Knowing that people generally fear what they don’t understand, the Entertainment Industries Council, Inc. (EIC) tried to shed some spotlight on mental health issues by hosting a conference between the Surgeon General of the United States, Dr. David Satcher, and leaders of our industry. Held at the Beverly Hills Hotel in January, the event also featured former ER Executive Producer and current Law and Order: SVU Executive Producer, Dr. Neal Baer; Academy Award-winning actor Sally Field; best-selling author and Johns Hopkins University Professor of Psychiatry, Dr. Kay Jamison; and Dr. David Litts, Special Advisor to the Surgeon General.

A primary focus of the conference, attended by producers, directors, writers and both network and studio executives, was the pervasive stigma confronting those suffering from mental illness. Dr. Satcher encouraged the industry to continue what many TV shows and films have recently achieved: sympathetic and accurate portrayals of mentally ill people as having problems rather than causing them, being more troubled than troublesome and -- as is true in real life -- being more frightened than frightening.

Dr. Satcher sees the industry as a crucial vehicle in shaping public perception and heightening understanding about mental disorders. “There’s an overwhelming problem of stigma that interferes with people getting the help they need. So less than half of the people who suffer from mental health problems each year seek treatment,” he told the audience. “I’m here with the Entertainment Industries Council to look at the whole issue of mental health and the role the media can play. I believe this group has the ability to bring awareness and understanding has increased in the minds of the public about mental illness.”

EIC President and CEO Brian Dyak enthusiastically underscored the sentiment that the entertainment industry is a particularly effective conduit for information about the various mental disorders. “In the mental health area, new scientific understanding has opened up a wealth of opportunity to engage the industry around mental health issues. Our intent is to give the creative community a more in-depth view of the changing standards around mental illness.”

Dr. Satcher stressed how commonplace mental disorders are. “One in five Americans suffer from some form of mental disorder each year including children,” he said.

Dr. Kay Jamison, an expert in bipolar disorder (otherwise known as manic depressive illness) added an exclamation point to that statement in her own presentation. “I can’t emphasize it enough: Mental illnesses are very, very common. They seem less common than they in fact are because people are so reluctant to talk about them.”

Showing none of this reluctance herself, she vividly described the awful roller coaster ride of manic depression, not only as an observer, but as a passenger. The author of the medical school textbook on manic-depression told her own story of coping with the euphoria and despair of this illness, and of her own attempted suicide. By coming out publicly, she’s hoping she may move others to seek treatment for their mood disorders. She estimates that 20% of all untreated depressives commit suicide, and yet most either don’t seek or receive proper treatment. “I’m amazed at the number of people affected by suicide. It doesn’t necessarily make sense to outsiders because people don’t talk about it. They’re ashamed, or more...”
If you don't want to be around other people
You're taking care of yourself and relaxing
For all of the above you're not told to take
If you don't like something and mention it
If you're afraid to leave the house at night
I'm depressed and need to get up.
You're afraid to leave the house at night
You're cautious
If I am afraid to leave the house at night
I'm paranoid.
If you speak your mind and express your opinions
You're assertive
If I speak my mind and express my opinions
I'm aggressive.
If you don't like something and mention it
You're being honest
If I don't like something and mention it
I am being difficult.
If you get angry
You're considered upset
If I get angry
I am considered dangerous.
If you over-react to something
You're sensitive
I over-react to something
I'm out of control.
If you don't want to be around other people
You're taking care of yourself and relaxing
If I don't want to be around other people
I'm isolating myself and avoiding.
If you talk to strangers
You are friendly
If I talk to strangers
I'm being inappropriate.
For all of the above you're not told to take
A pill or are hospitalized, but I am.

Debbie Sesula

Creating quite a buzz in the mental health community, the character has been a powerful catalyst for sufferers of this disorder to reach out and connect, and not feel so isolated with their problem.

“What I like to do is tell old-fashioned stories,” Baer told the group. “They provoke because they attempt to pose tough questions. They educate because they present an abundance of information accurately.” He spoke about the need for sensitivity in the mental health arena, but not at the expense of unabashed honesty. “When presenting topics dealing with mental health, we have to address an enormous amount of stigma that already exists. We have to try not to stereotype those suffering from mental disorders. But importantly, we have to pose tough questions and not shy away from asking them because they might rankle some viewers or Standards and Practices.”

If Dr. Baer gave Maggie her thoughts and actions, Sally Field’s compassionate but joiling portrayal gave her a soul. Ms. Field spoke of the considerable research she did to imbue the character with depth and realism - interviewing patients, reading books, and meeting with psychiatrists.

Gathering this information, she used her artist’s mind to take her where she would go if she had the disorder. “My task was to let this fire that I live with, a kind of on-edge, place to allow that part of reaching not only for other people’s emotions, but my own to create this complex character. I was allowed to go with the colors that came to me even though they weren’t in the script. Some of the fire and difficulty Maggie has weren’t written. I know that’s where she lived. I knew it went further than what’s easily put on a page.”

During the conference, a few clips of recent television programs that portray mental illness in a constructive and sensitive way were shown by Barbara Lurie, EIC’s Associate Director of Programs. Among those singled out was Law & Order: Special Victims Unit for its portrayal of a schizophrenic man as being a crime victim rather than victimizer. Both the episode and Ms. Lurie emphasized that, according to many studies, people with mental disorders as a whole are no more menacing than the population at large.

Also shown were Seventh Heaven’s empathetic depiction of a teenager coping successfully with life after a suicide attempt and Judging Amy’s enlightening characterization of a person trapped inside an obsessive-compulsive disorder.

Another clip from Judging Amy, as well as one from The West Wing were selected for their portrayals of lead characters receiving mental health treatment. Hopefully these characters will provide role models for untreated viewers similarly in need of help.

Spotlights illuminate. By shining a light on mental health issues, the conference tried to soften the shadows of stigma and misunderstanding that surround what it means to be mentally ill. The Surgeon General expressed hope that our industry will continue to do so as well.

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