

## **Guidelines for journalists on reporting mental health issues**

### **Introduction**

Although in Latvia there are around 49 000 people (around 3% of the total population) with mental health problems<sup>1</sup>, information about them is almost absent in mass media. The limited information is mainly in criminal news and in jokes about psychiatric patients that forms a misleading impression that people with mental illnesses are either murderers or objects of laughter. The main sources of information about people with mental illnesses for mass media are police and news agencies; almost never voice is given to individuals themselves therefore information very often is biased or incorrect.

Interviews conducted in 2004/2005 with journalists and editors indicate that there might be three reasons for under- representation of people with mental illnesses in mass media in Latvia<sup>2</sup>. Firstly, there is a widespread assumption that audience will not be interested in mental health issues, i.e. stories about people with mental illnesses “won’t sell”.

Secondly, persons with mental illnesses in Latvia are “invisible” and hard to find even if journalist is interested to tell about them, for example, to interview somebody who has mental health problems. Thirdly, journalists are somewhat reluctant to write about mental health issues or interview people with mental health problems or mental health advocates because their knowledge on this topic is rather limited. In addition, people with mental illnesses and mental health care professionals often complain that journalists misrepresent information about mental health care or people with mental illnesses.

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<sup>1</sup> “...a broad range of mental and emotional conditions that ....significantly interferes with the performance of major life activities such as thinking, communicating, learning, and sleeping. ...mental health problems are typically treated through some combination of hospital care, medication, psychotherapy, and social support” (Open Society Mental Health Initiative, [www.soros.org/initiatives/mhi/about](http://www.soros.org/initiatives/mhi/about))

<sup>2</sup> Kamerade, D. (2005). Representations of People with Mental Illnesses and Disability in Latvia. [www.policy.hu/kamerade/](http://www.policy.hu/kamerade/) [On-line].

## **Aim**

The aim of these guidelines is to provide journalists and editors with information that address all these three issues and might help to promote more accurate portrayal of mental health issues in mass media.

## **Issue Nr1. Potential audience and topics**

### **Will it sell?**

The evidence from focus group interviews with around 60 Latvian and Russian speaking representatives of general public (users of mass media) in Latvia, demonstrates that, in general, people are interested in mental health issues<sup>3</sup>. They name mass media (especially TV and press) as primary source for information on health, including mental health issues. However, majority of them admitted that information on mental health issues and people with mental illnesses is extremely limited and insufficient in mass media in Latvia. That indicates that potentially there is an interest on mental health problems from general public and therefore potential audience for mass media providing this information.

In addition to general public that is interested in mental health issues but find information about them insufficiently presented by mass media, there is a potential audience of around 49 000 persons with mental illnesses and their relatives that has been ignored so far by all mass media.

### **In what are people interested?**

When asked about what would be they interested to receive information related to mental health from mass media, representatives of general public identified two major themes that are currently underreported in mass media but are interesting: general mental health issues (i.e. causes, symptoms, treatment, prevention of mental illnesses) and people with mental illnesses (i.e. their lives, how to live with mental illness or with somebody who has it). Representatives of advocates of people with mental illnesses (e.g. self-support groups, NGOs) indicated that there is not enough

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<sup>3</sup> Kamerade, D. (2005). Representations of People with Mental Illnesses and Disability in Latvia. [www.policy.hu/kamerade/](http://www.policy.hu/kamerade/) [On-line].

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information about mental health care policy in Latvia (e.g. what are governmental initiatives regarding mental health care, are they sufficient, what need to be improved in mental health care system, what public initiatives exist to support people with mental illnesses).

### **Issue nr.2.**

#### **Where to find information?**

The main sources of information on mental health issues in Latvia are:

- Self-support group for people with mental illnesses and their relatives “Gaismas stars”, the leader- Mrs. Brigita Siliņa. (Lāčplēša Street 60, Rīga, t: 7284459). “Gaismas stars”, organizes workshops for people with schizophrenia and their relatives; publishes materials on schizophrenia and organizes annual exhibitions of works of art painted by individuals with schizophrenia.
- Latvian Centre for Human Rights and Ethnic studies, Mental Disability Advocacy Program, Alberta 13, Riga. Contact person Ieva Leimane-Veldmeijere –9717574, e-mail: [office@humanrights.org.lv](mailto:office@humanrights.org.lv). The aim of the program is the advocacy for rights of people with mental disabilities and illnesses.
- Association of Mental Health Care Professionals in Latvia- Tvaika 2, Rīga, t: 7080131. This association unites and represents mental health case specialists in Latvia.
- Association of Mental Health Nurses, contact person, the president of the association Jekaterina Jeremejeva, t:9570915 or 4731597. Association of mental health nurses actively participates in promotion of community based mental health case services and advocacy of rights of people with mental illnesses in Latvia.
- NGO “Paspārne”, Gārsene, Jēkabpils rajons, contact person Līga Rācene- 6525249 or 5269424. A regional organization that provides support for people with mental health problems.
- Association of private psychiatrists in Latvia, contact person- the chairman of the association Dr. Gints Polis, t: 9431337. This association unites around 40 psychiatrists, psychotherapists that are working independently from state mental health care system. The aim of this association is to provide an

alternative mental health care system in order to encourage people to seek help of mental health care specialists by providing discrete, more approachable service.

Some tips about finding and evaluating information about mental health issues and people with mental illnesses:

*Sources of information*

- It is crucial that in reports on people with mental health problems the voice is given to those who have mental illness experience, especially if story about them is negative, critical or very controversial. For example, when reporting on conflict between person with mental illness and his/her neighbours, make sure that you report not only neighbours opinion. Contrary to widespread belief that people with mental illnesses cannot express their opinions, in most cases they can talk to journalists just the same as everyone else.
  
- Collect information from as many and as diverse sources as possible in order to obtain the full picture. For example, mental health professionals, people with mental illnesses themselves, their relatives, decision makers and general public have fairly different perspectives of whether or not hospital centred mental health care (i.e. people with mental illnesses should be isolated into hospitals) should be substituted by community care (i.e. a range of support services and mental health care which are based in the community, rather than hospital, such as housing, day centres, supported employment projects).
  
- Remember that one person does not represent the whole group, e.g. one person with schizophrenia does not represent whole group of people with schizophrenia, and therefore his/her story is very unlikely to be truly representative. Try to obtain information from as many and diverse representatives of certain group as possible. Never make any conclusions from one person with mental illness.

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### *Bias and prejudice*

- Remember that all sources of information have their own “agenda”, i.e. purpose why they are giving/hiding some information and what information they are providing. Ask yourself: “Why this person is saying what he/she is saying? Is this information correct or biased?”
- Question your own bias and prejudice and those in society. For example, it is widespread belief that people with mental illnesses are more violent and dangerous to others. In reality, people with mental illness are very small proportion among those committing homicide, but they tend to be victims of violence more often than people without mental illness. Always ask yourself- where is the evidence that supports this “widespread knowledge”.
- Inform, not misinform! Always check facts, even if they come from “reliable sources” or you are “sure” that you are right. For example, do you know that schizophrenia and multiple personality disorder isn’t the same mental illnesses? If possible, show your report to experts, for example, mental health care professionals.

### **Issue Nr.3**

#### **How to write about people with mental illnesses?**

##### *Context*

- Do not emphasise that person has a mental illness if the main theme of publication isn’t mental illness per se, for example, when writing about criminal act committed by person with mental illness where illness wasn’t the cause for his/her activities. Emphasising mental illness in this case you would push readers towards misleading conclusion that criminal activity was caused by mental illness. The focus can be placed on mental illness only if the report is devoted to issues of mental health (e.g. interviews with people with manic depression about their coping strategies).
- Do not describe only mental illness and things related to it. Write about people in context- people with mental illnesses like other people also have families, work, opinions and hobbies. Presenting people with mental illness into

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context, i.e. writing about them, their life, rather than their illness, will make the story more interesting, appealing to the audience by reducing the person's mental health problems to "otherness".

- Find individuals who have managed their life and made achievements despite their mental illness. Don't write only about super achievers (e.g. genial scientists, writers) - it will raise unrealistic expectations on all persons with mental illnesses.

### *Language*

- Use the correct, undiscriminating and non-humiliating language. The right way to refer to people who have mental illness is "person with mental illness", "person with mental health problems", "person with schizophrenia (depression etc)". This approach focuses on the person not on his/her illness.
- Labels like "schizophrenic", "schizophrenic women", "mentally handicapped", "mentally disabled", "depressed child", and "mentally ill" or similar are inappropriate because they focus on diagnosis not on the person itself. People with schizophrenia are similar to each other as similar are people with gastritis- they do share some characteristics, however, still they are very diverse. Therefore it isn't appropriate to label somebody "schizophrenic" thus dismissing him/her as a personality.
- Labels like "crazy", "nuts", "stupid", "scizo", "maniac", are insulting and humiliating therefore must not be used.
- If you are not sure what term is correct, ask the people themselves how they prefer to be called or ask professionals what labels are appropriate. If some person (e.g. politician or other informant) uses such discriminatory language – indicate in your report that this language is perceived as insulting from people with mental health problems and their relatives.
- Never refer to people with mental illnesses as to "patients" or "patients of mental health care professionals" if your report is not directly related to

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patient's - health care professional relationships. Indeed, you usually don't call somebody "the patient of dentist or plastic surgeon" when writing about him/her outside of health care context.

### **Useful sources:**

- [www.psihiatrija.lv](http://www.psihiatrija.lv) - a website about psychiatry and psychotherapy in Latvia. Contains articles about mental illnesses, methods of mental health care, contacts of mental health care professionals in Latvia, and discussion forum.
- [www.privatpsihiatrija.lv](http://www.privatpsihiatrija.lv) - a website of association of Latvian independently working psychiatrists.
- [www.humarights.org.lv](http://www.humarights.org.lv) - website of Latvian Centre for Human Rights and Ethnic studies. Contains information on current activities of the Centre in field of advocacy for rights of people with mental disabilities and illnesses.
- [www.media-diversity.org](http://www.media-diversity.org), an international organisation that facilitates tolerance towards vulnerable groups into society promoting highest standards of professional journalism. Provides a wide range of user-friendly guidelines and handbooks for media professionals on how to report mental health issues, for example, how to interview people with disabilities, how to report suicide, how to write about mental illness and people with mental illnesses.