



# HELP FOR HEROES

## MEDIA GUIDELINES

### THE PORTRAYAL OF VETERAN MENTAL HEALTH ON SCREEN

The media portrayal of people who have been in the Armed Forces is one dimensional. Can you think of a TV series or film storyline featuring a veteran where they are not struggling with mental health difficulties and are a risk to themselves and others? Few such storylines spring to mind. Would the media any longer be able to get away with portraying a group of people in such a way based on their religion, skin colour, sexual orientation, or gender?

We believe that people who have risked everything for their country deserve better from their media. What's more, this one-dimensional portrayal of veterans is contributing to a dangerous prejudice within society. Healthcare professionals, politicians, employers, judges, and police officers all watch these dramatic films and television series, and can develop an unconscious bias against veterans. Many people who have served in the Armed Forces have told us about a disconnect with professionals who hold considerable power.

We are convinced that the one-dimensional media portrayal of veterans is a huge contributing factor to this perception of all veterans. It is time to tell a more accurate story. Here are some guidelines we would encourage people working in the media to think about when creating a story featuring a veteran.

01

**Better representation:** Not all veterans have mental health issues, and not all are white males. There needs to be a wider variety of storylines featuring veterans, creating better representation. The stereotype of the 'mad, bad, sad' veteran that proliferates in the media can lead to damaging misconceptions that can have a negative effect on veterans' lives and wellbeing.

02

**More positivity:** The vast majority of veterans who live with mental health issues, when they are supported and treated, live fulfilling, successful lives. There need to be more nuanced storylines around veteran mental health, showing the positives as well as the negatives. For instance, in the workplace, veterans who have learned to cope with mental ill health can be resilient, punctual, caring, and have the ability to recognise and support others suffering from mental health issues.

03

**Don't use post-traumatic stress-disorder (PTSD) as shorthand:** Not all veterans with mental health issues have PTSD. Other mental health conditions such as generalised anxiety disorder (GAD) and depression are much more prevalent. Elements of the media have a propensity to use 'PTSD' as a shorthand for all mental health issues suffered by veterans. It would be really useful to inform the public about the broader picture of veteran mental health when portraying veterans. The lack of representation of wider mental health issues may prevent veterans coming forward for help and support.



**04 More nuanced portrayals:** Mental ill health looks different for everyone who lives with it. Only in a tiny minority would you ever see the dramatic dangerous behaviour that is seen so often on screen. For example, the more common symptoms of PTSD are: re-experiencing the event through flashbacks or nightmares, avoidance (of places or people that may remind people of the trauma), or hyperarousal (feeling anxious and unable to relax). Writers and production companies need to better understand the nuances of PTSD and other mental health issues and get real insight into them from veterans who live with them.

They can contact Brand PR Manager

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at Help for Heroes to discuss upcoming projects and identify suitable veterans who can help.



**05 Signposting:** We understand that a drama needs to have drama. However, TV series and films that include a dramatic storyline with a veteran whose actions are linked to mental health must always include messaging that makes it clear that they are showing a dramatised version of veteran mental health. They should include content warnings, signposting viewers to information and resources about veteran mental health, such as <https://www.helpforheroes.org.uk/get-support/mental-health-and-wellbeing/> and <https://www.nhs.uk/mental-health/conditions/>.



**06 Education budget:** We are calling on production companies featuring storylines around veterans with mental health issues, to commit promotional budget to better educate the public in advance of broadcast. Bring together writers and actors playing veteran characters with genuine veterans who can tell the real stories behind the drama.

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