** of suicides in the UK are by men.

Ray, S., Borton, E. & Colyer, L. 'Listen Up: Responding to people in crisis', The Samaritans, 1998

Suicide accounts for **20% of all deaths by young people**.  
The Samaritans Information Resource Pack, 1998.

### Self-Harm

As many as **1 in 10 young people** could be affected by deliberate self-harm (e.g. hitting, cutting or burning oneself, pulling hair or picking skin).

*Royal College of Psychiatrists*

### Mental Illness and Violence

People diagnosed with schizophrenia are **100 times more dangerous to themselves** than to others.

*H. Prins 'Dangerousness: a review' in Principles and Practice of Forensic Psychiatry, R. Bluglass and P. Bowden, 1990*

You are **thirteen times** more likely to be killed by a stranger without mental health problems than by someone who has mental health problems.

*Progress report of the confidential enquiry into homicides and suicides by mentally ill people - Department of Health 1997*

We're here to help...

If you are researching or writing a piece about mental health issues and you need more information, HUG can either tell you what you need to know or put you in touch with someone who can.

In particular, we are keen to ensure that the voices of the users of mental health services are heard loudly and clearly in any media coverage of these issues.

Whether you want a general chat about the issues, you need to interview someone on a specific story or you want instant facts and figures, please get in touch with us at HUG

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