

Communication & Mental Health – The Role of the Media

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The Stigmatisation of Mental Illness

Communication Strategy in the Field of Mental Health

- The need for the development of a communication strategy or Public Relations activities is not limited to the private / corporate sector
- Very often the image of mental health service providers is threatened due to:
 - structural problems
 - insufficient funding
 - inefficient funds management
 - adverse conditions / climate
- Stigma attached to the mental health field:
 - Mental illness – Focus on schizophrenia
 - Use of mental health services
 - Employees working in the mental health sector

The Stigmatisation of Patients with Mental Illness

- The stigma attached to mental illness and people with mental health problems is connected to three main factors:
 - **IGNORANCE:** Little or incorrect knowledge among the population regarding mental illness
 - **PREJUDICE:** Anxiety or fear that lead to the avoidance of contact with people with mental health problems
 - **DISCRIMINATION:** Unequal treatment of people with mental health problems in both the private and public spheres

Mental Illness/ Stigma / Social Exclusion

- According to a Eurobarometer study (E.U. – 15) people with mental illness are the most vulnerable group in the labour market.
- 87% of people asked, consider people with mental illness as having less chances of finding work, receiving training or being promoted.
- The percentages regarding other socially sensitive groups are: 77% for people with physical disabilities, 71% for people over the age of 50 and 62% for ethnic minorities.

Eurobarometer (2003) Discrimination in Europe. For diversity, against discrimination. Brussels: European Commission.

The Stigmatisation of People with Mental Illness

- The stigmatisation of people with mental illness is expressed in various aspects of their lives:
 - In their personal / family relationships
 - In their transactions with various companies (e.g. Banks - receiving loans, insurance companies, travel agencies)
 - In their rights as citizens (e.g. the right to vote)
 - In their access to quality health services
- The stigmatization of people with mental illness leads to social exclusion

Social Exclusion

- Unemployment ↔ Poverty ↔ Lack of Resources
- Social Exclusion hinders the therapy and functionality of patients
 - The opportunities for social and employment rehabilitation are necessary for the treatment of mental illness
 - Nevertheless, people with mental illness display the smallest percentage of employment in the E.U.
 - The unemployment percentage for people with simple mental disorders is double than that of people with no mental illness
 - The unemployment percentage for people with severe mental illness like schizophrenia is three times as high as that for people with no mental illness

The Organisations' Relationship with the Media

The Role of the Media

- The Media greatly affect common perceptions regarding mental disorders
- The Media often encourage the stigmatisation of mental illness and in effect the social exclusion of people with mental health problems
 - E.g. Characterising criminals / murderers as "crazy" or as "psychopaths" with the result of connecting mental illness with violence and danger
 - Big exposure of crimes that have been committed by people with mental illness
- This is important as the Media are often the public's only source of information regarding mental illness

Media Coverage of Mental Illness

- International studies of newspaper articles regarding mental illness show that there is a systematic tendency of misrepresenting mental disorders
- A study by the Glasgow Media Group based on a sample of newspaper articles in the period of a month, showed that the majority of the articles mention mental illness within the framework of violence
- Emphasis is placed on the dangerousness of mental illness
- In this way the prejudice regarding people with mental illness is encouraged

SOURCE: *Shunned: Discrimination against People with Mental Illness*, Graham Thornicroft, Oxford University Press, 2006

The “construction” of the News

- The Media play a defining role in the establishment of social stigma being the principal public opinion formers
- The journalists require stories that have “value” for a wide audience and are codified on the basis of the dominant moral values
- News is constructed
- Schizophrenia seems to be the mental disorder most attractive to journalists
- In order to impress the public misleading and terrifying images of the illness are presented
- Fears and stereotypes are thus reproduced
- There is a need for a critical approach to the hegemonic narration of the Media

Coverage of Mental Illness by the Media

- A co-operation and even “training” of the Media and Journalists is required in order to:
 - Present precise information regarding mental illness
 - Present positive images of mental illness
 - Avoid stereotypes
 - Avoid language that encourages stigmatisation
 - Avoid the connection of all kinds of violence with mental illness

The Media

- Electronic Media: TV, RADIO
- Print: Newspapers, Magazines
- The Web: Anonymity, Confidentiality, Young audiences
- Below the line activities (Direct Mail etc), ambient media (toilets)

- Key factors for choosing an appropriate medium are the **TARGET AUDIENCE AND THE NATURE OF THE MESSAGE**
 - E.g. a special message targeting the scientific community may require writing an article in a scientific magazine
 - An informative campaign to combat the stigma attached to schizophrenia may require creating a TV Spot and appearing in TV talkshows

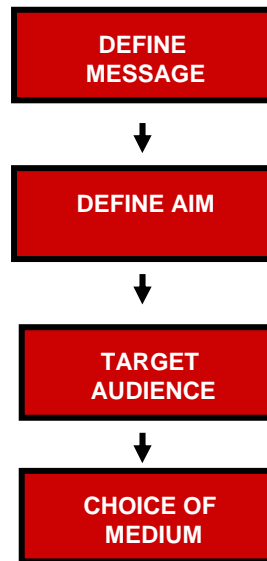
Relationship with the Media in order to combat stigmatisation

- The co-operation with the Media in order to combat the stigma attached to mental illness and ensure that correct information regarding mental illness is provided:
 - Facilitates the social inclusion of people with mental health problems
 - Leads to the public's information regarding the prevention and timely intervention of mental illness
 - Leads to the acceptance by the local communities of mental health structures – encourages the public's co-operation – facilitates the creation of local volunteer groups
 - Creates funding opportunities (e.g. donations / sponsorship)

Relationship with the Media in order to combat stigmatisation (cont.)

- The correct and systematic provision of information to journalists by mental health professionals is important for combating mental illness
- In addition, it promotes the public mental health and contributes to the de-dramatization of mental illness and the use of mental health services
- The communication with the Media should be done in a structured manner, following a specific plan
- The clarification and hierarchy of the aims should be set out, as well as the writing – out of the specific messages that we wish to promote

Communication Strategy in co-operation with the Media



Additional Aims of Mental Health Organisations Communication Strategy

- A communication strategy is not limited to contacts with the Press
- Contribution in combating the stigma attached to mental illness in other areas of social life (e.g. Community Sensitization in Schools and other Institutions)
- Provision of information for the services provided by the organisation – encouraging use of these services by people who need them
- Facilitating the inclusion and acceptance of a mental health structure within the local community
- Contact with official authorities and other mental health services providers
- Attracting funds from donations / sponsorships

Target Groups

- The Media
- Other Mental Health Organisations
- The General Public
- Local Community Authorities (the Mayor, teacher, the Clergy)
- Internal Communication (employees at the organization)
- Corporation / possible sponsors
- Higher authorities (The Ministry / The Government / the European Parliament etc)

Strategy for Communicating with the Media

- Clear guidelines should be set out regarding the communication of an organisation with the Media
 - Define contact person that will communicate with journalists (Press Representative / Public Relations Manager)
 - Collect material that will be distributed to journalists (media pack) / Check information that is included
 - Questions that we have to ask the journalists in order to ensure the quality and appropriate style of the coverage
 - What areas we want to cover / which topics we will focus on / issues that we do not wish to cover
 - Dealing with legal issues (e.g. ensuring the anonymity of patients / protecting patients' private data)

Contact with the Media

- Specify Press Representative / Press Officer
- Contact can be made on the organisation's own initiative (e.g. writing an article for publication / proposal to appear at a TV talk show)
- Contact can be made as a response to a coverage of a mental health issue (e.g. to congratulate a journalist for a full and appropriate coverage / to report the presentation of a relevant topic or the use of language that encourage stigma)
- Distribution of a Press Release that provides information on a specific issue of the Organisation
- Inviting journalists for a Press Conference (important announcements)

The Press Release

- The journalists are swamped by Press Releases on a daily basis
- A press release is usually an A4 size page / the contact details of the organisation should be clearly printed
- The first paragraph of the main text should include the message and its basic tenets (answering the question who, what, when, how and why?)
- The rest of the paragraphs should be brief and should be placed in a hierarchical order (on the basis of their importance)
- Simple and direct language, substantial sentences
- Provides information that is of wider interest for the public at large (not information that only interests the employees of the organisation)

Press Kit

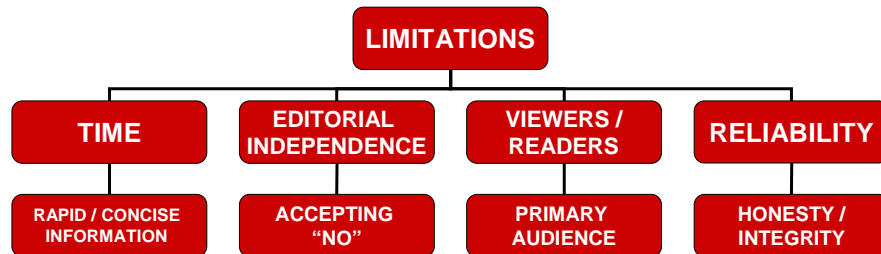
- Folder including information on the organisation:
 - E.g. history, mission, aims, current activities
 - Informative Leaflets
 - Photographic Material
 - DVD presenting the Organisation's activities
 - Articles or Interesting Press Releases regarding the Organisation
- The Press Kit should be distributed during the first contact with the journalist

The Press Representative

- An outgoing person, with strong language / writing skills
- Only the Press Representative(s) communicates with the journalists
- A strong relationship with the Organisation Directors and staff is required in order to ensure a steady and accurate flow of information to the Press Representative
- The Press Representative should be well informed regarding latest issues and developments in the area of mental health
- In this way the Press Representative can be prepared in order to provide concise and inclusive answers to the journalists' questions

Constructing Strong Media Relations

The construction of strong personal relationships with journalists increases the chance of a positive media coverage. Bear in mind the following limitations that guide journalists work:



Internal Organisation for Contacting the Media

- Appointing a Press Representative / Public Relations Manager
- Directors Meeting on regular intervals – e.g. every couple of weeks (participation of the Executive Director / Public Relations Manager / Scientific Director / Legal Representative)
- Ad hoc Directors Meetings when there is a new issue arises / Participation of employees involved
- Deciding of means of communication: e.g. Writing & Approving Press Releases / Organizing Press Conferences
- Deciding on contacts to be made / Choice of Media
- Deciding on who speaks with the Media: n.χ. The Director During a Crisis? / The P.R. Manager for an event
- Monitoring of Newspaper Articles – TV / Radio Programmes / Collecting and disseminating mental health articles / Overview of media coverage of mental health issues

Internal Organisation for Contacting the Media

1 **Directors Meeting**

2 **Means of Communication**

3 **Choice of Media**

4 **Who communicates**

Crisis Management

Defining a Crisis

- Crises are self - defined
- Crises are connected to the environment
- Crises are connected to timing
- They present both a threat and an opportunity
- They are connected with:
 - Undesirable events
 - Changes connected to growth
 - Transitional Situations
 - Emotional Pressure
 - The Environment

The Process of a Crisis

- Start
- Acknowledgement
- Attempting to resolve situation
- Emotional Stress
- Emotional Blocking
- Evaluation: Understanding & Realization

Standard Procedures for Crisis Management

- Organisations (should) implement Standard Procedures for the provision of detailed guidelines for the implementation of a series of activities that are repeated over specific time periods (e.g. writing Press Releases, informative leaflets, training seminars)
- Standard Procedures ought to be implemented for dealing with unforeseen situations – crises
- In such situations a rapid and effective intervention is required – time is crucial
- The process of designing a method to deal with a crisis cannot commence after the crisis has occurred

Crisis Management

- With the term “crisis management” we refer to the preparation and activities required to deal with adverse situations that affect the image, the fame and the status of the organisation
- Examples of crises include the following cases:
 - Revealing that the services of the organisation are inadequate
 - A patient’s accident / suicide
 - Revealing a fraud connected to the Organisation

Risk Assessment

- Every organisation is vulnerable to crises situations
- In the case of mental health service providers the following dangers can be “safely” predicted:
- i.e. some crises will occur
 - Suicide / Death of a patient
 - Accusations regarding the quality of the services provided
- A plan should be prepared and outlined regarding dealing with specific crises

Dealing with Crises

- The characteristic feature of a possible crisis is that it can occur any time and have unforeseen or wider consequences than expected (e.g. receive interest by the Media)
- In order to ensure that an unforeseen event does not jeopardise the image and fame of the organisation, attention and rapid steps ought to be taken in order to control the events that follow a crisis
- Planning, Prevention, Flexibility and Calm Responses are required

Dealing with Crises (cont.)

- Planning: Appointing a Crisis Management Team and creating an action plan for dealing with crises
- Prevention: Identifying possible crisis areas / testing the implementation of the action plan before the crisis occurs
- Appointing a Press Representative that will be responsible for communicating with th Media if required. The Press Representative should have a thorough knowledge of the Organisation's activities and be flexible, steady and able to give calm answers under pressure
- Before contacting the Media, a folder including all the necessary information regarding the event and answers to possible questions has to be created

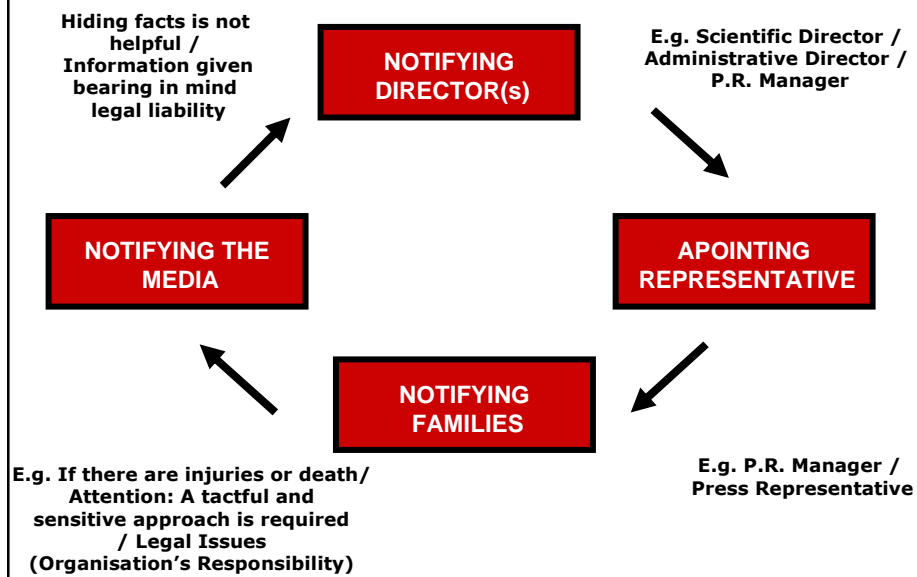
Dealing with Crises (cont.)

- Instant operation of the crisis management team and implementation of the foreseen action plan (with the addition of tailor made elements)
- Flexibility and Calm Responses
- Ex-post evaluation of the effectiveness in handling the crisis situation by the Crisis Management Team and proposals for improving the Action Plan
- PREPARATION AND PLANNING!!!

Attention Points for Crises

- We decide what stance we will adopt having confirmed that facts / beware of inaccuracies
- We do not change the presentation of the case
- We do not hide facts / Rather than "no comment" we should reply "I will look into it and get back at you"
- An appointed person replies / The staff should direct journalists to the appointed person and should not answer journalist's questions themselves
- A similar terminology should be used
- All the Directors should be informed about the relevant development and decide how to handle the situation together

Crisis Management Planning



Case Study #1

- A patient living in a hostel run by a mental health organisation commits suicide. His relatives sue the organisation and blame the lack of care received by the patient for the patient's suicide. The relatives notify the Media regarding the event and journalists start phoning asking questions regarding the event. Three large TV channels send news reporters and cameras outside the hostel
- How do you deal with / inform journalists? Steps
- How do you protect patients from this event?

Case Study #2

- A patient accuses a member of staff of sexual abuse. The staff member denies these allegations, but an internal investigation conducted by the Director confirms the accuracy of the allegations, based on testimonies by other staff members. The event is about to be announced to journalists by the patient's relatives.
- How do you handle the case so that it is not publicized? How do you handle the staff being accused, the relatives and the Media?

EXAMPLES OF ARTICLES

Press Releases

- “Maniac killed twin sisters” **London Evening Standard, 18 April 2005 (England)**
- “Knife maniac freed to kill. Mental patient ran amok in the park” **Front page headline, Daily Mail, 26 February 2005 (England)**
- “Violent, mad. So Docs set him free. New 'Community Care' scandal” **The Sun, 26 February 2005 (England)**

SOURCE: *Shunned: Discrimination against People with Mental Illness*, Graham Thornicroft, Oxford University Press, 2006