

MEDIA SHOW

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The Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration's Center for Substance Abuse Treatment presents the Road to Recovery. This program celebrates those in recovery from substance use disorders and recognizes the work of treatment providers across the country.

Today's topic is Recovery and the Media: Addiction in Entertainment and the News

Hello, I'm Ivette Torres, and welcome to another edition of The Road to Recovery. Today we'll be talking about recovery and the media, addiction, and treatment in entertainment and the news. Joining us in our panel today are Mark Weber, director of communications, Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Rockville, Maryland; Ron Tannebaum, president and cofounder, IntheRooms.com, Fort Lauderdale, Florida; Dr. W. Douglas Evans, professor and director, Public Health Communication and Marketing Program, George Washington University, Washington, DC; Sandra de Castro Buffington, director, Hollywood Health & Society, USC Annenberg Norman Lear Center, Beverly Hills, California.

Doug, why don't we review what we mean about media today.

Dr. W. Douglas Evans

Some time ago, Marshall McLuhan said that the medium is the message, and that is more true today than ever. Media have proliferated, and they now permeate our society. We're surrounded

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by it constantly 24/7, and users increasingly are defining what the media are and what those media mean to the rest of us.

And Mark, why is it important for the media to-to really understand addiction, treatment, and behavioral health?

Mark Weber

I think as Doug just said, it's 24/7, people rely on the media to get their information, and, as the media reaching out, people are forming opinions, ideas, attitudes about what they think about addiction and mental illness based on what they're seeing on these TV shows or hear—seeing on the Internet, hearing on the radio. So if what they hear is accurate, they'll be forming accurate opinions and able to help themselves or help other people who are dealing with these issues. If they hear inaccurate information, it proliferates stigma, the discrimination, and-and all the unfortunate circumstances people with addictions or mental illness find themselves in as a result of miscommunication.

So, Sandra, they definitely do play a role in-in helping people shape their understanding about issues, particularly addiction and behavioral health?

Sandra de Castro Buffington

They really do, Ivette, and nearly two thirds of regular viewers of television report learning something new about a disease or how to prevent it from scripted television shows. Nearly one third of those viewers take action on what they learn. So if the information is-is accurate, we're

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doing them a service. If it's inaccurate, it's a huge disservice. We also know that over half, 52 percent of regular viewers, believe that the health content they see on television is accurate. And nearly 26 percent of those viewers report television shows among their top three sources of health information.

Moving on to Ron—Ron, how are substance use disorders and behavioral health issues portrayed in the media?

Ron Tannebaum

I think the addiction is portrayed accurately. I don't think the recovery of addiction is portrayed accurately. I think it's always the addiction ready for the other shoe to drop and show all the worst things about addiction and not the assets of recovery.

So, Mark, we've established that accurate depictions help and get people to take actions. What does it do for individuals in recovery, or what does it do for individuals who need to get into recovery to see inaccurate depictions?

Mark Weber

Well, I think the inaccurate depictions have continued to perpetuate some of the myths around addiction and mental illness. And, in terms of recovery, a key component is making those social connections, seeing people like yourself, how they succeed, what they do to achieve greatness in life. And when inaccurate stories are portrayed, it leaves people maybe a little bit of doubt instead of hope and that's—that's not what's needed at this point and time in their lives. So,

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as opposed to pointing out as much, you know, when there are inaccuracies, what we have done is establish some great working relationships with organizations that-that work with the media to help portray accurate portrayal, so that the correct stories are getting out versus perpetuating the myths.

But, Ron, what does it do to you as a person in recovery personally in terms of when you see something that doesn't accurately depict who you are and what you're about?

Ron

I think it hurts the recovery movement and me personally because people have an image of what an addict is. They really don't have an image what recovery is. They think an addict is still that person living under the bridge or a person pushing that-that grocery cart in the streets of the city aimlessly and nowhere to go. Recovery is an asset. It's not a liability anymore. And I think they really depict the liability part of the addiction.

But Sandra, it's really difficult. So, in essence, the individuals that are developing programs that are putting stories together do really need to get some kind of insight and expertise, correct?

Sandra

That's such a great point. Hollywood Health & Society works with script writers and producers to get accurate health portrayals into television, film, and new media. So one thing we're doing, we're using a transmedia approach, old and new media, so that when we do get an accurate TV health storyline on addiction, we then work with a group like SAMHSA to develop the script for

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PSA and, at dramatic plot points during that storyline, refer viewers to credible sources of information through Web links or call-in hotline numbers.

Very good. Doug, I want to talk to you about your expertise is in branding and health branding at that. How do we take the whole notion of people's incorrect perceptions about addiction, about people in recovery, and what steps do we need to begin to think about in terms of presenting a positive light? And I mean that in the context of the messaging.

Douglas

I think one of the key things is to think about the competition. You know, any strong brand is based on a keen understanding of what it's competing against, what negative messages, negative stereotypes it's competing against. And so how can we reframe the issue of recovery so that it's an issue about social benefit, about uplifting of the individual, about economic benefit for society? How can we take some of those aspects of recovery and reframe the debate around how should we treat people in recovery in this society, people who have been addicted and are improving their lives or moving on to a new and better stage of their lives—how can we make that a social benefit and recognize that this is something that we need to invest in and this is something that we as a society can collectively benefit from, not just the person in recovery but all of us can benefit from, what's the group benefit?

Well, when we come back, I want to continue along this vein and really get into how we do that and how people create a framework for doing it. We'll be right back.

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Male Speaker: For more information on National Alcohol and Drug Addiction Recovery Month events in your town and how you can get involved, visit the Recovery Month Web site at <http://www.recoverymonth.gov>.

Brian Dyak, CEO and cofounder of Entertainment Industries Council, Inc., talks about his organization and their role in helping the media portray recovery issues accurately:

The Entertainment Industries Council was formed 28 years ago, and it was formed to bring the power and influence of the entertainment industry to bear on health and social issues. It engages writers, producers, directors, executives, as well as talent in the industry, to basically harness their creative talents and the reach of the entertainment industry to touch the consumer, the general public.

Marie Gallo Dyak, executive vice president of Program Services and Government Relations at EIC, discusses the power of the media and their influence on how people view recovery issues:

Episodes of some of these prime-time dramas reach an audience of nearly 15 million people every week who will record the episode if they're going to miss it or buy the DVD with the full season because of that affinity, and the more people can relate to these stories, the more they will seek treatment because they will not feel stigmatized. They will realize that it's treatable and that there certainly is hope and opportunity in recovery.

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So, Sandra, how can information about addiction, treatment, and recovery be portrayed in the media?

Sandra

Well, there's so many different ways. When we talk with writers at the Writers Guild of America, West, they tell us that their agenda is to tell compelling stories. So we need to inspire them with real stories of real people, positive stories. One thing we know about portrayals of alcoholism and drug addiction in television comes from our TV monitoring project. We did an analysis of almost 1,000 shows from 2004 to 2006, and what we found were that 29 percent of these episodes portrayed drug use and 33 percent of them portrayed alcoholism. Only 6 percent of those alcoholism storylines actually talked about alcohol abuse or alcohol as a problem. So one thing we know is that people are actually seeing people drinking and taking drugs on screen and not as much discussion about intervention, treatment, and recovery. So it's really important that we inspire writers with stories of recovery.

Well, I know, Mark, that we worked also with not only Hollywood Health & Society but the Entertainment Industries Council, and they just finished having their PRISM Awards to laud the gains made by some of the programs as well. But also EIC helps us to, you know, intervene sometimes, to help us to talk to the—also the producers and the writers. But there are those shows, however, you know, that really take the addiction to-to its extreme, almost portraying it and glamorizing it.

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Mark

Right and-and, you know, one of the key things is, you know, we love the media. They're such a powerful tool in our ability to get out accurate messages, and, at the same time, the media is there to entertain, and-and there is a creative process that goes into creating storylines. And when a storyline gets off, one of the great things about the recovery community and the treatment community is they're willing to pick up the phone and say, let's sit down and talk about what the implications of this show are and-and how it might be impacting people in recovery and-and how they feel about themselves and how they interact with society.

And, quite frankly, every time that I've seen that happen, the writers, they've been open to the conversation. They may not change the storyline. They definitely don't go back and revise what has happened, but they're open. We set up the conversation, and, I would say, most of the times we've come out with a more productive approach to the storyline in the future.

Ron, as a person in recovery, do you watch with that eagle eye, and do you take action and would you encourage other people in recovery to do that as Mark has noted?

Ron

Yes. I do watch with an eagle eye. We were just speaking about a storyline where it's always about pickin' up that next drink or taking that next drug after getting clean or sober in treatment. I-I rarely, if ever, see the success story about recovery where that person goes through treatment and comes out, goes to meetings, has a regular family life, struggles but has choices and makes those choices by the use of what we do in recovery by asking people for help and doing the right

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things and going to a meeting or picking up the phone, and they don't pick up the drink. You don't have to pick up a drink. You can go to a meeting, you can talk with somebody and see how much better your life gets and-and the success in recovery rather than always that struggle.

Doug, let's shift gears a little bit. As we know, the Internet has many positive and negative ways that-that it can be used. Talk to us a little bit about how the Internet has contributed to both a positive and a negative perspective on-on addiction treatment.

Douglas

Well, one obvious way that the Internet has contributed in a positive way is it gives us a place to go to get more information. So if through the PSAs that are being put out or through programming that's got a positive message around recovery and-and recovery from addiction, you can then go someplace, and you can actually get useful information, actionable information: you can engage, you can interact with a community of people who have similar concerns, similar problems; you can actually be part of a community in a way that you never could before. So that's a huge obvious benefit.

The downside is that any opinion on the subject is fair game.

Any opinion, whether it be prosubstance use, techniques for substance abuse, anything you can think of that could reinforce not only the-the behaviors that we're hoping to change but also negative stereotypes about addiction, all of that's out there, too. And, you know, which side is winning that competition—that's very hard to say, and we'll see in the years ahead.

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Well, when we come back, I want to talk about more how media outlets can do better. We'll be right back.

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Mark, talk to us about how SAMHSA gets engaged and involved in all these issues.

Mark

Well, part of that is, you know, SAMHSA has made public awareness and support around addiction, prevention, mental illness one of its top priorities. Rarely do you see a Federal agency that identifies communications as a top priority. That means communications needs to part of everything that is coming out of the agency, so we'll be involved in things from the development of treatment programs and grants and-and products to continuing our support as-as an integral part of Recovery Month, as-as part of SAMHSA's public awareness and support initiative.

And, indeed, that is one of Pamela Hyde's 10 Strategic Initiatives, is it not? It's very impressive.

Mark

Yes. It's ... we have 10 Strategic Initiatives that are being used to align the agency's resources around the top priorities, and the 10th priority is public awareness and support.

You know, one of the issues that we haven't included in the whole issue of media is the music industry and-and its role. Ron, what would you say about that?

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Ron

I think the music industry plays a large role in how they can portray addiction and recovery. I listen to some of the music my kids listen to, you know, rap music. Some of it's great; I like some of it, but a lot of it the words are horrible. It portrays drug use and sexual abuse. But then, on the other hand, I have great songs that I listen to about recovery, success stories in recovery. Aerosmith's Amazing; Richie Supa who wrote Amazing also wrote In the Rooms who won the PRISM Award in 2009. There's so many musicians in recovery today.

Sandra

Well, Nikki Sixx; Nikki Sixx did a whole album, right, Mark?

Mark

Absolutely.

Ron

Right. And Richie Supa is putting out an album now with dozens of recovering musicians from different groups we've all heard of since the seventies, and-and they're producing it now, and they're all written about recovery and all the success stories that go with it.

Doug, why should these industries care as to how they portray this issue?

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Douglas

In the long term, it's in their best interest. I mean, I think you can look at some recent examples of global corporations recognizing that working in the public health interest is really in their long-term interest. I mean, the most obvious current example is the food industry. You know, they run the risk of being the next tobacco industry. If they're portrayed as being culpable in obesity and childhood obesity, and I think you see in recent years that they're recognizing that, a number of food corporations have recently formed a-a foundation that's focused on obesity prevention.

Now, certainly part of that is corporate marketing on their part. But there's definitely a corporate social responsibility aspect, as well. And I think if we can seek to harness that in the substance abuse, prevention, and recovery field; if we can take advantage of that and-and put the power of that need that many corporations have to not only be good citizens but appear to be good citizens, I think we can-we can make some mileage out of that.

Sandra

And in the meantime, we can also appeal directly to the creative community, to writers. Even if they don't care about issues of social good, they do care about their own writing, and they care about making their stories compelling. And the way to make them more compelling is to make them more realistic. So if we can get some of the perspectives in that Ron was describing and make it real, portray recovery and a good life and AA meetings in a realistic way as a really cool place to be and an amazing way to live, we get better portrayals.

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Ron, give us a picture of what they're really like.

Ron

Oh, they're fantastic (laughs). Meetings are social events that are serious during the meeting. But we have what we call the meeting before—people getting together and gettin' their coffee and gettin' settled and huggin' each other and lovin' each other; these are people that have been together for 20, 25, sometimes 30 years in supporting each other. Then the meeting where there is no talking. We listen to whatever discussions or speakers, and after the meeting, we usually grab a gang of people and go out to eat or have some coffee together and what we call fellowship. It's much better than livin' in addiction. I mean, there is no comparison for me, and, you know, everyone knew when I was an addict.

Everyone knew that I was high; no one said anything. And so now that I'm in recovery, I don't want to hide that. You know, I'm proud of being in recovery, and I don't have to hide behind that I'm not in recovery. So.

That's excellent. Mark, let's talk a little bit about co-occurring conditions.

Mark

Co-occurring conditions. Well, quite often when we-we are portraying stories about individuals in the media, it's not all so clean cut. It's not just an addiction or a mental illness, there's usually involves addiction, mental illness, maybe even heart disease, some kind of condition that's contributing to what is going on in the storyline and-and, quite frankly, when-when you begin to

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develop interesting storylines or-or lyrics, sometimes the—when you get down to the basic issue, it is an underlying mental illness or addiction, and showing how those multiple conditions all contribute to what is going on in that individual's life quite often creates a very interesting story.

And so as the media portrays addiction, they also need to look at all the other things that are going on in an individual's life, how it contributes to resolving the problem and how it contributes to the problem itself.

And when we come back, we're going to be talking a little bit more about media literacy and how the general public can get engaged. We'll be right back.

When you have a drug or alcohol problem, your whole world stops making sense. You can get help for yourself or a loved one and make sense of life again. "Good Morning." For information, call 1-800-662-help. Brought to you by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.

Doug, what is media literacy?

Douglas

Media literacy is the ability to understand the messages and the media that one is exposed to and to realize what's being communicated, interpret the messages, and be able to act on them appropriately.

And, Mark, why should people need to react if they see a-an incorrect portrayal of addiction, treatment, or behavioral health issues on any media?

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Mark

Well, one of the key things that we've talked about here today is-is having the level of awareness and understanding so that if you see something that does not seem to be right, check it out:

What's the source? What—Why are they trying to convey that message to you? That ultimately gets to, you know, if-if the incentive behind the person sending the message is not necessarily in your best interest, why are you paying attention to them? It gets to the ultimate profit motive of our media as well. That's why it's important to them in the long run to be sending accurate messages about addiction and recovery, so that the public gets a better sense of what is going on, how it's portrayed, and-and, ultimately, you know, have the opportunity to seek help if they need it themselves, to help someone they know get treatment or get into some kind of counseling or support early on.

And-and one of the great things about the media and why it's such a critical partner is people are inviting the media into their homes—unlike when we do brochures or pamphlets, you know, we're out there knocking on doors trying to get people to take this stuff. These-these storylines and the music and the videos and the online—they're proactively seeking this information. And what a great opportunity to convey accurate information that is helpful and healthy to those who are watching.

Ron, if people see this misinformation, what should they do?

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Ron

I don't know if they know if they're seeing misinformation. That's the problem, I think. And I think they've seen the portrayal since the beginning that it's being portrayed. And they see the train wreck like everybody said. And you never see the spiritual side of recovery on what this disease is really about. So I would suggest that they sort of weigh it in their own mind and pick up the phone, and there are organizations, AA and NA and—that will portray the correct message.

But it really does take that, does it not? It takes people getting engaged, getting involved, calling individuals, letting them know that they're not quite comfortable the way that things are—have been portrayed because stigma, really—it's totally perpetuated in-in many instances through bad portrayals.

Sandra

Yes. I mean, one of the things we know about good, compelling storylines is that it triggers the behaviors of, for example, talking with family members and friends about what they've seen, calling for further information. We've done studies to look at searches on the Web and the timing of those searches. What we've found is people are multitasking. If there's a great storyline on television that's—that's engrossing them, they will actually do a Web search between the 9 and 10 p.m. hour when that show is on the air. They're not waiting till the end. So they've got sort of this multimedia thing going on. So we can't underestimate the power of TV storylines to actually trigger behavior.

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And one thing we know from other research is that when you make something a household word, it's a predictor of behavior change; it's an indicator that change will come. So making it a household word means that people actually break that stigma taboo and talk about addiction, treatment, and recovery.

In a good way.

Sandra

In a good way.

Right, Doug?

Douglas

I think one of the key themes that we've been all touching on in this discussion is the notion of authenticity. I think one of the things that Ron pointed out is that-that portrayals of recovery in the media are not necessarily as authentic as they can be and that when portrayals are authentic and they're engaging, they bring people in, and they make them want to learn more and be part of the solution and not simply watching the train wreck and getting satisfaction out of that. I think we need to figure out how to frame messages about recovery and integrate authentic depictions of recovery into programming.

I want to go back to what people can actually do. Should they be calling their television stations? Should they be calling the producers? Should they be advocating for this to happen, Mark?

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Mark

Well, I think every individual has a responsibility to take action when they see something is inaccurate, wrong, and-and there are many ways you can do that. And there are constructive ways, and there're not so productive ways. So picking up the phone as an individual and saying, you know, I don't like the way that was on the show, let's talk to you about recovery; why don't you come to one of our meetings. And, quite frankly, you'll have an opportunity to educate someone. And the media again is so critical because our families and kids and—are inviting the messages into their homes.

When they see something that said, you know, that looks like me; that looks like what I'm going through—it's-it's very accurate, it's very close to what I am experiencing. And then we've been great enough to work with a group like Hollywood Health & Society and build a message in where you can call to get help. And that's where you see the spikes in the calls and you see the people going online. So everyone has a responsibility to bring the resources they have access to, to bear. You know, at SAMHSA, we work with the writers through organizations to provide science, so information is accurate. The writers tell it in a compelling way, and so we all have our place and responsibility.

And there's no better way to talk about recovery than by observing National Alcohol and Drug Addiction Recovery Month in September. And we call on you to get engaged and get your family involved in National Alcohol and Drug Addiction Recovery Month. Thank you for being here. Great show.

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The Road to Recovery is a series of webcasts and radio shows that helps individuals, organizations, and communities as they plan and host events in celebration of Recovery Month each September. This series aims to raise awareness about the benefits of addiction treatment and recovery, and highlight the positive and affirming message that addiction is treatable and recovery is possible.

To view the webcasts from this season and others in the Road to Recovery series, visit <http://www.recoverymonth.gov> and click Multimedia.

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