

## The shift towards empathy in portrayals of mental illness on stage and screen

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**Over the past decade, studies on screen portrayals of mental illness have shown a shift towards empathy among filmmakers and TV producers that has significant implications for the creative process and decisions made by writers, says School of Culture and Communication researcher at the University of Melbourne, Dr Fincina Hopgood.**

Since she began her PhD researching portrayals of mental illness in Australian films of the 1990s, Dr Hopgood has observed a shift from stereotypical, stigmatising representations to portrayals that are more accurate and sensitive; what she describes as 'The Shift towards Empathy'.

Dr Hopgood points to *Mindframe* for stage and screen guidelines as evidence of this shift, the application of which, she suggests has resulted in the development of stronger emotional connections between screen characters and viewers.

Kim McNaughton from the *Mindframe* team had the opportunity to talk with Dr Hopgood about her research findings.



### What changes have you witnessed throughout your research on portrayals of mental illness on Australian screens?

I have seen a greater willingness on the part of filmmakers and TV producers to put a character living with mental illness front and centre in the narrative, as the protagonist with whom audiences are invited to identify, rather than as a supporting character for the audience to laugh at or be fearful of. In my PhD, I argue that films from Australia and New Zealand such as *Shine*, *Angel Baby* and *An Angel at My Table* really paved the way for this change both locally and internationally. These films showed us that the hero or heroine of the story can be living with mental illness or psychological trauma and the audience will stick with them, they will go on that emotional journey, if the portrayal is handled sensitively and compassionately. We are invited to empathise with these characters. I call this 'the *Shine* effect' – and it is arguably the success of a film like *Shine* that led producers to develop films such as *A Beautiful Mind*, *Iris*, and *Silver Linings Playbook*, and helped audiences embrace characters living with mental illness in shows such as *United States of Tara*, *Homeland* and *Please Like Me*.

### How do you see *Mindframe* for stage and screen as being evidence of a shift towards empathy for people living with mental illness?

Filmmakers and TV producers can't suddenly change the way in which mental illness is portrayed on screen without access to research that counters the stereotypes, clichés and misrepresentations that have dominated popular culture and the mass media for decades. Indeed, the 'psycho killer' remains one of the most persistent and pernicious stereotypes still circulating today. So *Mindframe* offers education and information that is accessible, practical and grounded in the real world experience of people living with mental illness. For a character to be empathetic, it is important that they appear authentic, that their storyline is based upon the lived experience of mental illness, even if the character is fictional and not based on an actual person. This ensures that the portrayal on screen does not stigmatise people living with mental illness and perpetuate misleading stereotypes that prevent audiences empathising with these characters.

### What are some of the implications for the creative process and for writers regarding this shift towards empathy?

Obviously, stereotypes are a convenient short-hand for screenwriters working in particular genres, such as comedy or writing for television where you are working within strict time constraints. So abandoning stereotypes and finding new ways to portray a condition like mental illness can be difficult. But there is a great creative potential in mental illness, if you're willing to take your audience inside the character's headspace – to find on-screen equivalents for what they see, hear, think and feel. This can be challenging material; after all, empathy - the imaginative act of walking in someone else's shoes or seeing through another person's eyes – is not always pleasant. But it also produces great insight and understanding if the portrayal of mental illness is framed within an approach to the character that regards them as a whole person, with hopes and dreams the audience can share.

### What advice do you have for budding screenwriters seeking to portray mental illness in their work?

It really helps to seek out people with a lived experience of mental illness, and talk with them not only about their own mental health journey, but about society's attitudes towards mental illness and how film, television and popular culture generally have contributed to these misconceptions and stereotypes. Ask them what *they* would like to see on the screen. Treat them as the experts, and let them guide you on your research journey. Reach out to organisations like *Mindframe* and SANE Australia for advice and resources to support you. Read widely; watch other films and TV shows about mental illness to see what works well and what distances you from the character. And don't be afraid to try something new!

### *Mindframe for stage and screen*

**Mindframe for stage and screen** resources were developed with the assistance of screenwriters, the Australian Writers' Guild and the Department of Health. The free resources assist scriptwriters, playwrights and television story departments with truthful and authentic portrayals of mental illness and suicide.

For more information on **Mindframe for stage and screen** and free downloadable resources, go to: [www.mindframe-media.info/for-stage-and-screen](http://www.mindframe-media.info/for-stage-and-screen) or contact **Mindframe** at 02 4924 6900.

**Mindframe** workshops are conducted through the Australian Writers' Guild and provide scriptwriters, playwrights and television story departments with accurate information based on research. **Mindframe** workshops can also provide scriptwriters, playwrights and television story departments with access to spokespeople with lived experience.

For information on news coverage of Dr Hopgood's research, see:

<http://www.theage.com.au/national/education/voice/shift-toward-empathy-20140206-323dq.html>

For more information about Dr Hopgood, see:

<http://www.historyofemotions.org.au/research/researchers/fincina-hopgood.aspx>

**Image caption:** Dr Fincina Hopgood, Associate Investigator, ARC Centre of Excellence for the History of Emotions and researcher affiliated with the Human Rights and Animal Ethics Research Network in the School of Culture and Communication at the University of Melbourne.