

Celebs speak out

Mike Yeoman, Together volunteer, shares his views on the growing trend towards celebrities discussing their mental health experiences more publicly.

Celebrities discussing their mental health issues through the media is by and large beneficial in raising public understanding and awareness. But the famous do not live in the same world as us 'normal folks' and the real difficulties and issues around mental health problems are in danger of being distorted.

Walk past the magazine stand at any newsagent and you will often see celebrity faces peering out at you with headlines regarding their 'mental illness hell'. It can sometimes seem like these confessional interviews are everywhere. The ability to speak out on the issue highlights a massive sea change that has happened within the past decade. Suddenly mental health is not something that needs to be hidden, a shameful secret that the public must not see.

Some celebrities, such as the ex-chatshow host Trisha Goddard, do a fantastic job campaigning for positive mental health reform on a long-term basis, and have an impressive track record of supporting multiple charities and organisations with their work.

Perhaps what makes Goddard such a great spokesperson is that she herself has spent time in a psychiatric hospital, and was also affected by the suicide of her sister, who was schizophrenic. She is currently playing an active role in the second wave of the 'Time to Change' £18million anti-stigma campaign, which aims to 'end mental health discrimination'.

Claire Monger in the Communication's Team at Together comments, "It's difficult to place an



Beverley Collard

interview in the national media with a normal person, unless they have an incredibly unique story. So celebrities definitely have a role to play in raising awareness.

I think the second wave of the Time to Change campaign is achieving a good balance. On the one hand they had celebrity spokespeople, like Trisha Goddard and Frank Bruno, but on the other made sure that they had a troop of service user spokespeople too. Inevitably, the media were more interested in the celebrity stories, so they did a sponsorship deal with the Daily Mirror, where they paid them to print the service user stories, just like an advert. It's certainly an effective and low-risk way to ensure more everyday people get the chance to have their say."

However, paying for advertising is expensive, and rarely possible. For that

reason celebrity interviews about mental health tend to dominate in the public eye, and we are now starting to see a number of problems arising from the promotion of mental health issues from such a narrow range of viewpoints.

The first is a question of representation. Celebrities simply do not represent the harsh reality of what mental health can be like if you are on a low income and have very little access to support, as many people with complex and enduring issues do.

From the people I spoke to when researching this article I found that the general impression for those with mental health difficulties is that those in the world of celebrity, and therefore money, can get the best support and private treatment to be found.

Simon Hepworth, whose wife is bipolar says, "Money [is the main difference]. They can afford more support whereas a normal person still has to struggle along and can't just take off to refresh and cool down. I know for a fact that getting away from it all sometimes would help my wife 100%."

Hilary Egan, one of Together's Voices of Experience Spokespeople also raised the issue that a celebrity's mental health can often be perceived more forgivingly, "You can be as odd, eccentric and off the wall as you like when you have pots of money, but I have found in my experience for most non-celebrity people with a known diagnosis it is a totally different ball game."

When the actor Stephen Fry confessed to being bipolar it was to 'fight the public stigma' of the condition. However, an unintentional

side effect of his celebrity status and others is that it creates, for some, an almost aspirational desire to be diagnosed with bipolar. Worryingly, some doctors have reported an increase in patients who have self-diagnosed themselves with the condition, as reflected in a recent UK study published by Dr Diana Chan and Dr Lester Sireling called 'I want to be bipolar'.

History has shown us past 'celebrities' who probably would have been diagnosed as bipolar today such as Beethoven, Isaac Newton and Vincent Van Gogh so it is perhaps forgivable, if not commendable, that people might wish to be associated with the condition and the perceived status that comes with it.

The real danger is two-fold. If people desire to be diagnosed as bipolar they may be misdiagnosed and put onto drugs that are dangerous to them. Secondly, if people with normal mood swings are asking to be diagnosed as bipolar then this suggests that there is a gross underestimation of the impact it has on the lives of people who actually live with it. This might be because people's only experience of mental health is the successful, the famous and (seen through the filter of TV) apparently happy.

Another issue can arise from 'The Fame Game'. Celeb careers can often depend on the public's perception of them and the need to stay constantly in the limelight. Mental health issues, whether genuine or not, might be used as a tool to excuse bad behaviour, to gain public sympathy or to promote a book launch (or DVD, new album etc).

This spring, Beverly Callard of Coronation Street spoke about her experience of clinical depression to the News Of The World. This was part of a publicity campaign for her new autobiography 'Unbroken'. The headline to the article was 'Frankenstein Op Saved Me from Suicide', a reference to the Electro Convulsive Therapy (ECT) she was prescribed as an inpatient.

As terrible as Beverly Callard's experiences may have been, and no doubt she did a lot to help people in similar experiences by sharing what happened to her, there are moral questions that need to be raised when the disclosure of mental health problem happens to be linked to the launch of a new book, album or film.

However, it is not so much an issue

that mental health is in danger of becoming another arrow in the celebrity promotional bow; that it is a tool agents use to keep their client on the front pages of the newspaper, a teaser to read a new autobiography. It is a given fact in today's celebrity focused media that some celebs will do or say whatever it takes to stay in the public's mind.

The real danger is in mental health

being trivialised. The experiences of everyday people who experience mental health issues are vastly different from those of a celebrity. And these are the stories that need to be highlighted more, however difficult and expensive that might be, in order for the public to be truly educated about the realities of mental health.



Trisha Goddard
Photo courtesy of Time to Change