

Mental Health Conditions Across 300 Popular Films: A Research Update from 2016 to 2022

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USC Annenberg
Inclusion Initiative



**American
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for Suicide
Prevention**

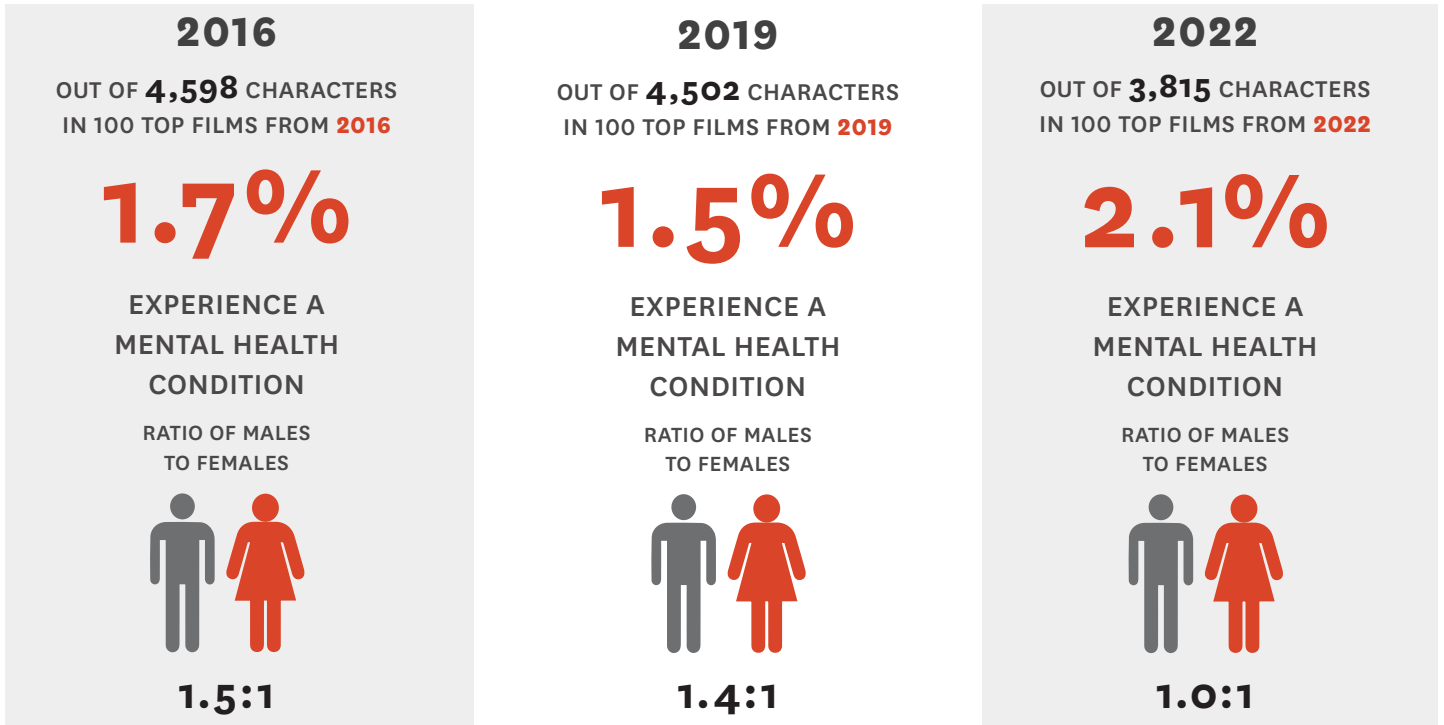
MENTAL HEALTH CONDITIONS ACROSS 300 TOP FILMS

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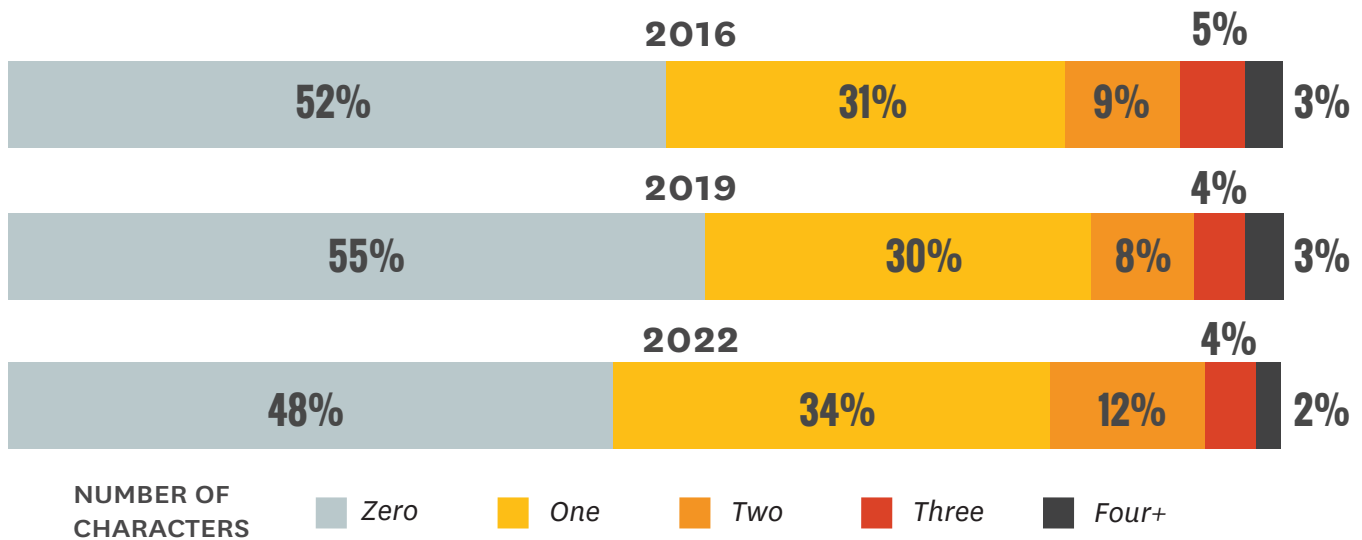
MENTAL HEALTH CONDITIONS ARE RARE IN POPULAR FILMS

Across the 100 top-grossing films of 2016, 2019, and 2022...



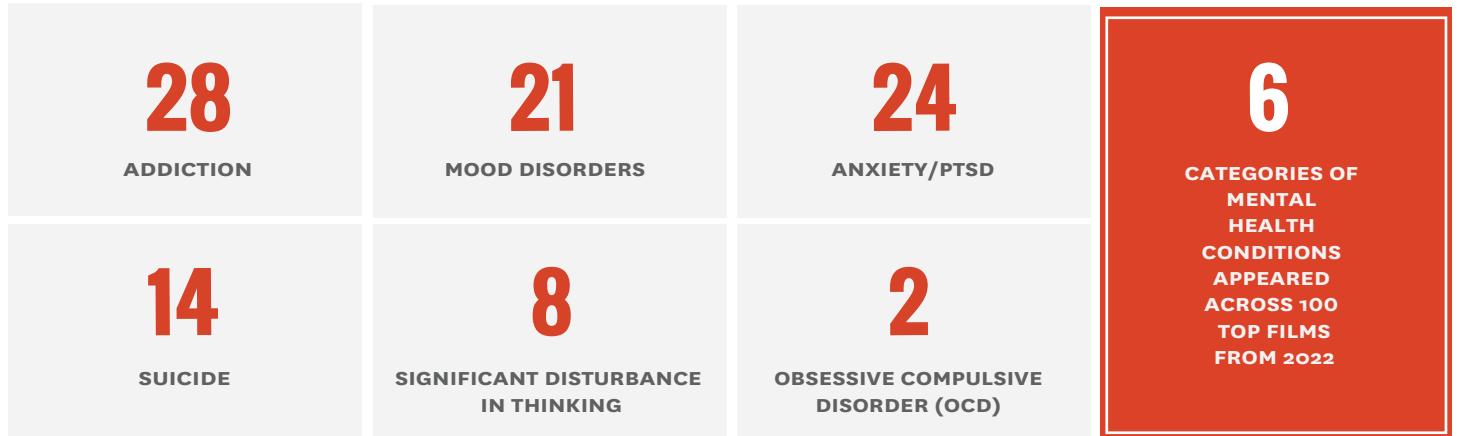
MENTAL HEALTH IS MISSING FROM STORYTELLING

Number of characters per story with a mental health condition by year, in percentages



TYPES OF MENTAL HEALTH CONDITIONS PORTRAYED IN FILM

Number of characters with mental health conditions in 2022, by category



Characters may have presented with more than one mental health condition. As such, the total across categories may exceed the overall number of characters depicted with a mental health condition.

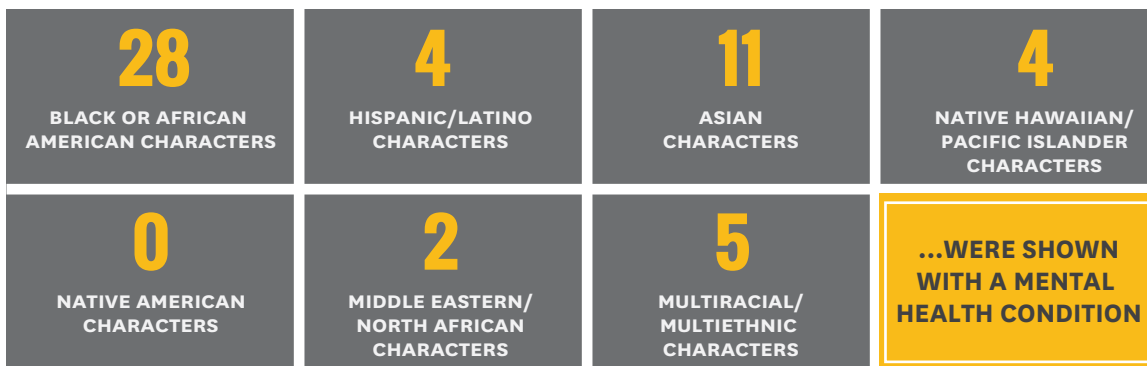
GENDER OF CHARACTERS WITH MENTAL HEALTH CONDITIONS

Percentage of characters depicted with mental health conditions by gender and year...

GENDER	2016	2019	2022
MALES	60%	59%	51%
FEMALES	40%	41%	49%
TOTAL	87	71	83

MENTAL HEALTH IS MISSING FOR MANY COMMUNITIES

Across 300 top films and 12,915 speaking characters from 2016 to 2022...



UNDERREPRESENTED CHARACTERS AND MENTAL HEALTH

Percentage of characters with a mental health condition who were from an underrepresented racial/ethnic group



2016

PREVALENCE OF MENTAL HEALTH CONDITIONS IN THE U.S. BY RACE/ETHNICITY*

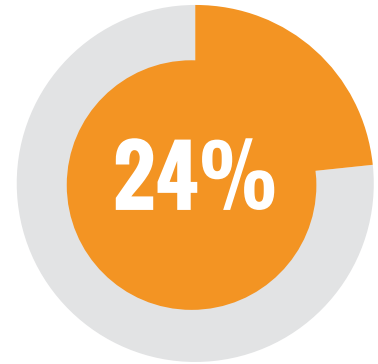
Hispanic/Latino: 20.7%

Black/African American: 21.4%

Asian: 16.4%

Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander: 18.1%

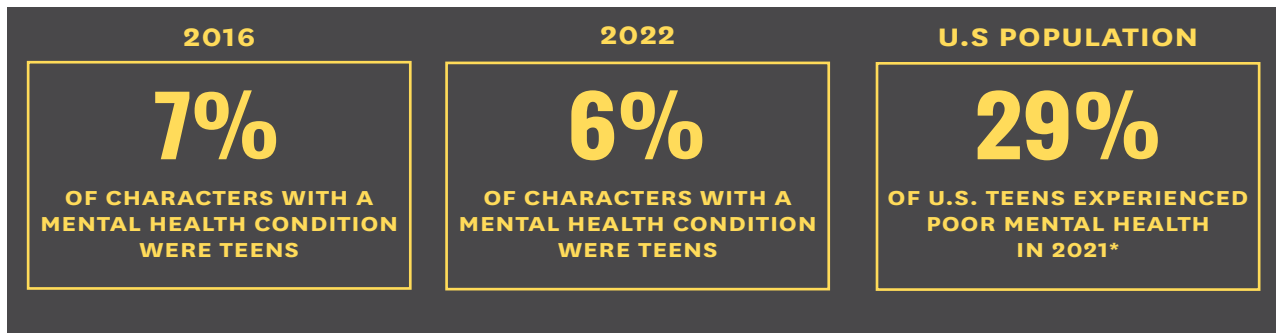
American Indian/Alaska Native: 26.6%



2022

*Population data sourced from the National Alliance on Mental Illness (2023).

TEENS' MENTAL HEALTH DOES NOT TRANSLATE TO ENTERTAINMENT



*Population data sourced from the Centers for Disease Control (2021).

MENTAL HEALTH PORTRAYALS LEAVE OUT THE LGBTQ+ COMMUNITY

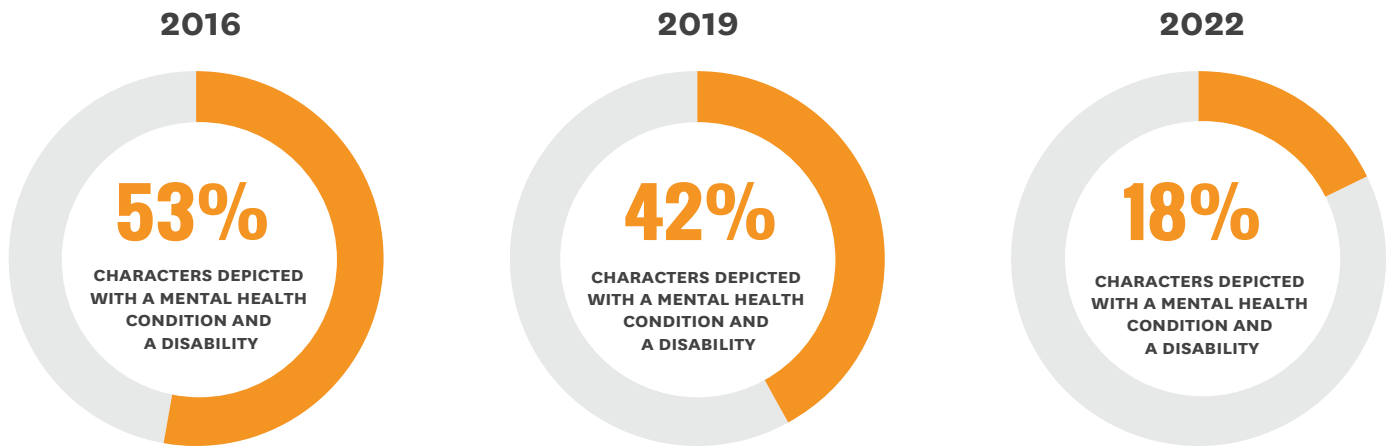
Across 100 top-grossing films of 2022...



ACROSS 300 TOP FILMS FROM 2016 TO 2022, ONLY 4 OF 9 LGBTQ+ CHARACTERS WITH A MENTAL HEALTH CONDITION WERE FROM AN UNDERREPRESENTED RACIAL/ETHNIC BACKGROUND. ALL APPEARED IN 2022.

MENTAL HEALTH IS NOT REPRESENTED IN OTHER COMMUNITIES

Percentage of characters shown with a mental health condition and a disability...



MENTAL HEALTH IS STIGMATIZED AND TRIVIALIZED IN FILM

Percentage of characters with a mental health condition shown in context with...

	DISPARAGEMENT	HUMOR	CONCEALMENT	TOTAL # OF CHARACTERS
2016	47%	22%	15%	87
2019	75%	44%	24%	71
2022	78%	18%	27%	83

FEW HELP SEEKING BEHAVIORS ARE SHOWN IN STORYTELLING...

Of the 83 characters depicted with a mental health condition...

MEASURE	2016	2019	2022
THERAPY	22%	30%	25%
TREATMENT	5%	13%	16%

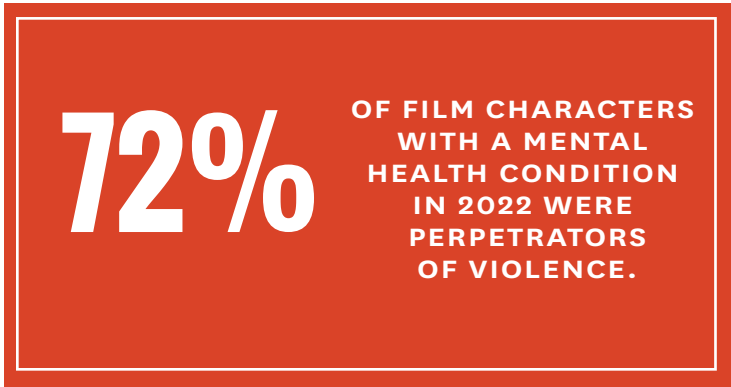
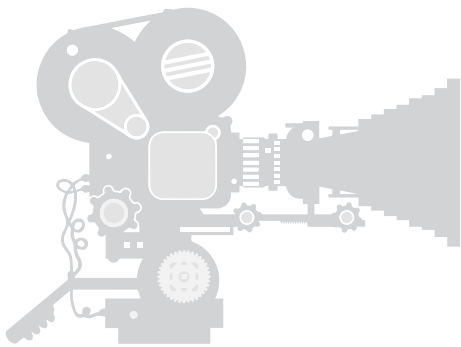
DEHUMANIZING LANGUAGE IS NORMALIZED IN FILM

Selected words/phrases used to refer to characters with a mental health condition in films from 2022...



Exposure to dehumanizing language can increase risk of learning and/or enacting aggression.

THE VIEW OF MENTAL HEALTH IS VIOLENT



In 2016, 46% of characters with a mental health condition were perpetrators of violence. In 2019, it was 63.4%.

CHARACTERS WITH MENTAL HEALTH CONDITIONS PERISH IN FILMS



MORE THAN HALF OF DEATHS WERE VIOLENT

SEVEN DIED BY SUICIDE

SHOT	DIED IN SLEEP
OVERDOSE	GUN-RELATED SUICIDE
ALCOHOLISM	HEART ATTACK
DIED IN EXPLOSION	STABBED
MURDERED	THROWN DOWN STAIRS
PUSHED OFF BALCONY	TERMINAL ILLNESS
BURNED ALIVE	SLIT OWN WRISTS
DRUG RELATED DROWNING	

SOLUTION FOR CHANGE: ADOPT A MENTAL HEALTH INCLUSION POLICY

Work with the Annenberg Inclusion Initiative, American Foundation for Suicide Prevention and other experts to develop...

STORY DEVELOPMENT

ATTRIBUTES SHOULD INCLUDE: USE THE MENTAL HEALTH MEDIA GUIDE, IDENTIFY RESOURCES & EXPERTS, WRITE INCLUSIVE CHARACTERS WITH INTERCONNECTED LIVES, CONSIDER CONTEXT, AVOID DEPICTIONS THAT RESEARCH HAS SHOWN CAN BE DANGEROUS FOR SOME VIEWERS

PRODUCTION & FILMING

ATTRIBUTES SHOULD INCLUDE: ALIGN ON WHY THE STORY MATTERS, IDENTIFY CRITICAL STORY ELEMENTS TO RETAIN, UNDERSTAND HOW VISUAL DEPICTIONS RELATE TO MENTAL HEALTH, CONSIDER HAVING A WELLNESS COORDINATOR ON SET

PROTECT CAST & CREW

ATTRIBUTES SHOULD INCLUDE: PROVIDE MENTAL HEALTH SUPPORT, PROMOTE INTERDEPENDENCE AMONG THE TEAM, SET STANDARDS FOR LANGUAGE USAGE & HUMOR, BRING EXPERTS TO SET

MARKETING & EXHIBITION

ATTRIBUTES SHOULD INCLUDE: PUT KEY INFORMATION IN PRESS KIT, DETERMINE WHETHER TO REFER TO RESOURCES, GIVE TALKING POINTS ABOUT MENTAL HEALTH, BUILD INCLUSIVE PRESS EXPERIENCE

Mental Health Conditions Across 200 Popular Films: A Research Update from 2016 to 2022

USC Annenberg Inclusion Initiative

Key Findings

The Annenberg Inclusion Initiative has released two previous reports exploring the prevalence and portrayals of mental health conditions across the 100 films highest grossing films at the U.S. box office 2016 and 2019. The findings across both studies painted a grim picture: mental health conditions were erased, dehumanized, and stereotyped on screen. Less than 2% of all speaking and named characters in both years were depicted with a mental health condition and a majority of these characters were White, violent, and disparaged against. To continue our work in this space, we are providing an updated report that looks at the most recent representation of mental health across 100 top-grossing films in 2022.

Prevalence

Out of the 3,815 speaking or named characters across the 100 top-grossing films in 2022, only 2.1% ($n=83$) were depicted with a significant or persistent mental health condition. Compared to 2016 (1.7%) and 2019 (1.5%), there was no meaningful difference across the 3 years. Nearly 21% of U.S. adults experience a mental illness.

Characters experiencing a mental health condition were shown in more primary roles than before. About 40% of characters (41.8%, $n=33$) with a mental health condition were in lead/co-lead or ensemble roles in the story. Less than half (44.3%, $n=35$) were in supporting roles, and 12.7% ($n=10$) were inconsequential to the plot. More characters depicted with mental health conditions were in lead roles in 2022 than in 2016 (25%, $n=19$) and 2019 (29.6%, $n=21$). We also saw a decrease in the number of tertiary characters with mental illnesses from both years, more significantly in 2016 (26.3%, $n=20$).

Almost half (48%, $n=48$) of top-grossing films in 2022 did not feature even 1 character with a mental health condition. Thirty-four percent only featured one character, 12% depicted two, 4% showed three, and only 2% depicted four or more characters. These results did not vary much across three years.

More than half of characters with mental health conditions (57%, $n=45$) were in R-rated films, while 36.7% ($n=29$) were in films rated PG-13, and 6.3% in films rated PG. Similar to 2019, no G rated films depicted any characters experiencing a mental health illness.

The following types of mental health conditions were the most popular depicted in top-grossing films in 2022: *addiction* ($n=28$), *mood disorders* ($n=21$), *anxiety/PTSD* ($n=24$), and *suicide* ($n=14$). Characters were also depicted with *significant disturbances in thinking* ($n=8$) and *obsessive-compulsive disorder* ($n=2$). No characters were shown with spectrum disorders or cognitive impairments in 2022.

Demographics & Identity

Of the 83 characters depicted with a mental health condition, 50.6% ($n=42$) were males while 49.4% ($n=41$) were females. This is a gender ratio of 1 male to every 1 female with a mental health condition. No characters were coded as non-binary.

Turning to race/ethnicity, 80 characters with mental health conditions were able to be evaluated for this variable. More than 75% were White ($n=61$), which was similar to 2019, and 19 characters were from underrepresented racial/ethnic backgrounds.

Looking at gender and underrepresented status (not White vs. White), the results were not shocking. 45% ($n=36$) of characters who experienced a mental health condition were White males and 31.3% ($n=25$) were White females. Only 5% ($n=4$) were underrepresented males and 18.8% ($n=15$) were underrepresented females. This is a ratio of 2.4 White males with a mental health condition to every 1 underrepresented female. Further, there has been a significant decrease in the prevalence of underrepresented males with mental health conditions since 2016 and 2019.

Age was also analyzed across characters with mental health conditions. Across 100 top grossing films in 2022, more characters who experienced a mental health condition on screen were adults (51.2%, 21-39 years of age) or middle-aged (32.9%, 40-64 years of age). Only 5 characters with mental health conditions were shown as teens, or 13-20 years of age, or as elderly, 65 years of age or older. In the entire sample, only 2 children were depicted with mental health conditions. No elderly or elementary aged characters were from underrepresented racial/ethnic backgrounds.

In the entire sample, nearly 10% of characters with mental health conditions were lesbian, gay, or bisexual. This is a significant increase from 2016 and 2019. However, more than half were Black (57.1%, $n=4$). These characters were Whitney Houston (*Whitney Houston: I Wanna Dance with Somebody*), Sophia (*Bodies, Bodies, Bodies*) and Jordan (*Bodies, Bodies, Bodies*). No characters were transgender. Despite the increase, less than 1% of all characters in the sample were lesbian, gay, or bisexual, which is an underrepresentation of the community not only on screen, but at the intersection of mental health.

Unfortunately, 2022 is another decrease in the representation of characters with mental health conditions who also experience a disability. Of the 83 characters depicted with a mental health illness on screen, only 18.1% ($n=15$) were also shown with a disability. In 2019, it was more than doubled (42.3%, $n=30$). One-third ($n=5$) of the disabilities presented on screen were in the communicative domain and almost half (46.7%, $n=7$) were in the cognitive domain. A majority of the disabilities fell under the physical domain (80%, $n=12$). In the U.S., 1 in 3 adults with a disability experienced a mental health crisis and storytelling is failing to share that reality.

Negative Context Surrounding Mental Health Portrayals

Across 83 characters with a mental health condition, 78.3% ($n=65$) experienced some form of disparagement (e.g., demeaning, disdain, belittling), which could present verbally or nonverbal from the character themselves or others. This represents a consistent increase of characters experiencing disdain in storylines since 2016. Breaking this down by category, 68.7% ($n=57$) of characters were disparaged generally or for attributes not related to their mental condition, whereas 47% ($n=39$) were disparaged specifically about or related to their mental health. Similar to previous years, most characters experienced disparagement from others (95.4%, $n=62$) while only a few engaged in self-disparagement (13.8%, $n=9$). Additionally, characters were also rejected, isolated, or *stigmatized* due to their mental health. Out of 83 characters, 29, or 34.9% were treated differently in the unfolding plot.

Turning to humor, 18.1% of characters with mental health conditions were the object of humor. This is a decrease from both 2019 (43.7%, $n=31$) and 2016 (22%, $n=19$). Humor and comedy are important plot devices in storytelling, yet how they are used to showcase a mental health experience requires scrutiny.

How characters concealed or hid their mental health condition was also evaluated. Around 26% of characters were shown hiding or deceiving others about their mental health condition. This reflects an increase across previous years, where 23.9% of characters concealed their condition in 2019 and 15% in 2016.

Characters who experienced a mental health condition were depicted holding occupations in the storyline. Of the 83 characters with mental health conditions on screen, 46 (56.1%) were shown with a job and only 12 were from underrepresented racial/ethnic backgrounds. Examples of occupations that characters held were assassin, surgeon, singer, investigative reporter, and an EMT.

Violence and mental health still overlapped on screen. Almost 75% ($n=60$) of characters with a mental health condition were perpetrators of violence and 77.1% ($n=64$) were shown as targets of violent attacks. In both cases, this is a significant increase from the previous 2 years. In 2016, 46% ($n=40$) of characters were perpetrators of violence and 60.9% ($n=53$) were targets. In 2019, 63.4% ($n=45$) and 66.2% ($n=66.2$) were perpetrators and targets of violence, respectively.

Of 60 characters that were perpetrators of violence, 50% ($n=30$) used natural means (e.g., slapping, punching,), 21.7% ($n=13$) firearms, 20% ($n=12$) used non-firearm weapons (e.g. knives), and 28.3% ($n=17$) took unconventional items like a whiskey glass or a fire extinguisher to carry out their attacks.

The 64 characters that were victims of violence were targeted by various means, including being pushed down the stairs, shot, threatened with physical harm, and injured during war. Additionally, 6% of characters with mental health conditions ($n=5$) were targets of sexual assault. All were women, 2 had contemplated suicide due to the assault and 1 died by suicide.

Under the context of violence, we also looked at how many characters died in the film. Across 83 characters with mental health conditions, 39.8% ($n=33$) died at some point in the plot and 54.5% ($n=18$) did so violently. Characters were stabbed (*Scream*), burned alive (*The Menu*, *Smile*), shot (*Barbarian*, *Redeeming Love*), and blown up (*Triangle of Sadness*).

A closer look was also given to how many of these characters died by suicide. A total of 7 characters with mental health conditions died by suicide in the storyline. The majority of these characters (71.4%, $n=5$) were White and only 2 characters were people of color. Turning to gender, more than half of the characters were female (57.1%, $n=7$) and three of them were mothers (*Mom*, *Smile*; Margaret, *Don't Worry Darling*; and Ann's Mother, *Prey for the Devil*). Continuing to tie mental health to violence reinforces the stigma that individuals experiencing a mental health condition are unpredictable and violent.

Treatment & Therapy Surrounding Mental Health Portrayals

Characters were also analyzed for how often they engaged in help seeking behaviors, specifically therapy and treatment. Only 25.3% ($n=21$) of characters were shown in therapy and 15.7% ($n=13$) were shown taking treatment. Despite treatment being the highest since both years (2016: 4.6%, $n=4$; 2019: 12.7%, $n=9$), depictions of therapy decreased since 2019 (29.6%, $n=21$).

When looking at the demographics of characters receiving help, more female characters were shown in therapy (76.2%, $n=16$) and taking treatment (76.9%, $n=10$) than their male counterparts. Few characters

from underrepresented racial/ethnic backgrounds, however, were depicted in these cases (therapy: 38.1%, $n=8$; treatment: 16.7%, $n=2$).

Despite some portrayals of help seeking behaviors increasing over time, content still overall lacks these depictions. Presenting healthy coping mechanisms or help seeking behaviors for characters with mental health conditions can significantly destigmatize the importance of support, as well as empower audiences to seek out these resources themselves.

Mental Health Conditions Across 300 Popular Films: A Research Update from 2016 to 2022

USC Annenberg Inclusion Initiative

June 2023

This is the third report from the Annenberg Inclusion Initiative to examine the prevalence and portrayal of mental health conditions in popular film. The first report focused on top-grossing films from 2016 and the second on from 2019. The results of these studies demonstrated that mental health conditions were rare in top films, and that when characters with mental health conditions did appear, they were often stereotyped and stigmatized. Such portrayals are not without consequences. Representation that dehumanizes those living with mental health conditions may create or reinforce existing stigmas and harmful attitudes that may translate to real-world contexts.¹

The purpose of the present study is to provide an update to the previous reports by examining the top-grossing movies of 2022. This analysis examines both the prevalence of characters with mental health conditions and the nature of how these characters are depicted on screen. Per our previous reports, characters were identified with mental health conditions if they experienced a “significant and/or persistent negative reaction (e.g., adverse thoughts, emotions, behaviors) evidenced by internalizing or externalizing symptoms.”²

This report will cover 5 major findings. First, the prevalence of characters with a mental health condition will be discussed. Then, the types of mental health conditions characters were depicted as experiencing or living with will be explored. Next, the demographic profile of characters with mental health conditions will be considered. The report will then shift to address the context surrounding characters with mental health conditions. Finally, the report concludes by assessing how often help-seeking behaviors (i.e., therapy, treatment) are shown in top films.

Three caveats are important to note. First, the results below will incorporate an over time analysis on certain measures (2016, 2019, 2022). Second, as with all reports from the Annenberg Inclusion Initiative, only differences of 5 percentage points or greater were considered to be meaningful. This *a priori* stipulation avoids making noise about trivial deviations. Third, our inaugural mental health report (released in 2019) provides variable definitions and analysis considerations that apply to the original study and both replications. This report can be found on the Annenberg Inclusion Initiative website.

Prevalence of Mental Health Portrayals

Out of 3,815 speaking or named characters across 100 top-grossing films in 2022, only 2.1% ($n=79$) were depicted with a significant or persistent mental health condition.³ Across three years, the prevalence of characters has not changed (2019=1.5%; 2016=1.7%). See Table 1. It is important to note that the prevalence of characters experiencing a mental health condition on screen underrepresents the population, as 21% of U.S. adults live with or have experienced a mental health condition.⁴

Table 1
Percentage of Characters w/a Mental Health Condition by Year

Prevalence	2016	2019	2022	U.S. Population
% of characters w/mental health condition	1.7% (<i>n</i> =76)	1.5% (<i>n</i> =68)	2.1% (<i>n</i> =79)	21%

Note: Data on U.S. population is from National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI).

When looking at the role these characters played in the storyline, most characters were in primary roles. In 2022, 41.8% of characters (*n*=33) were in lead/co-lead or ensemble lead roles in the film and 43% (*n*=34) of characters with mental health conditions were part of the main cast, which represents a 13.4 percentage point increase from 2019 (29.6%, *n*=21) and a 18 percentage point increase from 2016 (25%, *n*=19).⁵ Supporting characters cast in top-grossing storylines comprised 44.3% (*n*=35) of characters with mental health conditions, which represents another meaningful decrease from 2019 (54.9%, *n*=39), but not 2016. Moreover, the percent of inconsequential characters in 2022 was 12.7% (*n*=10), a significant decrease from 2016 (26.3%, *n*=20), but not 2019.

Another way to understand the prevalence of mental health conditions was by assessing how often films failed to include any characters with a mental health condition in the storyline. Nearly half (48%) of films did not feature even 1 character with a mental health condition in the unfolding plot (see Table 2). This finding has improved somewhat from 2019 when 55% of films had no representation of characters with a mental health condition.

Thirty-four percent of films included only 1 character who experienced a mental health condition, 12% included 2 characters, 4% included 3 characters, and only 2% depicted 4 or more characters.⁶ As mentioned above, the percentage of films with no characters with a mental health condition decreased but no other changes were observed across the three years

Table 2
Distribution of the Number of Characters w/a Mental Health Condition in Film by Year

# of characters w/MHC per film	2016	2019	2022
0 Characters	52% (<i>n</i> =52)	55% (<i>n</i> =55)	48% (<i>n</i> =48)
1 Character	31% (<i>n</i> =31)	30% (<i>n</i> =30)	34% (<i>n</i> =34)
2 Characters	9% (<i>n</i> =9)	8% (<i>n</i> =8)	12% (<i>n</i> =12)
3 Characters	5% (<i>n</i> =5)	4% (<i>n</i> =4)	4% (<i>n</i> =4)
4+ Characters	3% (<i>n</i> =3)	3% (<i>n</i> =3)	2% (<i>n</i> =2)
Total Films	100	100	100

Looking at film *rating*, more than half of characters (57%) of characters with mental health conditions appeared in films rated R, while 36.7% appeared in PG-13 rated movies. Only 5 characters appeared in content rated PG.

The previous section excluded demographic changes, or characters shown at different ages, from the overall prevalence of characters with mental health conditions. In the subsequent analyses of this report, the sample size will include those characters and will increase from 79 to 83. This approach allows for characters shown across various life stages (*Amsterdam*, *Elvis*) to be included and provides additional context on how those with mental health conditions are portrayed on screen.

Types of Mental Health Conditions

The types of mental health conditions presented in film were also examined. In 2022, characters that presented with a mental health condition fell under one or more of the following 7 categories: *Addiction* ($n=28$), *Anxiety/PTSD* ($n=24$), *Depression/Mood Disorders* ($n=21$), *Suicide* ($n=14$), *Significant Disturbances in Thinking* ($n=8$), *Cognitive Impairment* ($n=0$), and *Obsessive Compulsive Disorder* (OCD, $n=2$).⁷

Overall, there was an increase in portrayals of anxiety/PTSD since 2016 (see Table 3). Across all 3 years, there was no significant change in mood disorders, cognitive impairment disorders, obsessive compulsive disorders, and significant disturbances in thinking. Depictions of suicide have also stayed relatively constant, while no characters presented with spectrum disorders for the second year in a row.

Table 3
Percentage of Characters w/a Mental Health Conditions by Type & Year

Mental Health Condition	2016	2019	2022
Addiction (i.e., alcohol, drugs, gambling)	29	25	28
Mood disorders (i.e. bipolar, depression)	18	18	21
Anxiety/PTSD	15	19	24
Suicide (e.g., ideation, attempt, completion)	13	11	14
Cognitive Impairment	11	3	0
Significant Disturbance in Thinking	8	9	8
Spectrum Disorders (i.e. autism)	7	0	0
Obsessive Compulsive Disorder (OCD)	0	1	2

Note: If applicable, characters were categorized under more than 1 condition category. Therefore, the sum of each column may not add to the total sum of characters.

Identifying and categorizing characters with mental health conditions required both verbal and nonverbal indicators. To help make appropriate judgements, a variety of contextual cues were

scrutinized, which varied by type of mental health condition. Characters that were depicted with addiction were shown using drugs and alcohol (e.g., *Elvis*, *Father Stu*, *Whitney Houston: I Wanna Dance with Somebody*, *Triangle of Sadness*), attending or referencing rehab (e.g., *Bodies Bodies Bodies*), or even overdosing (e.g., *Amsterdam*, *Vengeance*).

Mental health conditions were also identified through behavior and dialogues. For example, Izzy Hawthorn (*Lightyear*) disclosed that she had astrophobia, or a fear of space. She presented with typical symptoms of anxiety (e.g., heavy breathing, feelings of nervousness, avoidance) when confronted with the thought of going into space. Multiple characters also experienced panic attacks on screen (e.g., *Lyle*, *Lyle*, *Crocodile*, *Easter Sunday*, *The Fabelmans*), and verbalized how other characters treated them and their feelings, which helped illuminate their mental state. For instance, Ladybug (*Bullet Train*), spoke of his therapist throughout the film and acknowledged the more calm and meditative mindset he had learned, whereas Yuta (*Jujutsu Kaisen 0: The Movie*) mentioned that another character was mindful of his anxiety.

Portrayals of suicide occurred in top-grossing films, including a spectrum of types of suicide-related experiences- suicidal ideations, behavior, and loss- across storylines. For example, a reference to a suicidal ideation was made in the film *Death on the Nile*, in which Windlesham, mentioned that when his one true loved married again, “I actually thought about ending my own life...I loved her.” In the film *She Said*, Rowena Chiu detailed her experience with a sexual assault and how it affected her mental health, “I wanted to be dead. I didn’t know how to be, keep going. I tried to kill myself, but I didn’t know how. I felt I failed at even that.” Depictions of attempted or completed suicides were also put on the big screen as well (*Don’t Worry Darling*, *A Man Called Otto*, *Redeeming Love*), although some also offered strong contextual cues that implied a suicide occurred (*Babylon*, *Smile*). We know from other research that the way suicide-related experiences are depicted can have real-world consequences. These portrayals can lead to problems such as suicide contagion and conversely, can reduce suicidal ideation and inspire hope when content portrays survival and help seeking.⁸

Across the sample, only one character disclosed that she had postpartum depression (Jodi Kantor, *She Said*) and only one character was depicted with an identifiable eating disorder (Charlie, *The Whale*). On screen, mental health conditions occurred across families. Fourteen characters with mental health conditions were related to each other, of which 12 of them had a parent/child relationship. Examples included *Batman* (Martha and Bruce Wayne), *Father Stu* (Bill and Stuart Long), and *Elvis* (Gladys and Elvis Presley).

Since 2016, there has been very little change in the representation of mental health conditions in top-grossing films. Although 1 in 5 U.S. adults experience a mental illness or condition⁹, storytelling has failed to catch up to this reality (2.1%). Even when characters were portrayed with a mental health condition, they were often depicted across a limited spectrum of diagnoses. In other words, while substance use disorders, depression, anxiety, and suicide-related experiences were portrayed, films did not accurately spotlight the full diversity of mental health experiences.

Demographic & Identity Factors Related to Mental Health Portrayals

Characters that were depicted with a mental health condition were also evaluated across a series of demographic indicators.¹⁰ Overall, 50.6% ($n=42$) of all characters with mental health conditions were male, while 49.4% ($n=41$) were female (see Table 4). In 2022, there was no gender difference in portrayals of mental health.

The percentage of female characters with a mental health condition increased from 2019 to 2022. There was a corresponding decrease in male characters with a mental health condition. In reality, women are at least 1.5 times more likely to have a mental health condition (e.g., anxiety, depression) than men.¹¹

Table 4
Characters w/a Mental Health Condition by Gender & Year

Gender	2016	2019	2022
Male	60% (n=52)	59.2% (n=42)	50.6% (n=42)
Female	40% (n=35)	40.8% (n=29)	49.4% (n=41)
Total	87	71	83

Table 5
Characters with a Mental Health Condition by Racial/Ethnic Group & Year

Racial/Ethnic Group	2016	2019	2022
White/Caucasian	80% (n=62)	76.5% (n=52)	76.3% (n=61)
Hispanic/Latino	0	1.5% (n=1)	3.8% (n=3)
Black/African American	14% (n=11)	11.8% (n=8)	11.3% (n=9)
Asian	5% (n=4)	1.5% (n=1)	7.5% (n=6)
Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander	0	1.5% (n=1)	0
American Indian/Alaskan Native	0	0	0
Middle Eastern/North African	0	1.5% (n=1)	1.3% (n=1)
Multiracial/Multiethnic	1% (n=1)	5.9% (n=4)	0
Total Characters	78	68	80

Note: Any reduction in sample size for race/ethnicity across three years is due to characters whose race/ethnicity could not be ascertained. These characters included anthropomorphized animals (2019=3; 2016=4; 2022=2), anthropomorphized supernatural creatures (2016=5), and an non-anthropomorphized animal (2022=1).

Turning to race/ethnicity, of the 80 characters whose race/ethnicity was possible to evaluate, more than 75% of characters with mental health conditions were White (76.3%, n=61) and only 19 were from underrepresented racial/ethnic backgrounds.¹² Table 5 indicates the distribution of characters with a mental health condition by specific racial/ethnic group. There was a significant increase in the

percentage of characters with a mental health condition who were Asian from 2019 (1.5%) to 2022 (7.5%), though 2022 did not differ from 2016 (5%). Similarly, a significant decrease in multiracial/multiethnic characters with a mental health condition was observed from 2019 to 2022, though the most recent year was similar to 2016.

When crossing gender and underrepresented status, White males still comprised the greatest share of characters with a mental health condition in 2022 (45%, $n=36$). White females filled 31.3% ($n=25$) of these roles, while underrepresented females made up 18.8% ($n=15$) of characters with mental health conditions and underrepresented males represented only 5% ($n=4$). This is a ratio of 2.4 White males with a mental health condition to every 1 underrepresented female.

Table 6
Percentage of Characters w/a Mental Health Condition
by Gender, Underrepresented Status & Year

Measure	2016	2019	2022
White males	44.9% ($n=35$)	42.6% ($n=29$)	45% ($n=36$)
White females	34.6% ($n=27$)	33.8% ($n=23$)	31.3% ($n=25$)
UR males	14.1% ($n=11$)	14.7% ($n=10$)	5% ($n=4$)
UR females	6.4% ($n=5$)	8.8% ($n=6$)	18.8% ($n=15$)
Total	78	68	80

Note: Across all three years, the sample size of characters for this measure is less than the total number of characters with mental health conditions. This is because only characters with mental health conditions whose race/ethnicity could be evaluated were included in for analysis. Additionally, UR refers to characters from an underrepresented racial/ethnic group (i.e., non White).

Overall, there was no change over time between White males and White females, however there was a significant increase of UR females with mental health conditions and a significant decrease in UR males with mental health conditions in storytelling.

Age was another demographic indicator evaluated for characters with mental health conditions. Across the 100 top-grossing films of 2022, the majority of characters with mental health conditions were adults (51.2%, 21-39 years of age) or middle-aged (32.9%, 40-64 years of age). Only 5 characters (6.1%) with mental health conditions were shown as teens (13-20 years of age), or as elderly (65 years of age or older). In the entire 2022 sample, only 2 children were depicted with mental health conditions.¹³

Table 8
Characters w/a Mental Health Condition by Age & Year

Age Group	2016	2019	2022
Children (0-12)	7% (n=6)	0	3.7% (n=3)
Teens (13-20)	7% (n=6)	5.7% (n=4)	6.1% (n=5)
Adult (21-39)	46% (n=40)	35.7% (n=25)	51.2% (n=42)
Middle Age (40-64)	33% (n=29)	52.9% (n=37)	32.9% (n=27)
Elderly (65+)	7% (n=6)	5.7% (n=4)	6.1% (n=5)
Total Characters	87	71	82

Note: Across all three years, the sample size of characters for this measure is less than the total number of characters with mental health conditions. This is because only characters with mental health conditions whose age could be evaluated were included in for analysis.

The prevalence of characters with mental health conditions in other marginalized communities was also a focus in this report. Less than 10% of characters (8.5%, $n=7$) with mental health conditions were identified as lesbian, gay, or bisexual and no characters were depicted as transgender.¹⁴ Although this is a significant increase since 2019 and 2016 (see Table 9), the LGBTQ+ community as it intersects with mental health is still largely underrepresented on screen, especially since over 39% of LGBTQ+ Americans experience a mental health condition.¹⁵

Of the 7 characters that were identified as LGBTQ+, more than half were Black (Lesbian=2, Bisexual=2) and were featured in *Whitney Houston: I Wanna Dance with Somebody* (Whitney Houston) and *Bodies, Bodies, Bodies* (Sophia; Jordan). The remaining 3 characters were White (Lesbian=1; Gay=1; Bisexual=1) and they appeared in *The Whale*, *Tár*, and *Babylon*.

Table 9
Characters w/a Mental Health Condition by LGBTQ+, Disability & Year

Measure	2016	2019	2022
LGBTQ+ Characters	0	2.8% (n=2)	8.5% (n=7)
Characters with a Disability	52.9% (n=46)	42.3% (n=30)	18.1% (n=15)
Total Characters	87	71	83

Lastly, the intersection between mental health conditions and disabilities was analyzed. Of the 83 characters with a mental health condition on screen, only 18.1% ($n=15$) were depicted with a disability.¹⁶ This is a meaningful decrease from 2019 and 2016 (see Table 9). A majority of the characters that presented with a disability were shown with a physical disability (80%, $n=12$), while nearly half (46.7%, $n=7$) experienced a cognitive disability, and 33.3% ($n=5$) had a communicative disability.¹⁷ Compared to

the real world, 1 in 3 U.S. adults with a disability experience frequent mental distress, yet there is minimal representation of characters with mental health conditions who also live with a disability.¹⁸

These findings suggest that there is a positive trend across the overall representation of mental health conditions in popular content. 2022 had the highest percentage of characters with mental health conditions who were women of color or characters identified as lesbian, gay, or bisexual. However, there are still areas for improvement. In the next section, the context surrounding portrayals of mental health is explored.

Context Surrounding Mental Health Portrayals

In addition to highlighting the prevalence of characters with mental health conditions on screen, this report also investigates the extent to which characters in 2022 were disparaged, stigmatized, or shown in connection to violence.

Across the 83 characters with a mental health condition, 65, or 78.3%, experienced some form of disparagement in the storyline. Disparagement was identified through demeaning and belittling verbal and nonverbal cues that came from the character or others.¹⁹ In 2022, the percentage of characters with a mental health condition that experienced disparagement increased from 2016 (47%, $n=41$) but was similar to 2019 (74.6%, $n=53$).

Table 10
Examples of Disparagement of Characters w/a Mental Health Condition

Bastard (1)	Son of a Bitch (8)	Washed Up (2)
Monster (2)	Asshole (1)	Bitch (7)
You Little Shit/Piece of Shit/Dipshit/Batshit (8)	Spoiled Brat	"I'm a degenerate fucking animal"
Whore (3)	Disgusting	Loser
Crawl into a bottle/Hide at the bottom of a bottle	Psycho/Psychopath (4)	Strung Out
Crazy (13)	Unhinged (2)	Weirdo
Hysterical	Idiot/Dumb (3)	Delusional
Crackpot	Half-wit	Sad
Sick	Freak (5)	Deformed
Shut the Fuck Up (2)	Demon (2)	Nuts
Fucking Stupid	Devoid of Empathy	Lost Her Mind

Disparagement was also broken down into 2 categories: general disparagement and mental health disparagement. More than two-thirds (68.7%) of characters ($n=57$) with mental health conditions were disparaged *generally* or for attributes not related to their mental health. On the other hand, almost half

of characters (47%, $n=39$) were disparaged in relation to their mental health. Across the board, these characters were more frequently insulted by other characters (95.4%, $n=62$) compared to making self-deprecating statements (13.8%, $n=9$).²⁰ This is on par with 2019. Examples of disparaging phrases are shown in Table 10.

In addition to being disparaged, characters with mental health conditions were also isolated, rejected, or excluded in the storyline.²¹ Across 83 characters depicted with a mental health condition, 34.9% ($n=29$) were *stigmatized* because of their mental health. For example, in the film *Elvis*, Elvis's addiction to pills became so severe that it drove his partner, Priscilla, to leave him and file for divorce. In *Smile*, the protagonist's sister, Holly, admitted to leaving their mother due to her mental illness, "...I had to leave to survive...because I got the worst of Mom's insanity." Other examples included Nellie LaRoy, *Babylon* (considered a liability by a studio executive due to her gambling debts) and Suzu, *Belle* (who states, "After my mom died, I was always crying and most of my classmates avoided me.") When characters are judged or stigmatized on screen, it may reinforce perceptions that individuals with mental health conditions are outsiders deserving of isolation.

Another way that characters were portrayed on screen was as objects of humor or jokes as it related to their mental health. In 2022, 18.1% of characters ($n=15$) with mental health conditions were presented as the punchline or their conditions were used for comedic relief.²² This is a decrease since 2019 (43.7%, $n=31$), but an increase since 2016 (22%, $n=19$).

One example occurred in *Violent Night*, where the audience is meant to find humor in the portrayal of an alcoholic Santa who often drinks on the job. In *Babylon*, fellow characters mocked Nellie LaRoy for her drug use, social outbursts, and gambling addiction. In *Bodies, Bodies, Bodies*, Alice's character disclosed feelings of body dysmorphia at an inopportune time, leading her friends to dismiss and disparage her as a comedic punchline to the audience. Comedy and humor in storytelling can be deployed as a tool for commentary but these devices run the risk of trivializing mental health conditions.

Characters were also evaluated regarding how often their mental health condition was concealed or hidden in the storyline.²³ Around 26% of characters (26.5%, $n=22$) were shown hiding their mental health condition, which reflects an increase from 2019 (23.9%, $n=17$) and 2016 (15%, $n=13$). Characters were depicted concealing their mental health experiences from their families (*Blacklight*), their colleagues (*See How They Run*), and even the public (*Batman*). One notable example occurred in the film *She Said*, where Rowena Chiu explained that because of her cultural upbringing, she was not empowered to speak to anyone about her sexual assault and the toll it took on her mental health. These results demonstrate that there are opportunities to model disclosure related to mental health conditions in ways that can empower and inform viewers.

The occupations of characters with mental health conditions were examined. More than half of characters (56.1%, $n=46$) were depicted with an occupation. Of the characters shown with a job, nearly three-quarters were White males (73.3%, $n=33$). Only 12 characters with a mental health condition that held a job were from underrepresented racial/ethnic backgrounds, 9 were women and 3 were men. Examples of occupations that characters held were assassin, surgeon, singer, investigative reporter, and EMT.

The final group of variables that were measured amongst characters with mental health conditions related to violence and death.²⁴ Nearly three-quarters of characters with a mental health condition (72.3%, $n=60$) were depicted as *perpetrators of violence*. This is a significant increase from previous

years. Of these characters, half (50%, $n=30$) of those instances involved characters using natural means (e.g., slapping, punching,), 21.7% ($n=13$) depicted firearms, 20% ($n=12$) used non-firearm weapons (e.g., knives), and 28.3% ($n=17$) utilized unconventional weapons (e.g., whiskey glass, fire extinguisher).

Characters were also shown as *targets* of credible threats or physical violence in the unfolding plot. Specifically, 64 characters, or 77.1%, were shown as victims of violence. This was also a significant increase since 2016 and 2019 (see Table 11). Characters were shot, threatened with physical harm, injured in war, and pushed down a flight of stairs. Few characters also engaged in self-harm (*The Banshees of Inisherin*, *Don't Worry Darling*, *Redeeming Love*). Additionally, 6% of characters with mental health conditions ($n=5$) were targets of sexual assault. All were women; 2 contemplated suicide due to the assault and 1 died by suicide.

Table 11
Characters w/a Mental Health Condition Shown Engaged in Violence by Year

Attribute	2016	2019	2022
Perpetrator of Violence	46% ($n=40$)	63.4% ($n=45$)	72.3% ($n=60$)
Target of Violence	60.9% ($n=53$)	66.2% ($n=47$)	77.1% ($n=64$)

The gender and race/ethnicity of characters involved with violence was also explored. In terms of gender, there has been a significant change observed for men and women involved in violence. The prevalence of males as perpetrators and targets declined over time, while for females these percentages increased. Looking at race/ethnicity, there has been no change over time for both White and underrepresented perpetrators and targets of violence (see Table 12).

Table 12
Gender of Characters with Mental Health Conditions Engaged in Violence by Year

Attributes	Perpetrators			Targets		
	2016	2019	2022	2016	2019	2022
Male	72.5% ($n=29$)	64.4% ($n=29$)	51.7% ($n=31$)	75.5% ($n=40$)	61.7% ($n=29$)	56.3% ($n=36$)
Female	27.5% ($n=11$)	35.6% ($n=16$)	48.3% ($n=29$)	24.5% ($n=13$)	38.3% ($n=18$)	43.8% ($n=28$)
White	83.3% ($n=30$)	77.3% ($n=34$)	77.2% ($n=44$)	81.6% ($n=40$)	76.6% ($n=36$)	79% ($n=49$)
UR	16.7% ($n=6$)	22.7% ($n=10$)	22.8% ($n=13$)	18.4% ($n=9$)	23.4% ($n=11$)	21% ($n=13$)

Note: No characters were coded as gender non binary across all 3 years. UR refers to characters from an underrepresented racial/ethnic group (i.e., non White).

In addition to the portrayal of violence, the *death* of characters with mental health conditions was assessed. Across the 83 characters with a mental health condition, 39.8% ($n=33$) died during the plot and 54.5% ($n=18$) of those who died did so violently. Examples included characters being stabbed (*Scream*), burned alive (*The Menu, Smile*), shot (*Barbarian, Redeeming Love*), and involved in explosions (*Triangle of Sadness*).

It was also important to look at how many of these deaths were due to suicide. Of the 33 characters with mental health conditions that died in the storyline, 7 characters (21.2%) died by suicide.²⁵ Breaking this down by gender, less than half (42.9%, $n=3$) were male and 57.1% ($n=4$) were female. Three of the women who died were mothers (*Mom, Smile*; *Margaret, Don't Worry Darling*; and *Ann's Mother, Prey for the Devil*). And a majority of these characters (71.4%, $n=5$) identified as White, while only 2 characters were people of color.

Table 13
Nature of Death for Characters with Mental Health Conditions

Sex	R/E	Age	Type of Death	MH Condition	Suicide
Female	White	Adult	Slain	Depression	No
Male	White	Elderly	Heart Attack	Addiction (gambling)	No
Female	White	Middle-Aged	Alcoholism	Addiction (alcohol)	No
Male	White	Middle-Aged	Poor Heart Function	Addiction (drugs)	No
Female	White	Middle-Aged	Overdose	Suicide	Yes
Female	White	Adult	Coerced into Burning Herself Alive	Anxiety	Yes
Female	White	Adult	Leukemia	PTSD	No
Male	White	Middle-Aged	Stabbed	Addiction (alcohol)	No
Male	White	Elementary-Aged	Pushed Off a Balcony	Anxiety	No
Male	White	Middle-Aged	Shot	Addiction (alcohol)	No
Female	Black	Adult	Slits her neck	Suicide	Yes
Female	White	C/T	Shot	Significant Disturbance in Thinking	No
Male	White	Adult	Shoots himself with gun	Depression	Yes
Male	White	Middle-Aged	Burned Alive	Depression	No
Male	White	Middle-Aged	No Information Provided	Addiction (alcohol)	No

Female	Black	Middle-Aged	Drug Related Drowning	Addiction (drugs)	No
Female	White	Middle-Aged	No Information Provided	Significant Disturbance in Thinking (schizophrenia)	Yes
Female	Hispanic	Adult	No Information Provided	Suicide	Yes
Male	White	Adult	Uses himself as bait for an alien force	Anxiety	No
Female	White	Adult	Accidental Overdose	Addiction (gambling, drugs)	No
Male	White	Middle-Aged	Shoots himself with gun	Suicide	Yes
Male	White	Middle-Aged	Shoots himself with a gun	Suicide	Yes
Female	White	Adult	Shot	Body Dysmorphia	No
Male	White	Adult	Accidentally slices his neck	Addiction (drugs)	No
Male	White	Middle-Aged	Smashed with a Kettlebell	Depression	No
Female	Black	Adult	Thrown down the stairs	PTSD	No
Male	White	Adult	Shoots himself	Suicide	Yes
Male	White	Middle-Aged	Health related	Depression/ Eating Disorder	No
Male	Middle Eastern /North African	Adult	Alcoholism	Depression/ Addiction	No
Male	White	Elderly	Heart condition	Depression	No
Female	White	Adult	Overdose	Addiction (drugs)	No
Male	White	Middle-Aged	Blown up on a boat	Addiction (alcohol)	No
Female	Asian	Adult	Terminal Illness	Suicide	No

Note: Several characters died or their deaths were communicated in the storyline, however the cause or reason for their death was not provided.

Therapy & Treatment of Mental Health on Screen

In our previous reports on mental health representation, the prevalence and portrayal of help-seeking behaviors on screen has been an important indicator of the mental health experience. Two specific variables were used for this analysis: therapy and treatment.²⁶

Of the 83 characters that were depicted with a mental health condition, 25.3% ($n=21$) received therapy and 15.7% ($n=13$) used medications or other forms of *treatment* for their condition. From 2016 to 2022, there was no meaningful difference in the prevalence of characters with mental health conditions in

therapy. There was a 3 percentage point increase in the number of characters taking treatment since 2019 (see Table 14).

Table 14
Demographic Information for Characters with Mental Health Conditions Receiving Therapy & Treatment by Year

Attribute	Therapy			Treatment		
	2016	2019	2022	2016	2019	2022
Male	36.8% (n=7)	71.4% (n=15)	23.8% (n=5)	25% (n=1)	55.6% (n=5)	23.1% (n=3)
Female	63.2% (n=12)	28.6% (n=6)	76.2% (n=16)	75% (n=3)	44.4% (n=4)	76.9% (n=10)
White	66.7% (n=12)	88.9% (n=16)	61.9% (n=13)	100% (n=4)	88.9% (n=8)	83.3% (n=10)
UR	33.3% (n=6)	11.1% (n=2)	38.1% (n=8)	0	11.1% (n=1)	16.7% (n=2)
Total	21.8% (n=19)	29.6% (n=21)	25.3% (n=21)	4.6% (n=4)	12.7% (n=9)	15.7% (n=13)

Note: The race/ethnicity of 3 characters with mental health conditions in 2022 could not be evaluated, including 1 character who was receiving treatment.

As shown in Table 14, women were more likely to be shown in treatment or receiving therapy than men, which reverses the trend seen in 2019. In terms of race/ethnicity, more White characters were shown in therapy or taking treatment than characters from underrepresented racial/ethnic groups (see Table 14). Of the 8 underrepresented characters in therapy, 7 were Black and 1 was Hispanic/Latino. For treatment, only 2 characters were from an underrepresented racial/ethnic background (1 Hispanic/Latino and 1 Black character) and both were women.

In addition to examining characters with a mental health condition, it was also important to assess how often all speaking characters were shown in therapy or receiving mental health treatment. In these instances, characters might not meet the threshold to be counted as experiencing a mental health condition but might still engage in help-seeking behavior.

Across the entire sample of 3,819 characters, 1.1% ($n=42$) of characters were depicted in therapy. Of the characters in therapy, 50% ($n=21$) did not have an underlying mental health condition. Fewer characters ($<1\%$, $n=18$) were shown in treatment and 27.8% of those characters ($n=5$) did not have a mental health condition. These results demonstrate that help-seeking behaviors were not solely shown when characters experience mental health conditions, though they are rare on screen.

Characters that were included in therapy made references to (e.g., *Nope*, *Bullet Train*, *Glass Onion*) or were depicted seeing an individual therapist (e.g., *The Unbearable Weight of Massive Talent*, *Smile*) or attending group therapy (e.g., *Father Stu*). Characters were also shown in inpatient psychiatric care (e.g., *the Batman*, *Orphan: First Kill*, *Terrifier 2*). Others mentioned rehab for addiction-related issues (e.g., *Bodies, Bodies, Bodies*).

Treatment occurred when characters took or were prescribed medication to relieve a mental health issue. For example, characters that were depicted using their prescribed treatment during persistent stressful scenarios include Sam Carpenter (*Scream*), the only Hispanic/Latino female identified in this variable. She was shown taking her medications when visiting her sister in the hospital and being berated by a vision of her father who says, “Antipsychotics aren’t working as well as they used to, are they?” Characters were also shown taking other forms of treatment to treat their mental health. In *Puss in Boots*, Perrito served as a therapy dog and even helped Puss in the film. In *Bodies, Bodies, Bodies*, Greg was shown using a light therapy mask, which another character mentioned, “Helps treat his seasonal depression.”

Although depictions of therapy decreased since 2019 and portrayals of treatment increased, content still lacked depictions of help-seeking behaviors for mental health conditions that demonstrate these conditions can be ameliorated or their severity reduced. It is important that filmmakers increase depictions of therapy and treatment, to show audiences healthy and positive coping mechanisms and support.

Conclusion

This study is the third iteration in the series of reports by the Annenberg Inclusion Initiative to explore the representation of mental health conditions in top-grossing films. More than 3,800 speaking or named characters were analyzed across 100 top-grossing films in 2022 to determine the prevalence and portrayals of mental health conditions. Five major findings from the study and recommendations for change are outlined below.

#1 Mental Health Conditions are Erased in Storytelling

Only 2.1% of characters in the top 100 films of 2022 were depicted with a mental health condition. While the figure has now surpassed 2%, there has been no meaningful change in the percentage of characters with a mental health condition in top films since 2016. Moreover, movies do not come close to meeting the threshold of proportional representation with the U.S. population, where 21% of U.S. adults live with a mental health condition.²⁷ Additionally, nearly half of the films did not feature even 1 character with a mental health condition, while nearly a third only depicted 1 character. These figures reveal that audiences will rarely see a mental health portrayal on screen in the most popular films of the year.

In addition to the findings mentioned above, when characters with mental health conditions did appear, they were often in supporting roles. While the inclusion of characters with mental health conditions across roles of every size is essential, depicting leading characters navigating mental health challenges is important. These characters offer audiences the chance to see a longer, more nuanced mental health journey, including opportunities to view treatments and therapy settings.

#2 Mental Health Conditions in Film are Dominated by Suicide, Addiction, and Anxiety

When characters in top-grossing content were depicted with mental health conditions, they most often experienced mood disorders (e.g., depression), addiction, and anxiety. These findings are somewhat aligned with the reality of mental health conditions in the real world. According to the survey by the Gallup Panel, 29% of U.S. adults have been diagnosed with depression in 2023, with women and adults 18-44 years of age experiencing depression at higher rates.²⁸ Although characters were shown experiencing depression, many portrayals failed to showcase positive outcomes or the authentic process of living with depression in the storyline.

Turning to addiction, more than 60% of all substance use cases involve alcohol and around half have battled a drug use disorder.²⁹ Depicting addiction and substance use in film thus reflects the challenges faced by audience members and may be instrumental in helping family, co-workers, and friends foster empathy or compassion. However, this is only likely if portrayals are authentic, nuanced, and depict help-seeking, which is still rare.

Anxiety was the third most likely mental health condition to be seen on screen. In the U.S., anxiety is the most common mental health disorder in adults, affecting 31.1% of the population.³⁰ Ensuring that characters on screen are shown depicting not only generalized anxiety, but a variety of types of anxiety disorders is still needed, however.

Although films accurately illuminated more common mental health experiences, the prevalence of other mental health conditions was limited. For example, suicide is the 11th leading cause of death in the U.S., yet only 14 characters were depicted with suicidal ideation, attempts, or dying by suicide.³¹ It is imperative that storytellers do not limit the scope of mental health conditions shown on screen. Broadening the types of mental health portrayals in storytelling is one pathway to illuminate the spectrum of experiences that exist off screen.

#3 Mental Health Conditions are Often Experienced by White, Straight, Men

As in previous reports, the demographic profile of characters with mental health conditions in the top films of 2022 was still predominantly straight, White, and male. The lack of intersectionality in these portrayals runs counter to real-world statistics. For example, according to the National Center for Transgender Equality and the Williams Institute, a national survey of over 27,000 transgender individuals ages 16 years and older in the U.S. found that 81.7% reported having serious thoughts of suicide in their lifetime, including 48.3% in the past year, and 40% reported attempting suicide at one point.³² Beyond these statistics, adolescents and people with disabilities also experience mental health conditions in the real world, but these are rarely shown on screen.³³

Acknowledging that mental health conditions may impact people from a variety of underrepresented groups is an important step toward changing portrayals. Content can spotlight the unique perspectives of those with lived experience of mental health conditions who are identified with these communities. In doing so, entertainment can provide a pathway toward identification and empathy for those within and outside of those groups. This may reduce stigma and increase supportive behaviors.

#4 Mental Health Conditions are Still Stigmatized On Screen

Despite the few portrayals of mental health shown on screen, what might viewers understand about mental health when these depictions do appear? First, characters with mental health conditions were

disparaged on screen. This included portrayals that positioned mental health conditions as humorous, or a source of shame and stigma, perpetuating detrimental myths about living with adverse mental health. Second, characters with mental health conditions were associated with violence at an increasing incidence since 2016, either as perpetrators (72.3%) or targets (77.1%). Nearly 40% of characters with mental health conditions died over the course of the story, many of them violently. This messaging overstates how dangerous individuals with mental health conditions are. The majority of individuals with mental illnesses can manage their mental health and do not go on to die by suicide or other violent means.

Our previous reports have produced similar findings— the portrayal of mental health on screen is rarely authentic or nuanced. The depiction of mental health as dangerous and deadly may foster or reinforce viewers' perceptions about mental health off screen. Thus, depictions of mental health conditions matter for more than the plot of a film. Dehumanizing people living with mental health conditions on screen may further stigmatize people living with mental health conditions in the real world. During these last several years of the pandemic, polls show American viewers value their mental health and are eager to learn ways to manage mental health conditions. However, films clearly do not align with the public's expressed interests.³⁴

#5 Few Characters Seek Help for Mental Health Conditions On-Screen

Portraying help-seeking behaviors in storytelling is one way to destigmatize mental health and even encourage viewers to consider available resources for their own needs. Unfortunately, films failed to showcase positive actions to manage mental health conditions. Roughly one-quarter of characters with mental health conditions were in therapy and fewer were in treatment. The few characters who did engage in therapy or treatment were predominantly White and women, which obscures the reality that people from all backgrounds benefit from mental health interventions.

This is a critical area in which entertainment can have a potentially positive influence on society. By depicting supportive behaviors from friends and family, showing therapy sessions and treatment options, and destigmatizing mental health in general, there are opportunities to change audience perceptions and attitudes. Entertainment content can influence knowledge, attitudes, and behaviors related to mental health by incorporating messages that inform audiences on issues pertaining to mental health— and in particular, how to seek and provide support for mental health conditions.

Study Limitations

As with all research, a few limitations in this study must be noted. First, this report only examines top-grossing films. Limiting the scope of the research to movies may not paint the full picture of mental health portrayals across popular media, particularly television and streaming content. Extending the research to other platforms and storytelling is a necessary step toward understanding the prevalence of mental health stories in entertainment. Second, the definition of a mental health condition in this analysis focuses on conditions that are significant and persistent. In other words, the conditions that present as ill and injurious were counted for analysis. Expanding this definition to include a wider spectrum of mental health experiences, specifically those that are more transient, may provide a different understanding of how mental health is showcased in storytelling.

Solutions for Change

The results in this report reveal that there is still considerable room to increase mental health storytelling in popular film. To facilitate this expansion, there are resources available to content creators. In particular, the Mental Health Media Guide, a free online resource that offers insight around storytelling on mental health, is accessible. Additionally, the Mental Health Storytelling Initiative (MHSI), a project of the Annenberg Inclusion Initiative, and its Mental Health Storytelling Coalition, are available to connect storytellers with experts and industry partners seeking guidance on mental health storylines. MHSI serves as a hub to guide and influence change in entertainment regarding mental health. As a bridge between industry and expert partners, the MHSI is committed to connecting and engaging leaders in the media and mental health space to provide resources via the Mental Health Media Guide, including best practices in storytelling. The impact of these efforts is to go beyond good entertainment. It is to engage audiences, empower communities, and create profound change that destigmatizes mental health.

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Aastha Jani	Habeeba Kamel	Shefali Murti
Aimee Christopher	Jalen Layfield	Sheury Soto
Amanda Fassett	Jalen Short	Shreya Ranganath
Athena Pham	Janelle Nwaku	Simi Situ
Bryan A'Hearn	Jonathan Beyer	Skylar Graham
Celia Hidell	Julia Zara	Sophia Pelaez
Chris Bien-nee Tsoumou	Karyna Rodriguez	Vivienne Yang
Danielle Hsieh	Miguel Bernas	Xinyang Zhang
Deeptavarna Mummineni	Olivia Clarke	Yvonne Abedi
Drew Norman	Pepper Campbell	
Ethan Huang	Shane Dimapanat	

Footnotes

1. Smith, S.L., Choueiti, M., Choi, A., Pieper, K., & Moutier, C. (2019). Mental Health Conditions in Film & TV: Portrayals that Dehumanize and Trivialize Characters. Annenberg Inclusion Initiative. https://assets.uscannenberg.org/docs/aii-study-mental-health-media_052019.pdf
2. To keep consistent with our previous studies, a comprehensive codebook was used that outlined the definition and relevant contexts of a mental health condition. A character was determined as having a mental health condition when a significant and/or persistent negative reaction (e.g., adverse thoughts, emotions, behaviors) was evidenced by internalizing or externalizing symptoms. Three individual student coders were trained in this definition and analyzed content, identifying various verbal and nonverbal cues to accurately judge characters on the presence of a mental health condition. In addition to rendering a judgment on a character's mental health, students were also tasked with analyzing characters according to 21 additional mental health variables that would contextualize the character's mental health experience. Fifteen of these variables were specific to characters who were coded with a condition. Following this, the study's author discussed coders' judgements, reconciled disagreements, and collated notes. Once all characters were examined, study authors reviewed each decision to make final judgements.
3. Across the sample, a total of 83 characters were depicted with a mental health condition. Per the definition of our codebook, when a character changes demographically by age, gender, race/ethnicity, or type, a new line of data is created. For the purposes of this study, characters with demographic changes were excluded from the overall prevalence of characters with a mental health condition ($n=79$). However, the total 83 characters with mental health conditions were included across all subsequent analyses to capture the full nuance of the characters' portrayal across their lifespan.
4. National Alliance on Mental Illness (n.d.). *Mental Health by the Numbers*. Retrieved from: <https://www.nami.org/mhstats>. Salk, R.H., Hyde, J.S., & Abramson, L.Y. (2017). Gender differences in depression in representative national samples: Meta-analyses of diagnoses and symptoms. *Psychological bulletin* vol. 143,8 (2017): 783-822. doi:10.1037/bul0000102. <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC5532074/>
5. Drawing from our existing methodology, leads or co-leads are characters who drive the plot. Additional information on how the Annenberg Inclusion Initiative defines leads/co-leads can be found in one of our annual reports.
6. In 2022, 3 films presented with 4 or more characters with a mental health condition. These films were *Elvis*; *Prey for the Devil*; and *Bodies, Bodies, Bodies*.
7. In the 2016 and 2019 reports, 7 types of conditions were used to categorize the characters that presented with a mental health condition: *addiction, anxiety/PTSD, cognitive impairment, developmental disorders, significant disturbances in thinking, mood disorders (i.e. depression), and suicide*. For 2019 and 2022, *obsessive compulsive disorder (OCD)* was added to the list. Additionally, 2 mental health conditions depicted on screen (*The Whale*; *Bodies, Bodies, Bodies*) were categorized under cognitive impairment: *eating disorder* and *body dysmorphia*.
8. Niederkrotenthaler, T., Till, B., Kirchner, S., Sinyor, M., Braun, M., Pirkis, J., Tran, U. S., Voracek, M., Arendt, F., Ftanou, M., Kovacs, R., King, K., Schlichthorst, M., Stack, S., & Spittal, M. J. (2022). Effects of media stories of hope and recovery on suicidal ideation and help-seeking attitudes and intentions: systematic review and meta-analysis. *Lancet Public Health*. 7(2), e156-e168. [https://doi.org/10.1016/S2468-2667\(21\)00274-7](https://doi.org/10.1016/S2468-2667(21)00274-7).
9. NAMI (n.d.).
10. Integral to the research at the Annenberg Inclusion Initiative, all speaking or named characters are evaluated according to a set of demographic indicators that aim to contextualize their identity. These include age, sex, race/ethnicity, role, disability, among others. More information on how we identify and analyze these variables can be found in our other reports.
11. Salk, et al. (2017).
12. Of the 83 characters depicted with a mental health condition, only 80 characters' race/ethnicity were able to be evaluated. Two characters were 'Can't Tell' for this variable (Chip, DC League of Super-Pets;

Jimbo, Paws of Fury: The Legend of Hank). One character was 'Not Applicable' for race/ethnicity (Lulu, Dog). Drawing from our existing research, characters from underrepresented racial/ethnic backgrounds include those who are depicted as Black/African-American, Hispanic/Latino, Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander, Asian, Middle Eastern/North African, and/or Multiracial/Multiethnic.

13. 3 characters with mental health conditions were identified as elementary age (6-12 years of age), however 1 character was a non-anthropomorphized animal (Lulu, Dog). For the purposes of the report, we only mentioned characters that were identified as human.
14. Of the 83 characters depicted with a mental health condition, only 82 were evaluated for LGBT status. The 1 character that was not applicable for this analysis was Lulu (Dog).
15. Mental Health America (n.d). LGBTQ+ Communities and Mental Health. Retrieved from: <https://mhanational.org/issues/lgbtq-communities-and-mental-health>.
16. ADA National Network (n.d). What is the definition of a disability under the ADA? Retrieve from: <https://adata.org/faq/what-definition-disability-under-ada>.
17. The U.S. Census identifies three domains of disability: physical, mental, and communicative. See Taylor, D.M. (2018). Americans with Disabilities: 2014. Current Population Reports. Available: <https://www.census.gov/content/dam/Census/library/publications/2018/demo/p70-152.pdf>
18. Cree, R. A., Okoro, C. A., Zack, M. M., & Carbone, E. (2020). Frequent Mental Distress Among Adults, by Disability Status, Disability Type, and Selected Characteristics- United State, 2018. Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report. <http://dx.doi.org/10.15585/mmwr.mm6936a2>.
19. *Disparagement* is any verbal or nonverbal disdain or prejudice which can occur either in the presence or absence of a character with a mental health condition. Two categories were measured under disparagement: general and mental health. Comments and behaviors counted as general disparagement if they were not related to the character's mental health. On the other hand, mental health disparagement included verbal and nonverbal communication specifically directed at or about the character's mental health condition.
20. The 65 characters that experienced some form of disparagement were evaluated for this measure. Every instance of disparagement (e.g., general, mental) for each character was categorized as coming from another character or self. Character level judgments were then made, where the character was counted as experiencing disparagement from others, experiencing disparagement from self, or both. For this reason, total sum of characters facing disparagement from others and self do not total 70.
21. *Stigma* specifically refers to the isolation, judgment, or rejection of characters with mental health conditions in ways that are not consistent with how characters without a mental health problem would be treated in the same situation.
22. For all 83 characters depicted with a mental health condition, humor was evaluated by analyzing the presentation of their mental health condition and the mental health variables they were included for. When it was clear that the character was the object of a joke or their mental health experience was depicted with humor, the character was counted for this measure.
23. *Concealment* referred to any depictions of lying about and/or hiding the symptoms, treatment, or diagnosis of a mental health condition. Included in this definition were instances of other characters (family, friends, and/or colleagues) concealing the mental health condition on behalf of the affected character, as well as the character failing to mention their mental health problem when given the opportunity and it was appropriate to do so. Characters that concealed transient feelings did not count.
24. Characters with mental health conditions were evaluated for 2 measures of physical violence: perpetrators of violence and targets of violence. Per our definition, a perpetrator of violence is one who commits or carries out an act of violence against another individual or group of individuals. A character is a target of violence if they are a target of a violent act or threat, or are harmed by another character. If a character engaged in self-harm, they were coded as both a perpetrator and target of violence.
25. Of these 7 deaths by suicide, 3 characters died by unknown means, while 2 characters killed themselves by a gun, 1 character by slitting their throat, and 1 died from an overdose. Any characters who died by coerced or sacrificial suicide were not included in the overall measure for suicide, as well as this metric.
26. All speaking characters in the sample were evaluated for the presence of therapy or treatment, regardless of whether a mental health condition was present. Therapy was defined as treatment intended to resolve problematic behaviors, beliefs, feelings, relationship issues, and/or somatic responses. Contexts that are

included under therapy are individual psychological or psychiatric care, life coaching, marriage counseling, group therapy, school counseling, social work, as well as rehabilitation and support groups for problems concerning mental health (e.g., alcohol/drug addiction, grief) and any institutionalized care. Regarding treatment, we defined it as medication consumed or prescribed to specifically relieve the symptoms, effects, or causes of the character's mental health condition. Treatment for conditions not related to mental health did not count in the measure.

27. NAMI (n.d.)
28. Writers, D. (2023). U.S. Depression Rates Reach New Highs. Retrieved from: <https://news.gallup.com/poll/505745/depression-rates-reach-new-highs.aspx>.
29. HHS (2023). SAMHSA Announces National Survey on Drug Use and Health (NSDUH) Results Detailing Mental Illness and Substance Use Levels in 2021. Retrieved from: <https://www.hhs.gov/about/news/2023/01/04/samhsa-announces-national-survey-drug-use-health-results-detailing-mental-illness-substance-use-levels-2021.html#:~:text=Drug%20Use%20and%20Substance%20Use,which%2052.5%20million%20people%20used.>
30. National Institute of Mental Health (n.d). Any Anxiety Disorder. Retrieved from: <https://www.nimh.nih.gov/health/statistics/any-anxiety-disorder.>
31. American Foundation for Suicide Prevention (n.d). Suicide Statistics. Retrieved from: [https://afsp.org/suicide-statistics/.](https://afsp.org/suicide-statistics/)
32. AFSP (2023). Recent Legislation Targeting the Rights of Trans Individuals Deepens Concerns Around the Mental Health of LGBTQ Communities: Leading suicide prevention organization strongly opposes bills that can harm the mental health and wellbeing of LGBTQ people. Retrieved from: <https://afsp.org/story/recent-legislation-targeting-the-rights-of-trans-individuals-deepens-concerns-aro.>
33. CDC (2020). Disability and Health Promotion. Retrieved from: <https://www.cdc.gov/ncbddd/disabilityandhealth/features/mental-health-for-all.html#:~:text=A%20recent%20study%20found%20that,distress%20than%20those%20without%20disabilities.&text=In%202018%2C%20an%20estimated%2017.4,in%20the%20past%2030%20days.>
34. Suicide Prevention Now (n.d). Know How to Help. Retrieved from: [https://suicidepreventionnow.org/.](https://suicidepreventionnow.org/)