

Mental illness and suicide on screen: a screenwriter's perspective

Nick Burnett is a screenwriter and a member of the Australian Writers' Guild. He describes his latest script, The Tale of the Unknown Man, as a sci-fi thriller with a difference.

"The story is about a police detective who hunts a supernatural killer. He experiences a psychotic episode and must deal with that while pursuing his goal," Nick said.

Elena Terol from Mindframe's Stage and Screen program spoke with Nick about the portrayal of mental illness on screen, as well as his own experience living with Schizoaffective Disorder and Obsessive Compulsive Disorder.

Elena: What are the key issues that concern you in relation to how people with mental illness are portrayed on screen?

Nick: There's an idea in society that people with mental illness are extremely ill. This is often perpetuated in film. Too often it's not shown that most of us with illnesses live a very balanced, and dare it be said, normal life.

It's almost like if you have a psychotic episode, then this is how you are for good. There's little consideration that people deal with and recover from such events.

I wanted to show this in my script.

Yes, a psychotic episode is a major incident in your life. You may even need to be hospitalised for a certain time. I've had three psychotic episodes. At no time was I violent or tried to hurt another person. Quite the opposite. I wanted to help people and save the world. This notion that you're somehow crazy is a false one. I certainly lost touch with reality on two occasions. But I wasn't erratic or mad.

That's why it was important to me to show the audience what it's like to have a psychotic episode and show the hero recovering from that and going about his everyday life. Show a character pursuing worthwhile goals. Being able to do that without somehow cracking up.

Often in movies, mental illness is shown in extremes. I wanted to deliver a story that showed a character having a psychotic episode and dealing with that and recovering from that.

Too often the villain in films is shown to have a type of mental illness. This leads to a story which reinforces the false myths that exist around mental illness. That is a person experiencing mental illness is somehow crazy, violent and unpredictable, and even a psychopath.

What do you think are the main myths/stereotypes in relation to mental illness?

There seems to be this myth in society that if you get a mental illness then your life's somehow over. Too often films portray the crazy person who's beyond help. Whereas most of us with mental illnesses just get on with our lives.

“Mental illness isn't a death sentence.”

It's not something that should be feared or dreaded. It's certainly not the end of the world. In fact you'll find through the experience of mental illness you have a far richer life. While acute episodes are difficult. Once you get professional help and get on the right medication you can recover and live a rich full life.

Of course a psychotic episode, depression, anxiety, or Obsessive Compulsive Disorder are very difficult to deal with. But know that you will get through it and come out the other end a far stronger person. If you can deal with mental illness then basically you can deal with anything.

How does it make you feel when you see mental illness portrayed in a stigmatising or ill-informed way?

The stigma around mental illness is the result of a lack of understanding and false fear. It's the belief that having a mental illness makes you different and odd.

What it does make you is more understanding of human emotions and the human condition. More empathetic to the battles that people face. More considerate to the needs of people. It makes you a genuine individual who's capable of being thrown in the deep end and swimming your way out of it.

What areas related to mental illness would you like to see portrayed on screen?

We need to see characters on the screen who are capable of having an episode of mental illness and dealing with that. Then going on to thrive because of that experience.

We need to see stories that illustrate that having a mental illness isn't something to be embarrassed about. Nor feared.

We need to see stories that present the experience of mental illness as a positive one. Ones that show just how strong a person can become. How people can confront the gossip around them and deal with the stigma head on. Deal with the misinformation.

“It's important for films to not give fuel to the myths and stigmas around mental illness: that people with a mental illness are somehow evil psychopaths, hell bent on their own destruction.”

What would be your advice for fellow screenwriters who are considering or working on projects that deal with mental illness?

If you're writing a script about mental illness then be realistic. Don't perpetuate the false myths and fuel the stigmas. Talk to people who live with mental illness. Learn from their experiences.

“Don't just assume mental illness is such a negative when in actual fact it can be an experience that produces enormous growth in one's character.”

We don't see enough on the screen people dealing with mental illness in a positive character building way. Just be accurate in your portrayal of mental illness in films. Do your research.

Mindframe is a great resource to help with questions you might have for writing about mental illness. Speak to people who live with mental illness. Speak to psychiatrists, psychologists, and doctors.

Just be accurate. Don't fuel the stigmas. Don't perpetuate the myths. Tell true stories about mental illness. We're not stuck in the dark ages. For whatever reason, a lot of the public don't have a good understanding about mental health. So educate them. Show them what it's really like to live with mental illness. Show characters with mental illness in a positive light. It's not a terminal illness so stop writing films that suggest it is.

Why do you think it's important to include help-seeking information in screen portrayals?

The greatest problem with the stigmas surrounding mental illness is that it may stop a person who's becoming ill from seeking professional help. Mental illness is no different to physical illness. You wouldn't break your leg and walk around on it for many months. You'd break your leg and seek help almost immediately. Why should mental illness be any different? We need to illustrate this in the stories we tell.

Suicide needs to be prevented in society. The major way we can do that is for a person to seek help immediately when they get into trouble. We need to tell stories where the characters reach out for assistance when they experience mental illness.

“We must crush the stigma around seeking help. To do this we must tell stories that show people need to seek help.”

If this interview has raised any concerns for you, you can contact the following crisis services:

- Lifeline: 13 11 14
lifeline.org.au
- Suicide Call Back Service: 1300 659 467
suicidecallbackservice.org.au
- *beyondblue*: 1300 22 4636
beyondblue.org.au

If you are a screenwriter looking for information on psychotic illnesses, you can access the following resources:

- One Door Mental Health (previously Schizophrenia Fellowship of NSW)
onedoor.org.au
- SANE Australia
<https://www.sane.org/mental-health-and-illness/facts-and-guides/psychosis>
- *Mindframe's* guidelines for Stage and Screen, developed in partnership with the Australian Writers' Guild
mindframe-media.info/for-stage-and-screen/stage-and-screen-resources

02 4924 6900

Mindframe@hnehealth.nsw.gov.au

mindframe-media.info/for-stage-and-screen