



# Picture *This*

How Australians  
picture mental illness

**SURVEY RESULTS**

sane  
AUSTRALIA

# Picture *This*

## How Australians picture mental illness

### SURVEY RESULTS

#### Stigma and mental illness

A quick Internet search of ‘mental illness’ reveals the kind of images that are commonly available on this subject. The image of a person sitting in the shadows holding their head in their hands is perhaps among the most recognisable visual representation of mental illness.

International research has not only found that images of mental illness can be stigmatizing, but that stigma is still a major issue for people affected by mental illness. A study by prominent psychologist and academic Professor Otto Wahl, *Media Madness: Public Images of Mental Illness*, also showed that mental illness is frequently depicted inaccurately and unfavourably.

The 2011 Mental Health Council of Australia Consumer and Carer Experiences of Stigma survey found that 83% of the 410 people surveyed had seen or read things in the mass media they considered to be hurtful or offensive. And according to the 2011 SANE Australia StigmaWatch member survey, 42% of more than 400 respondents believed that stigma surrounding mental illness still existed.

The negative stereotypes and myths surrounding mental illness which contribute to stigma is widespread and a significant barrier to participation in society. A study from the Mental Health Foundation of New Zealand *Fighting Shadows: Self Stigma and Mental Illness* showed that stigma may prevent some people from seeking treatment for mental illness, and may even worsen their symptoms and inhibit their recovery.

#### SANE Australia’s work

SANE Australia has worked to change the representation of mental illness in Australia for more than 15 years through the StigmaWatch program, part of the Mindframe National Media Initiative.

This program provides feedback to media professionals about reporting on, or portrayals of, mental illness.

However there is more work to be done in the area of challenging visual representations of mental illness. This is why SANE Australia developed the Picture *This* survey.

The following information outlines the high-level findings of the survey and SANE Australia’s recommendations to help people visually portray mental illness fairly and accurately.

# About the survey

## Method

In 2015 SANE Australia asked Australians how they wanted mental illness to be represented in a short online survey. Getty Images provided six photographs from their iStock by Getty Images collection and researchers at SANE developed a set of questions to accompany them.

The survey images were chosen to represent types of images commonly used to accompany news or information about mental illness online. Participants were asked to rate these images on fairness and accuracy.

SANE wanted to determine whether or not the participants felt the existing images used in the media were misrepresenting mental illness.

Survey participants were also given the opportunity to describe what they thought was a fair and accurate depiction of mental illness.

The participants were then asked to provide five words they used to search for images of mental illness online. This question helped SANE identify what words people associate with the images they want to find.

## Participants

Over 5,000 people participated in the survey. The majority were aged between 35 and 54 years old.

Participants were asked to choose how they would primarily identify themselves: media professional, mental health sector worker, having a lived experience of mental illness, health professional, carer or none of the above.

The majority of the survey participants had a lived experience of mental illness. There was an even spread of health professionals, carers, mental health sector workers or people who didn't identify in any of the categories. Media professionals were the least represented.

### Survey participants

The majority of survey participants identified as having a lived experience of mental illness.

Lived experience of mental illness	70%
Health professional	10%
Carer	10%
Mental health sector	10%
Media	4%
Other	9%

## Images

SANE Australia prepared a set of questions to accompany six images chosen from iStock by Getty Images.



iStock/aaprophoto



iStock/AntonioGuillen



iStock/Sigal Suhler Moran



iStock/Astova



iStock/ClarkandCompany



iStock/Brent\_Davis

# Survey results

## Fair and accurate representation



Agreement was high across all age groups

**95%** aged 25–44

**94%** under 18–24

**89%** aged 45–64

**74%** aged over 65

Out of the six images provided in the survey, this image was found to be the most fair and accurate with nearly two thirds of the survey participants agreeing or strongly agreeing that it was a fair and accurate representation of mental illness.

People with lived experience reported the highest level (71%) of agreement. Many of the survey participants' descriptions of mental illness also identified images portraying the invisibility (21%) and adversity (27%) of mental illness as being fair and accurate. This was because these types of images express the hidden emotional turmoil behind a smiling face.

Just over a third of respondents (34%) reported that a fair and accurate image should contain 'everyday' people doing ordinary things to demonstrate that mental illness can affect anyone, while 27% described adverse aspects of mental illness. Among these were suggestions that mental illness is often a hidden struggle which is not visible on the outside.

*"The photo should represent someone putting on a mask to hide their 'negative' feelings."*

## Least fair and accurate



*"It should show ordinary people because mental health problems can be experienced by anyone."*

Out of the six pictures presented in the survey, participants reported that this image – with the definition of depression surrounded by pills – as the least fair and accurate.

More than three quarters of participants (76.2%) disagreed or strongly disagreed that this image is a fair and accurate representation of mental illness.

The image appeared particularly unpopular among health professionals and mental health professionals with 84% of respondents in each of these categories disagreeing or strongly disagreeing that it is a fair and accurate representation of mental illness.

## Strong disagreement



Landscape images are also sometimes used to accompany stories about mental illness. In this survey, this image was chosen to illustrate this approach.

It was considered by the majority of respondents not to be fair and accurate. Sixty percent of respondents disagreed or strongly disagreed that it is a fair and accurate representation of mental illness.

The highest level of disagreement about this image was among the media professionals with 73% disagreeing or strongly disagreeing.

## Divided opinions



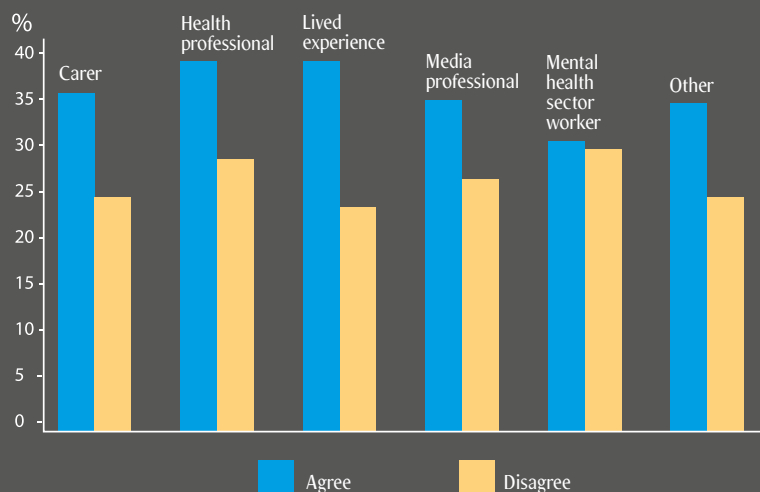
*"Something that shows the detachment, isolation and fear. Perhaps someone caught in a trap or a cage watching a potential 'them' going about the daily tasks of life with engagement and relish."*

Images of people in the dark, in a corner or holding their head in their hands have often anecdotally been referred to as stigmatising.

Interestingly, participants in the survey were divided in their opinions about this image. Almost half the participants (45.2%) agreed or strongly agreed that it was a fair and accurate representation of mental illness while just over a third (34.1%) disagreed or strongly disagreed.

Participants' descriptions also revealed that many people identified with images portraying the adversity of mental illness.

### Almost half the people surveyed agreed this image was fair and accurate



# Survey results

## Mixed views



This image of a woman with a concerned expression talking to another person represents a range of images that show human interaction.

Over a third of the survey participants were neutral about this image. The remaining two thirds were equally split between agreement and disagreement.

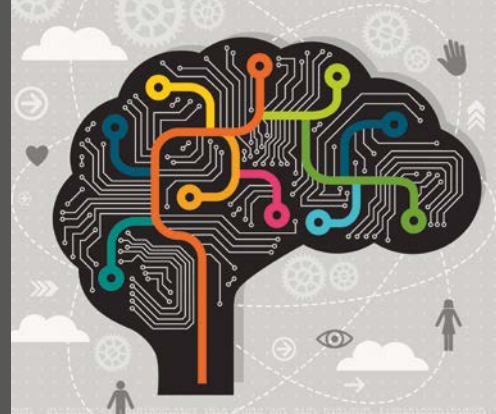
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Results were evenly split across three areas

**32% AGREE**

**34% DISAGREE**

**34% NEUTRAL**



This image, which depicts an illustration of a brain, also received mixed responses from participants.

It had a greater number of positive responses than the landscape image, with well over a third of the survey participants agreeing or strongly agreeing that this is a fair and accurate representation of mental illness.

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Well over a third of people agreed this is fair and accurate

**41% AGREE**

**33% DISAGREE**

**26% NEUTRAL**

## Top ten search terms

The more popular words people used to search for images which portray mental illness were diagnostic terms, or words describing emotions or distress.

'Depression' and 'mental illness' were the most popular words used in online searches for fair and accurate visual representations of mental illness.

1. DEPRESSION
2. MENTAL ILLNESS
3. ANXIETY
4. MENTAL HEALTH
5. SAD
6. ALONE
7. SADNESS
8. DEPRESSED
9. CONFUSION
10. BIPOLAR



# Recommendations

Stigma surrounding mental illness still endures in Australia and SANE continues to work to reduce this through advocacy, providing advice to media professionals and information to the wider public. SANE hopes the Picture *This* survey will inspire further research on the subject of images and mental illness stigma.

Based on the survey results SANE has developed five recommendations to assist in the fair and accurate visual portrayal of mental illness. Getty Images, a partner in the Picture *This* survey, has curated a collection of images that reflect these recommendations and it is hoped that other organisations will aim to use similar images.

## Hidden adversity

Provide more images depicting people from diverse backgrounds, doing 'everyday' things, while also illustrating a hidden experience of adversity.

## Human experience

Emphasize the human experience of mental illness rather than featuring abstract depictions.

## Non-violent

Do not tag or associate images depicting violence (blood, knives etc) with mental illness. There are still some images of violence in online collections that are tagged with words related to mental illness (such as Schizophrenia) even though these images aren't often used to portray mental illness.

## Search words

Tag images reflecting the survey's results with diagnostic terms (such as 'depression', 'bipolar'), or emotions (such as 'sadness' and 'loneliness') to make them easier to locate via online searches.

## Diversity of experience

Use images that represent isolation or pain (such as those with people in the dark, in a corner or holding their head in their hands) with other types of images to show the diversity of experience of mental illness. While many identify with this type of image, there are also others who do not.

## Picture *This* How Australians picture mental illness

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AUSTRALIA

Helping all Australians affected by  
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[www.saneforums.org](http://www.saneforums.org)

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1800 18 7263  
[helpline@sane.org](mailto:helpline@sane.org)

## Further Reading

For more information about the visual representation of mental illness and stigma see the studies below. See also [www.mindframe-media.info](http://www.mindframe-media.info).

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