

Advancing Empathetic Portrayals of Mental Health Issues in the Media: An Interview with Helene Ellison of the Media Empathy Foundation

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What is “media empathy” and what is the mission of the Media Empathy (ME) Foundation?

To us, “media empathy” means portraying people with mental illness in a compassionate way that recognizes their humanity and their struggles and makes them relatable, rather than vilifying them or treating them comically. This empathy is often missing in the narrative around mental health today. For example, while the media typically understands and depicts the challenges faced by cancer patients in a sympathetic and accurate manner, it often makes misrepresentations about what it is like to live with a mental illness.

Our mission is to advocate for a culture in which people can speak freely about mental health issues and can access supportive resources to help manage their illness. Despite many campaigns aiming to destigmatize mental health issues, portrayals of mentally ill individuals in the media remain problematic and social distancing hasn’t really improved since the 1950s. We seek to collaborate with those who create and shape media to change the narrative surrounding mental illness.

What problems do you seek to address?

The biggest problem we see is that mentally ill individuals are frequently portrayed as violent and unpredictable in the media. Fear of violence remains the leading reason for social distancing from the mentally ill. People often refrain from working or associating with people who suffer from mental illness. These factors make it extraordinarily difficult for people with mental health challenges to speak up about their condition and seek the treatment they need.

What is the origin of the ME Foundation, and how will it accomplish its mission?

I have worked in mental health in the pharmaceutical industry for the past 35 years. In attending conferences and speaking with other members of the mental health and pharmaceutical community across the world, my colleagues and I began to realize that billions of dollars had been spent to treat mental illness, but the stigma surrounding mental illness remained stronger than ever. A major change in the narrative around mental illness was crucial because these treatments cannot help mental health patients if they are too afraid to come forward. My first instinct was to attack the media practices that perpetuated this harmful narrative, but I soon learned that we could be much more effective by partnering *with* the media, rather than attacking it. Today our strategy is to engage and collaborate with the media in an evidence-based, responsible, and nuanced way.

What services does ME Foundation provide to increase media empathy for people with mental illnesses?

Although our organization is still young, we already have several projects in motion. We are currently organizing a conference in partnership with Columbia University's Department of Psychiatry Media Center and the Columbia School of Journalism to foster dialogue between journalists, medical experts, and academics about the stigma of mental illness in journalism. We hope this will prompt journalists to rethink their responsibility to report on and portray mental health issues accurately. We believe that journalists can better represent the facts of mental illness, especially when invoking the subject in the wake of violent tragedies. If leaders and experts in these fields challenge the status quo, we believe that real results will follow.

In addition to journalism, we are also advancing changes in the entertainment industry. We believe that advocates for the mentally ill should be involved in reviewing and approving scripts for movies and TV shows that depict characters with mental illness. We are forming an advisory board of patients and psychiatric experts, and we are meeting with several studios in Los Angeles to encourage them to consider the perspectives of these advisors.

We are also forming partnerships with artists and executives in the music industry to promote a healthy dialogue surrounding mental health in music. For example, some musicians are willing to dedicate their philanthropic efforts to mental health advocacy and understand that their music can shape attitudes among young people and help mentally ill youth. Young people are the most vulnerable community of patients, as they often lack access to resources and support, but they are also a community with incredible potential for improvement and growth.

Finally, we seek to connect patients and advocates to the many resources and tools that already exist, and to ensure that those resources are being optimized.

Tell us about the ME Foundation's relationship with Proskauer. How has Proskauer's pro bono assistance furthered your work?

Proskauer's expertise in nonprofit incorporation and tax exemption law has helped us tremendously in crystallizing our message, forming our foundation, gaining recognition for our work, focusing on our outputs, and constructing clear goals for the future. With Proskauer's help, we are building the necessary structure to achieve our current goals as well as grow over time and make a greater impact.

How can people who are interested in furthering your mission best support the ME Foundation?

We're in the process of finalizing our website www.mediaempathy.org. Once we're up we'll ask for people with mental illnesses to share their stories. We are working on an initiative to encourage patients to speak out about their experiences. This alone can powerfully shake up the narrative and begin to remove the stigma. We are hoping to amplify and promote these stories as part of our mission. You can help in that regard by spreading the word about us. We are currently constructing a social media presence, so interacting with our pages, retweeting our posts, and being online advocates will help spread our message of thoughtfulness and empathy.

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