

# Dealing with prejudice

*Emma Edwards, Media Co-ordinator at the Media Action Group for Mental Health, examines the need for promoting positive images of mental health...*

One in four people in the course of any one year will experience some form of mental ill health. Despite this, stigma and discrimination around mental health issues still persist. Indeed, service users and people who have experienced mental distress have reported that dealing with the prejudice they encounter can be as damaging, if not more so, than the ill health itself. This, in turn, impacts upon family, friends and carers.

The need to alter the public's attitude and behaviour towards those who experience mental distress has been recognised at a national level. Standard One of the National Service Framework (NSF) for Adult Mental Health (1999) includes as a priority the need to combat discrimination against individuals and groups with mental health issues, and the need to promote their inclusion. The Mental Health and Social Exclusion Report by the Social Exclusion Unit (2004) recognised that mental ill health often leads to, and reinforces, social exclusion. Stigma and discrimination are cited as being the underlying causes of social exclusion. Actual rejection or fear of rejection from the community can lead to people wanting to stay in the safety of mental health services, rather than engaging in the mainstream. Conversely, the stigma attached to mental distress is also seen as a key barrier to people accessing mental health services.

It is for these reasons that past and present mental health service users and their carers formed the Media Action Group for Mental Health (MAGMH) in 2000. Based in Stoke-on-Trent and working within North Staffordshire, the group manages a number of projects that work with both the local media and the general public to promote positive, accurate and realistic images of people who experience mental distress so that the ignorance and prejudice that surrounds it may be combated.

MAGMH believes that, by engaging with media producers, people who have experience of mental distress can significantly improve public perceptions of mental ill health. Indeed, research carried out by the mental health charity 'maca' supports this thinking. In the research, it was found that:

- 44% of journalists said that contact with people who have a mental illness would most help improve their reporting of mental health issues;

- 84% of journalists said the general public would most benefit from reading about personal accounts of living with a mental illness.<sup>1</sup>

It is for this reason that MAGMH wants to encourage as many people who have experience of mental distress as possible to speak with the media. The TALKBANK Training Course offers those who have this experience, and are prepared to talk to the media about it, the opportunity to learn the skills needed to start working positively with journalists and presenters, avoid the risk of exploitation, and promote positive and accurate representations of mental health. During the eight week course, trainees learn how to send stories to the media via press releases, how to write letters for publication to newspapers, and how to conduct themselves during newspaper, radio and television interviews.

Members who have spoken with the media have found it to be an empowering and rewarding experience. Among the topics they have spoken about are: answering a journalist's assertion that people on incapacity benefit due to stress are capable of returning to work; favourite holiday destinations; favourite books; their experience of being prescribed the anti-depressant Prozac; and they have also participated in radio interviews about MAGMH events.

However, a majority of the time, members will talk to newspaper journalists about their experience of mental ill health and give what we term 'a personal testimony'. This enables the general public to see the human face behind terms and diagnoses such as 'manic depressive' and 'schizophrenic'. It is for this reason that MAGMH insist that members who speak to the media use their full name and are prepared to have their photograph taken – we believe that anonymity does nothing to combat the prejudice.

Once members have successfully completed the training course, they can move onto the TALKBANK Database, which is made up of people who are prepared to talk to the media on a range of topics but who don't want to move into the TALKBANK Action Group (TAG).

TAG arose because there was seen to be a need for members to remain engaged with MAGMH once they had finished the training course. TAG members monitor the media, and combat



stigma and discrimination by responding to negative reporting and getting their views heard. Amongst other things, TAG members regularly write letters to the 'Letters to the Editor' page of the local newspaper, The Sentinel. In the past, members have written to say how pleased they were that the boxer Frank Bruno talked about his experience of mental distress in the TV programme 'Frank Bruno: Gloves Off' (ITV1, Tuesday 18<sup>th</sup> October 2005).

Another of MAGMH's projects is the Media Bureau. Having built up excellent working relationships with the media producers in North Staffordshire, the Media Bureau utilises their contacts and, using its already established methods, works with voluntary and statutory organisations to obtain media coverage on their behalf. This could be promoting the organisation itself, an event it is holding or any services it is providing. Amongst the organisations MAGMH has obtained coverage for are: the West Midlands' branch of the National Institute for Mental Health England (NIMHE); North Staffs Mind; and Rethink (Staffordshire region). The Media Bureau works on the principle that, the more the general public hear and learn about mental health, the less fear there will be. This will have the long-term effect of reducing the stigma and discrimination that surrounds mental distress.

As well as the above ongoing activities, MAGMH also holds conferences to reach a more specific audience. In 2001, the first benchmarking event, 'Future Positive' discussed media activity around mental health issues in North Staffordshire

within the wider context of the recently launched national campaign strategy 'mind out for mental health'. Its success led to the conference becoming incorporated as part of Sanity Fair (for an explanation of Sanity Fair, see below).

MAGMH now regards its annual conference as a vital showcase for a range of local, national and even international examples of good practice in the mental health field. It also ensures that the views and lived experience of service users and carers are an integral part of the event. In June 2003, 'Beyond the Media Myth' focused on a range of contemporary media initiatives from both home and abroad aimed at promoting positive shifts in attitudes and behaviour towards people experiencing mental ill health and mental health in general. As well as presentations from Linda Dunion, director of the Scottish 'See me...' campaign, MAGMH were privileged to welcome two speakers from New Zealand: Mary O'Hagan, a service user and mental health commissioner for the New Zealand government; and Gael Surgenor from the 'Like Minds, Like Mine' project.

The conference provides an ideal opportunity for building up networks and partnerships between different statutory and voluntary sector organisations. It has also enjoyed the support of a wide range of funders, for example, the Britannia Building Society and Lloyds TSB Foundations, as well as the Office of the Elected Mayor of Stoke-on-Trent. From 2004, the conference has been extended: Originally held on the morning of Sanity Fair, it is now a full day event held on a

separate day. Each year, the conference concentrates upon a particular topical subject, such as women's mental health issues (which critically examined the consultation document, 'Women's Mental Health: Into the Mainstream'), and the emotional and mental wellbeing of young people. The conference topic for 2006 is 'Food for thought: Nutrition and mental well-being.'

Sanity Fair itself is a unique annual street festival that celebrates mental and emotional wellbeing. Its primary aim is to give members of the public free access to information in a fun, inviting and informal environment. This event is now entering its sixth year.

In its first year, Sanity Fair consisted simply of six local organisations handing out their promotional material along with some limited entertainment. However, each year has seen a more ambitious Sanity Fair and now, in 2006, planning for the festival has reached new heights. Sanity Fair now attracts people from across the West Midlands and, in 2005, special coach trips were put on from Birmingham, Wolverhampton and Hereford for visitors to attend.

Sanity Fair celebrates emotional wellbeing and raises awareness of mental health by showcasing what is going on within local services in Stoke-on-Trent. The pedestrianised area of the Cultural Quarter, where the event is held, is lined with information points from different mental health organisations, informing people of the service provision available to them. 32 local and national organisations attended this year's event, including NIMHE, North Staffs Mind, The Richmond Fellowship and Social Services. However, MAGMH also includes those organisations that do not directly work in mental health. For example, in 2005, a local gym, which offers exercise on prescription, was involved, and a local artist promoted the benefits of therapeutic art and gave people the opportunity to do simple painting exercises, while the local library service exhibited the wide range of self-help books available.

The array of entertainment creates a colourful, carnivalesque atmosphere that includes street performers and a full programme of live music on the main stage. As well as showcasing local artists, MAGMH also welcomes performances and contributions by those who have experience of mental distress. In 2005, a band whose members have experience of mental ill health travelled from Yorkshire to perform, whilst a comedian from London attended to give a more humorous perspective on mental distress.

As Sanity Fair is a permanent fixture within Stoke-on-Trent's events calendar, MAGMH are always guaranteed excellent positive publicity. The local radio stations and newspapers give Sanity Fair their full support. Last year's event saw sponsorship from The Sentinel. This backing and approval by such an influential media outlet made MAGMH realise how far the organisation had come in achieving its goals.

The evaluation forms handed out at Sanity Fair 2005 asked people what they had learnt from attending the event. Returned forms included comments such as: 'We must not discriminate against people with mental health problems'; 'The importance of educating people re mental health'; and 'We need these events to make people aware.' Stoke-on-Trent South MP Rob Ffello, who attended the event, stated: "There should be no stigma attached; people should feel as comfortable getting help for mental health problems as they are about getting a haircut."

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Sanity Fair is now eagerly anticipated not only by mental health organisations, people who have experience of mental distress and their carers, but also by the general public, who come from far and wide to be a part of the day. It demonstrates to the wider community that people with experience of mental ill health can make a valuable contribution to society, and can combat stigma and discrimination at a local and national level.

This, in essence, is the ethos of MAGMH: encouraging those who have experience of mental distress to work to bring about the eradication of the prejudice that surrounds it. Since its inception, MAGMH has built up a strong membership base, a proven track record of successfully working with the general public, and has achieved major successes in challenging, influencing and changing media coverage both in print-based and broadcast media. Now, after five years of working, MAGMH firmly believes that, through the projects it manages, it is slowly combating the stigma and discrimination that surround mental distress. How long this will take is another matter.

<sup>1</sup> Reporting mental illness: a survey of journalists' attitudes to covering mental health stories, maca, 2004.

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