

Reading 9

Public condemns 'bonkers' press coverage

By Helene Mulholland

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'Bonkers', 'loony' and 'nutter' are unacceptable words with which to describe a person experiencing mental illness, according to eight out of ten members of the public.

And just about everyone (94%) wants to see more sensitive mental health coverage by the media.

The findings were published by Mind Out for Mental Health, the government mental health anti-stigma campaign, in time for today's World Mental Health day, which aims to raise awareness and reduce the stigma surrounding mental illness.

The survey of 1,000 people was carried out to gauge public attitudes following the uproar over the Sun's coverage of Frank Bruno's admission to a psychiatric hospital last month.

The Sun was forced to make a hasty retreat after upset readers rang in to complain about the headline 'Bonkers Bruno'.

The clamour led to the tabloid's decision to launch an appeal to raise funds for mental health charity Sane.

While mental health charities expressed delight at the public backlash over the coverage, some feared this was predicated on Mr Bruno's status as a public figure rather than a general softening of attitudes.

A survey published by the Department of Health in June – the seventh since 1993 to examine public attitudes to mental health – found that attitudes became slightly worse between 2000 and 2003.

Days after the Sun's coverage, however, the attitude seemed much improved, revealing a growing level of intolerance towards perjorative words used to describe people with mental health problems.

Almost nine in ten (88%) of those surveyed agreed that 'bonkers' was unsympathetic and offensive when used to describe all people who experience mental distress.

'Loony', 'nutter', and 'schizo' were also unacceptable terms to describe an individual, according to more than 80% of respondents.

Asked whether it was possible for someone to recover from their mental distress, 91% agreed.

A Mind Out spokesperson said it was hard to prove whether the debacle over the Sun coverage was responsible for improving public attitudes, but anecdotally this did seem to be the case.

'There seemed to be a change in attitudes', she said. 'How long for remains to be seen. We are hoping to run the survey again at another stage. It will be interesting to see what kind of figures there are then'.

This tallies with the preliminary results of a survey carried out by the Office of National Statistics on behalf of the Royal College of Psychiatrists to conclude their five-year anti-stigma campaign.

The survey followed up an initial survey carried out at the launch of its campaign in 1998, and found a drop in the level of negative attitudes, with few people identifying people with specific disorders, such as schizophrenia, as dangerous.

Liz Main, an ambassador for the Mind Out campaign who visits journalism colleges to talk to future journalists on mental health, is confident that the tide is turning. 'People are getting a bit fed up about the way mental health is covered and demonised', she said.

Ms Main, who has manic depression, said she regularly deals with people who patronise her or fear her as dangerous, simply because she has an illness. Her experience highlights the importance of continuing to improve public attitudes.

'You can deal with that in everyday life, but when you try and get a job or housing, the stigma that goes ahead of you makes it difficult to do anything.'