

A CHARTER “STIGMA IN THE MEDIA” FOR JOURNALISTS, AS A DECLARATION OF INTENT FOR RESPONSIBLE REPORTING ON MENTAL HEALTHCARE

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SUMMARY

Stigma and discrimination against people with mental health problems remain prevalent, despite increasing global efforts to combat them. Organizations like the Lancet Commission and the WHO emphasize the media's crucial role in shaping public perception, advocating for responsible reporting and the involvement of individuals with lived experience. While some positive shifts in media portrayal have been observed (e.g., in prime-time TV series), negative representations, dehumanizing language, and the perpetuation of stereotypes persist across various media forms, including gaming and news.

In Belgium, a specific incident involving stigmatizing media coverage led to the development of the "Stigma in the Media" charter. This charter provides guidelines for journalists. It stresses the importance of accurate information, appropriate terminology, respect for privacy and human dignity, and avoiding sensationalism. The charter aims to foster an empathetic and respectful media environment, promoting responsible discussions about mental health and encouraging positive societal change. Initial results suggest the charter is positively impacting media reporting on mental health in Belgium.

Key words: stigma - mental health - journalists

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INTRODUCTION

Stigma and discrimination against people with mental health problems continue to cause social upheaval and have been a hot topic in scientific literature for years (Catthoor & Thys 2025). Between 2001 and 2015, 2500 articles on PubMed were published using the search term 'mental health stigma.' By March 2025, there were 2066 articles from the past year alone. The definition of stigma has remained consistent over the past 25 years, which provides the important scientific advantage that research on this topic shares the same starting point and utilizes the same research instruments. The Lancet Commission on Ending Stigma and Discrimination in Mental Health (Thornicroft et al. 2022) still uses the description by Link & Phelan (2001): stigma should be understood as a complex social process that always involves five elements - labeling, stereotyping, social distancing, status loss, and discrimination. It is a destructive phenomenon that operates on multiple levels and often occurs within a context of power.

The Lancet Commission places great emphasis on both traditional and new media in the fight against stigma and discrimination, as media coverage is a powerful tool that can be used both positively and negatively. Language can either challenge or reinforce stereotypes

and prejudices. According to the Commission, all media companies should be called upon to develop action plans that promote mental health and actively contribute to combating negative portrayals of mental illness. Lancet Psychiatry is the first journal to ask every author of a submitted paper about the involvement of people with lived experience in the development of their manuscript (The Lancet Psychiatry 2025).

The World Health Organization (WHO) published a Mosaic toolkit to end stigma and discrimination in mental health (WHO 2024). The toolkit offers practical guidance on how to achieve this, based on three core evidence-based principles: leadership or co-leadership by people with lived experience, social contact, and inclusive partnerships. Emphasis is placed on inclusive collaborations between people with lived experience and influential groups in society, such as journalists and media companies. Active partnerships through social media are also promoted. Joining forces with media may enable anti-stigma activities to reach wider audiences and decrease the possibility that stereotypes and labels will be spread or reinforced.

Despite all efforts worldwide to tackle mental health stigma, the representation of people with mental health problems in the media remains mostly negative. A rare positive finding from American research was the favor-

able evolution of the portrayal of people with psychosis in prime-time TV series over the past ten years (Hodge & Turner 2025). Mentally vulnerable individuals with psychosis were less often depicted as former prisoners, criminals, or villains. Instead, they were increasingly portrayed as attractive and having a positive impact on society, as well as victims and protagonists. But recent research from Poland shows that people with autism are still portrayed as limited, and individuals with lived experience rarely get a voice (Wodziński et al. 2025). Similar research on public stigma toward people who use drugs showed that the use of dehumanizing terminology such as 'zombie drugs' substantially increases negative perceptions (Sumnall et al. 2025). Other forms of media, such as gaming, use the exact same negative framing of psychiatric care as traditional media. Recent research on the depiction of electroconvulsive therapy (ECT) in games showed that it is portrayed as an outdated, aggressive treatment method and even as a form of torture (Buday et al. 2024).

PSYCHIATRIC STIGMA IN THE MEDIA IN BELGIUM

Research in Flemish newspapers between 2013 and 2017 showed that the stigma attached to schizophrenia and psychosis is poignantly present in these journals (Thys et al. 2020). In 2023, a new media incident led to an open letter from several chief physicians calling for an end to stigmatizing and devaluating media framing towards persons with mental health vulnerability (Bouckaert 2023). The case was that a patient admitted to a psychiatric hospital got lost during a permitted leave. The police organized a search in the environment with a helicopter. This rescue action was picked up by a journalist from a popular newspaper, who subsequently portrayed the patient as an escaped criminal. After the publication of the open letter, the editorial board of the newspaper in question was contacted with a request for consultation regarding the incident. Consensus was quickly reached to take the article offline.

Subsequently, a task force was established with the aim of formulating guidelines for journalists to help reduce stigmatizing language and address incorrect framing. The task force was composed of a diverse group, including psychiatrists, media experts, and individuals with lived experience. The Flemish Association of Journalists and The Flemish Association of Psychiatry joined from the outset to ensure it became a shared project. The task force opted for the development of a charter, a formal document as a declaration of principles and a guideline for action. The intention was to present the charter to media companies in Belgium and have it formally signed by the editors-in-chief and the responsible publishers as a

declaration of agreement with its content, offering possibilities of improving the way mental health and psychological vulnerability are presented in the media. Signatories commit to fostering an inclusive, empathetic, and respectful approach while ensuring the well-being and privacy of those affected. Based on international best practices and adapted to the Belgian context, the charter seeks to help journalists reduce stigma, enhance understanding, and encourage positive changes in our society. It strives to create a media environment where mental health can be discussed responsibly and respectfully, enabling everyone to speak freely on the subject without fear of stigma or discrimination.

On September 9th 2024, the charter was officially signed by ten companies at the headquarters of DPG Media in Antwerpen (HLN), in the presence of the Belgian Minister of Health, Frank Vandembroucke, and the Flemish Minister of Media, Benjamin Dalle.

THE CHARTER "STIGMA IN THE MEDIA"

The charter was based on the journalistic guidelines for careful and ethical reporting of the Flemish Association of Journalists, the so-called 'Code of the Council for Journalism,' with the aim of aligning as closely as possible with existing and well-established recommendations. The code stipulates several fundamental principles, such as the standard of reporting truthfully, gathering and providing independent information, acting fairly, and showing respect for privacy and human dignity (Council for Journalism).

The charter "stigma in the media" consists of two major parts: the first on information and resources on mental health issues and stigma, and the second with recommendations for stigma-free reporting in the media (VVP 2025).

The first part of the text begins with the universality of mental health issues and their high prevalence while simultaneously emphasizing the generally good prognosis. It highlights the various causal factors - physical, psychological, and social - that interact and reinforce each other in the development of mental health problems. A central focus of the piece is that the occurrence of aggression and violence among psychologically vulnerable individuals is extremely rare and almost always the result of untreated symptoms. The impact of stigma on the well-being of people with mental health issues, as well as the responsibility of the media in this matter, is carefully explained. Finally, a number of information sources are listed where accurate and substantive information on various psychiatric disorders - such as depression, anxiety, psychosis, bipolar disorder, and borderline personality disorder - can be found.

Table 1. Ten recommendations for stigma-free reporting

Social relevance

- Evaluate whether mentioning a person's mental health condition is genuinely relevant to public interest.
- Medical data is sensitive. Balance respect for privacy with the public importance of the information and avoid unnecessary intrusions.

Reliable information

- Use reliable, expert sources to identify and describe mental health conditions (see "Information and resources").
- Avoid making automatic and unfounded links between a mental health condition and disruptive behavior.

Appropriate terminology

- Avoid stigmatizing or discriminatory terms such as "dangerous lunatic" or "escaped from the asylum."

Scientific context

- Briefly explain any medical terms or scientific concepts you use (see "Information and resources").
- Highlight available societal solutions for preventing or treating mental health conditions and accessing care.

Respect for privacy

- Be particularly cautious when dealing with people in vulnerable situations.

Respect for human dignity

- Avoid sensationalism at the expense of individuals with mental health conditions.
 - Show empathy: report with the mindset that the individual with a mental health condition could be a family member or friend.
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The second part of the charter consists of a recommendation for stigma-free reporting in the media. On social relevance, the advice is to evaluate whether mentioning a person's mental health condition is genuinely relevant to public interest. It is clear for everyone that medical data are most privacy-sensitive. The charter urges to balance respect for privacy with the public importance of the information and avoid unnecessary intrusions at all cost (Table 1).

On reliable information, the charter recommends to use reliable, expert sources to identify and describe mental health conditions. Besides that, it is essential to avoid making automatic and unfounded links between a mental health condition and disruptive behavior.

On appropriate terminology, it is off course absolutely necessary to avoid stigmatizing or discriminatory terms such as "dangerous lunatic" or "escaped from the asylum."

It is always helpful for readers to receive some scientific context in order to understand the entire picture. Therefore, the charter points out to explain any used medical terms or scientific concepts. In this context, it is worth mentioning and highlighting available societal solutions for preventing or treating mental health conditions and accessing care.

Last but not least the charter mentions the need for the utmost respect for the privacy of the person with mental vulnerability or in vulnerable situations, and respect for human dignity. Sensationalism at the expense of individuals with mental health conditions should be avoided in any possible way. Empathy should be the basic emotion to report with, together with the mindset that the individual with a mental health condition could be a family member or friend.

CONCLUSION

The 'Stigma in the Media' charter was developed in response to a careless, stigmatizing, and denigrating online article in a Flemish newspaper about the police search for a missing hospitalized patient. It is encouraging that both the Flemish Association of Journalists and a large number of media companies have agreed to the content of the charter, thereby committing themselves to ensuring that future reporting is as factually accurate as possible. Since the charter was signed, there have been no further media incidents. Spreading the charter across various European countries could help reduce stigma and improve the situation of psychologically vulnerable individuals.

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The authors assert that all procedures contributing to this work comply with the ethical standards of the relevant national and institutional committees on human experimentation and with the Helsinki Declaration of 1975, as revised in 2008.

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