

Mental Health Conditions Across 400 Popular Films: A Research Update from 2016 to 2024

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October 2025

USCAnnenberg
Inclusion Initiative

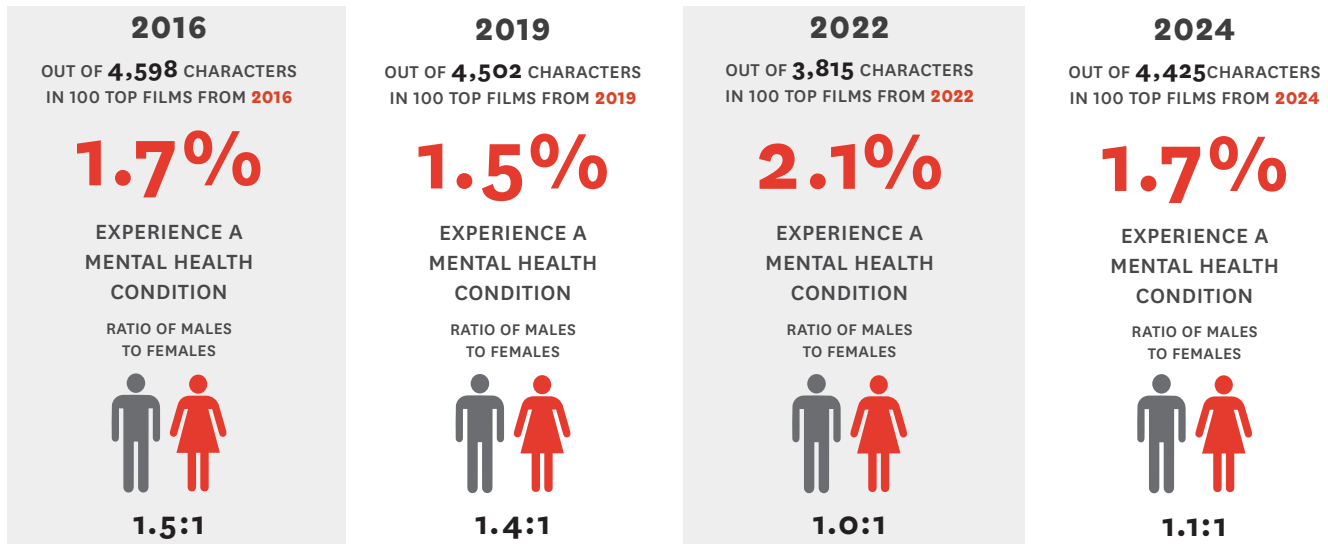
MENTAL HEALTH CONDITIONS ACROSS 400 TOP FILMS

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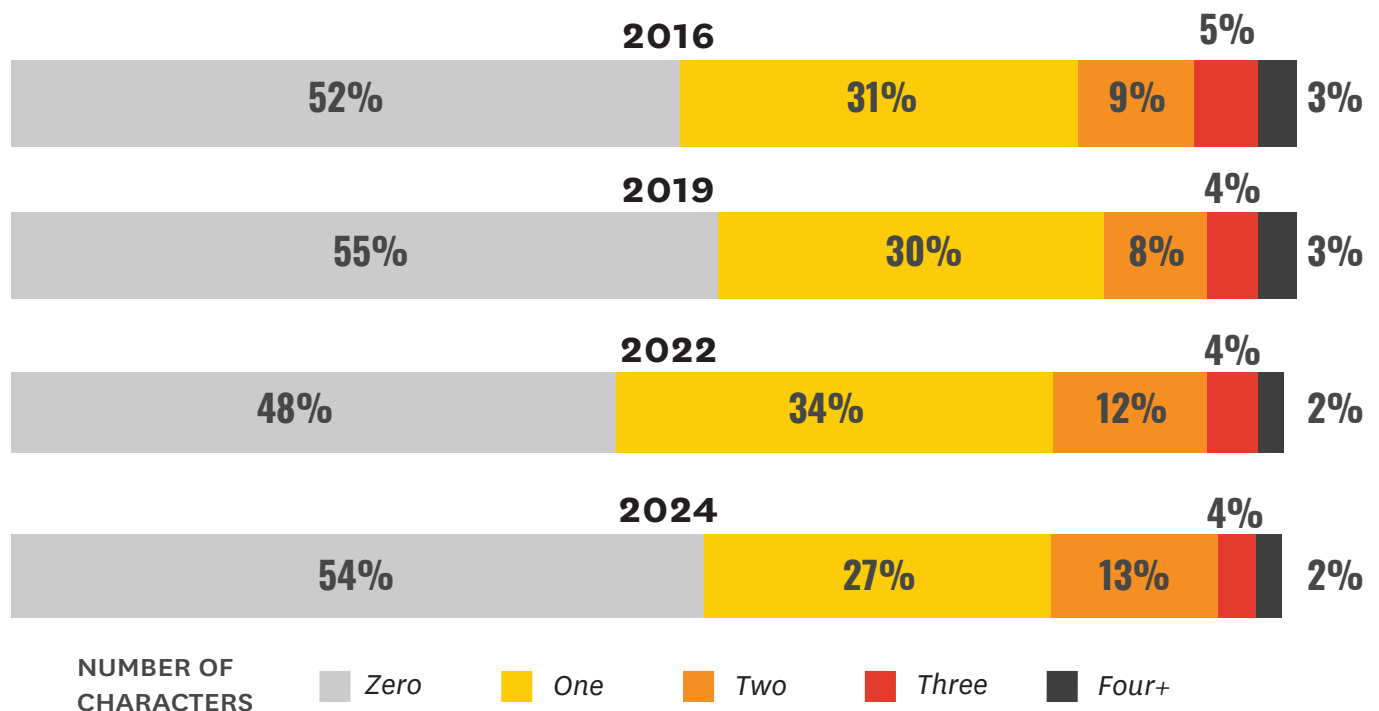
MENTAL HEALTH CONDITIONS ARE RARE IN POPULAR FILMS

Across the 100 top-grossing films of 2016, 2019, 2022 and 2024...



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 2024, by category



Characters may have presented with more than one mental health condition, therefore the total for each category across both years may be more than the total 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	2024
MALES	60%	59%	51%	53%
FEMALES	40%	41%	49%	47%
TOTAL	87	71	83	93

MENTAL HEALTH IS MISSING FOR MANY COMMUNITIES

Across 400 top films and 17,303 speaking characters from 2016 to 2022 and 2024...



UNDERREPRESENTED CHARACTERS AND MENTAL HEALTH

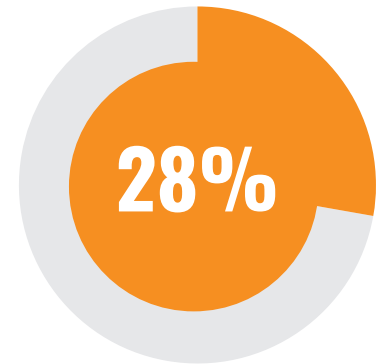
Percentage of characters with a mental health condition who were from an underrepresented racial/ethnic group



2016

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

Hispanic/Latino: 20.7%
Black/African American: 20.9%
Asian: 17%
American Indian/Alaska Native: 25.9%
Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander: 12.2%
Multiracial: 35.5%



2024

*Population data sourced from the Center for Behavioral Health Statistics and Quality (2025).

TEENS' MENTAL HEALTH DOES NOT TRANSLATE TO ENTERTAINMENT



*Population data sourced from the Centers for Disease Control (2025).

MENTAL HEALTH PORTRAYALS LEAVE OUT THE LGBTQ+ COMMUNITY

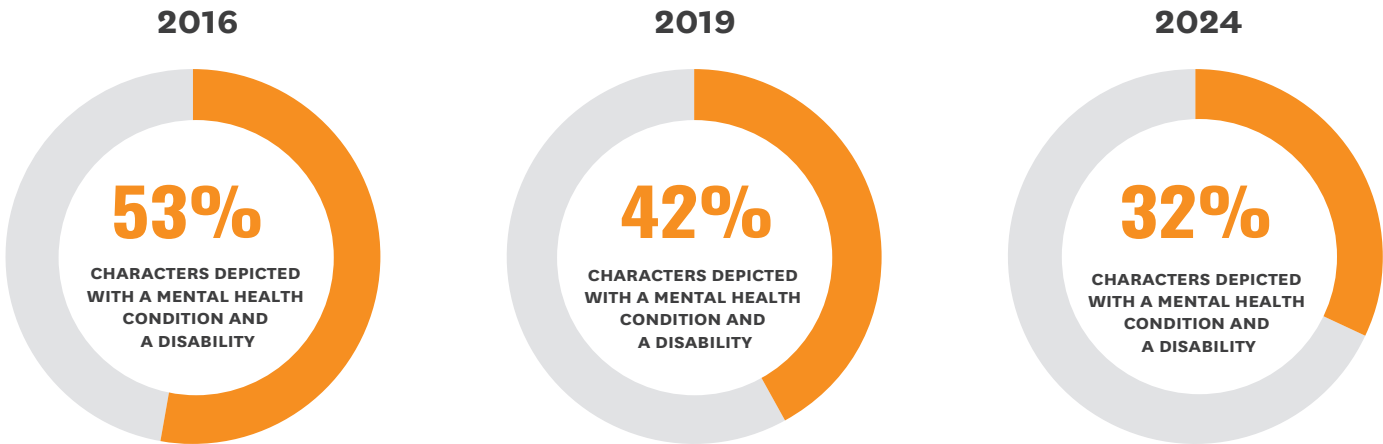
Across 100 top-grossing films of 2024...



ACROSS 400 TOP FILMS FROM 2016 TO 2022 & 2024, ONLY 6 OF 13 LGBTQ+ CHARACTERS WITH A MENTAL HEALTH CONDITION WERE FROM AN UNDERREPRESENTED RACIAL/ETHNIC BACKGROUND. ALL APPEARED IN 2022 AND 2024.

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
2022	78%	18%	27%	83
2024	52%	12%	15%	93

FEW HELP SEEKING BEHAVIORS ARE SHOWN IN STORYTELLING...

Of the 93 characters depicted with a mental health condition...

MEASURE	2016	2019	2022	2024
THERAPY	22%	30%	25%	31%
TREATMENT	5%	13%	16%	12%

In 2024, not a single woman of color was shown using medication to treat a mental health condition

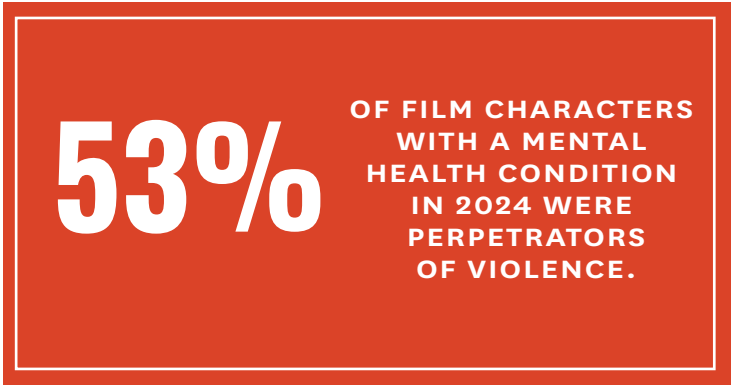
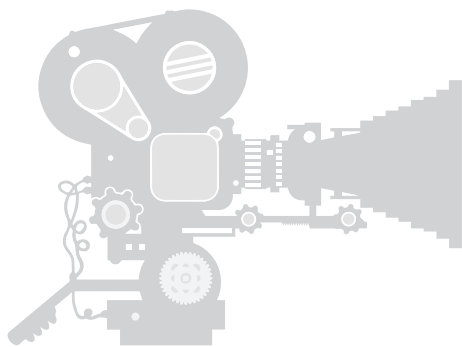
DEHUMANIZING LANGUAGE IS NORMALIZED IN FILM

Selected words/phrases used to refer to characters with a mental health condition in films from 2024...



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



OF CHARACTERS WITH A MENTAL HEALTH CONDITION **DIED**

EIGHT DIED BY **SUICIDE**

SHOT	SET ON FIRE
ALCOHOLISM	GUN-RELATED SUICIDE
BEAT TO DEATH	CHOKED
MURDERED	STABBED
HANGING	DEATH BY JUMPING
BURNED ALIVE	SLIT OWN THROAT
POISONED	SUFFOCATION

RECOMMENDATIONS AND SOLUTIONS FOR CHANGE

Work with the Annenberg Inclusion Initiative and other experts to...

**PRESENT MORE CHARACTERS & STORIES ABOUT
MENTAL HEALTH**

**IMPROVE THE CONTEXT SURROUNDING
MENTAL HEALTH**

**RELY ON EXPERTS TO
SHAPE STORYTELLING**

Mental Health Conditions Across 400 Popular Films: A Research Update from 2016 to 2024

Annenberg Inclusion Initiative

Since 2019, Dr. Stacy L. Smith and the Annenberg Inclusion Initiative have been examining the prevalence and portrayal of mental health conditions in popular entertainment. This is the fourth report and now covers 400 top-grossing movies from 2016, 2019, 2022 and 2024. Our definition of a mental health condition included characters who experienced “a significant and/or persistent negative reaction (e.g., adverse thoughts, emotions, behaviors) evidenced by internalizing or externalizing symptoms.”¹ Below, we review the results on films from 2024 and draw comparisons to previous years. As with all reports, differences must reach a threshold of 5 percentage points to be considered significant.

Prevalence of Mental Health Portrayals

Of 4,425 characters across the 100 top-grossing films of 2024, 1.7% ($n=77$) had a mental health condition. This falls far below the 23.4% of the U.S. population with a mental health condition.² As shown in Table 1, this is consistent with the percentage of characters with mental health conditions in previous studies. In other words, there has been no change since 2016 in the percentage of characters with a mental health condition.

Table 1
Prevalence of Characters with Mental Health Conditions by Year

Year	% of characters w/a mental health condition	# of characters evaluated
2016	1.7% ($n=76$)	4,598
2019	1.5% ($n=68$)	4,502
2022	2.1% ($n=79$)	3,778
2024	1.7% ($n=77$)	4,425
Total	1.7% ($n=300$)	17,303

Characters with mental health conditions were most likely to appear in main (40.3%, $n=31$) and supporting (40.3%, $n=31$) roles while 19.5% ($n=15$) played an inconsequential part.

Of the 100 films evaluated in 2024, 46 featured a character with a mental health condition, while 54 had no portrayals of mental health. This is a decline from 2022, when 52 films featured a mental health condition and is roughly equivalent to 2016 (48 films). There has been little change in the distribution of characters with mental health conditions in popular films—most movies feature 1 character with a mental health condition. Table 2 displays the results per year.³

Table 2
Number of Characters with Mental Health Condition in Film by Year

Year	2016	2019	2022	2024
0 Characters	52% (n=52)	55% (n=55)	48% (n=48)	54% (n=54)
1 Character	31% (n=31)	30% (n=30)	34% (n=34)	27% (n=27)
2 Characters	9% (n=9)	8% (n=8)	12% (n=12)	13% (n=13)
3 Characters	5% (n=5)	4% (n=4)	4% (n=4)	4% (n=4)
4+ Characters	3% (n=3)	3% (n=3)	2% (n=2)	2% (n=2)
Total	100	100	100	100

Most characters with a mental health condition appeared in films rated R (55.8%, $n=43$), followed by PG-13 (32.5%, $n=25$) and PG (7.8%, $n=6$). Three characters (3.9%) appeared in unrated films.

Types of Mental Health Conditions

There were 7 types of mental health conditions observed in 2024.⁴ As shown in Table 3, characters were observed with *Addiction* ($n=17$), *Mood Disorders* ($n=18$), *Anxiety/PTSD* ($n=19$), *Suicide* ($n=16$), *Cognitive Impairment* ($n=21$), *Significant Disturbance in Thinking* ($n=6$), *Spectrum Disorders* ($n=1$), and *Obsessive Compulsive Disorder* ($n=2$). Characters may have been included in more than one category as they may have been depicted with more than one mental health condition.

Table 3
Types of Mental Health Condition in Film by Year

Mental Health Condition	2016	2019	2022	2024
Addiction (i.e., alcohol, drugs, gambling)	29	25	28	17
Mood disorders (i.e., bipolar, depression)	18	18	21	8
Anxiety/PTSD	15	19	24	21
Suicide (e.g., ideation, attempt, completion)	13	11	14	16
Cognitive Impairment	11	3	0	19
Significant Disturbance in Thinking	8	9	8	6
Spectrum Disorders (i.e., autism)	7	0	0	1
Obsessive Compulsive Disorder (OCD)	0	1	2	2

Note: Characters may have been shown with more than one mental health condition and were included in all categories that Applied. Thus, totals for 2024 do not add to 77 characters.

Demographic & Identity Factors Related to Mental Health Portrayals

Of the 93 characters with a mental health condition⁵, 52.7% ($n=49$) were male-identified and 47.3% ($n=44$) were female-identified. There were no non-binary characters with a mental health condition. Since 2016 (60%), the percentage of male-identified characters with a mental health condition has decreased, though 2024 was not different from 2022 (50.6%).

The racial/ethnic breakdown of characters with a mental health condition was as follows: White/Caucasian (72.5%, $n=66$), 15.4% ($n=14$) were Black/African-American, 4.4% ($n=4$) were Asian, 2.2% ($n=2$) were Hispanic/Latino, and 5.5% ($n=5$) were Multiracial/Multiethnic. Two characters were not evaluated for race/ethnicity as they were non-human characters. Overall, 27.5% of all characters with a mental health condition were from an underrepresented racial/ethnic group. This is similar to 2022.

When the intersection of gender and race/ethnicity was considered, 38.5% ($n=35$) of characters with mental health conditions were white males, 34.1% ($n=31$) were white females, 14.3% ($n=13$) were underrepresented males, and 13.2% ($n=12$) were underrepresented females. The percentage of underrepresented females with a mental health condition decreased from 2022 (18.8%) but was not different than 2016 (6.4%).

Turning to age, 45.7% ($n=42$) characters with a mental health condition were adults (age 21-39) and 29.3% ($n=27$) were middle-aged (40-64). Few characters were elderly (13%, $n=12$), teens (8.7%, $n=8$), or children (3.3%, $n=3$). In other words, younger and older characters are rarely shown with a mental health condition. These findings mimic those of previous years—few older or younger characters were portrayed with a mental health condition in 2016, 2019, or 2022.

Four characters with a mental health condition were identified as LGBTQ+. None of the characters were transgender. 2024 reflects a decrease from 2022 when 7 characters with a mental health condition were LGBTQ+.

Nearly one-third (32.3%, $n=30$) of the characters with a mental health condition also had a disability. In most cases ($n=23$), the mental health condition experienced by the character was their disability. However, 6 characters had a communicative disability (e.g., seeing, hearing, speaking) and 9 had a physical disability. The percentage of characters with a mental health condition and a disability increased from 2022 (18.1%) but reflects an overall decrease from 2016 (52.9%).

There has been little change over time in the representation of mental health conditions across the demographic and identity factors evaluated in this study. White, male, adult characters were most likely to be shown with mental health conditions, and LGBTQ+ representation was rare. In the next section, we turn to contextual factors related to mental health representation.

Context Surrounding Mental Health Portrayals

The first area evaluated was *disparagement*. One-third (33.3%, $n=31$) of all characters with a mental health condition were disparaged specifically about their mental health. A total of 15.1% ($n=14$) experienced disparagement from other characters, while 5.4% ($n=5$) disparaged themselves, and 12.9% ($n=12$) experienced disparagement from both self and other characters.

The previous variable focused specifically on disparagement related to mental health, but characters also experienced *general disparagement*. More than half (51.6%, $n=48$) were insulted during the film. For 28% ($n=26$) of characters, this occurred from others, while 2.2% ($n=2$) experienced self-disparagement and 21.5% ($n=20$) were disparaged by both self and other characters.

We were next interested in other ways that characters with mental health conditions might be treated differently because of their mental health. First, we evaluated how many characters *concealed* their condition. Of characters with a mental health condition, 15.1% ($n=14$) hid or obscured their condition in some way. Additionally, 33.3% ($n=31$) faced *stigma*, including rejection or isolation from others on account of their mental health condition. Finally, 11.8% ($n=11$) of characters were the object of humor.

More than one-third (36.7%, $n=33$) of characters with mental health conditions were employed or had an occupation. Some examples of these occupations include: architect, chef, firefighter, hairdresser, journalist, medic, meteorologist, nun, neurosurgeon, police officer, professor, TV host, and waitstaff. Though slightly less than two-thirds of the characters with mental health conditions in the sample were unemployed, few ($n=3$) were shown as homeless. Only 4 characters with a mental health condition were military veterans.

The next set of variables explored whether characters with mental health conditions engaged in violence. Half (52.7%, $n=49$) of characters with mental health conditions were perpetrators of violent acts in the films evaluated. This reflects a decrease from what was observed in 2022 (72.3%). Across the instances of violence observed, perpetrators were most likely to use natural means (e.g., hitting, punching, kicking; $n=34$), followed by unconventional weapons (e.g., hammers, plastic bags, firecrackers; $n=14$), firearms ($n=12$), and conventional, non-firearm weapons (e.g., swords, knives, tasers, lightsabers; $n=14$).

Turning to *targets* of violence, 61.3% ($n=57$) of characters with a mental health condition were targeted with violent actions. Of the incidents in which characters were the targets of violence, most were victimized with natural means ($n=37$), conventional weapons ($n=17$), firearms ($n=17$), and unconventional weapons ($n=14$).

A total of 28% ($n=26$) characters with mental health conditions died during the films assessed. These characters perished as a result of being stabbed, shot, poisoned, blown up, suffocated, set on fire and hanged.

Beyond violence, around one-third (37.6%, $n=35$) of the characters with a mental health condition engaged in illegal activity. This included crimes such as arson, kidnapping, sexual assault, murder, and other behaviors such as illegal drug consumption.

Overall, the context surrounding mental health conditions has changed little over time. Characters are still stigmatized and disparaged for their mental health. Additionally, they are often connected to violence and a quarter of the characters died during the film. In the next section, we turn to ways in which help-seeking behaviors are presented.

Treatment & Therapy of Mental Health

The last set of variables explored how often characters sought and obtained treatment for mental health needs. Here, we are interested in help-seeking behaviors in the form of *therapy* and *treatment*.

Less than one-third (31.2%, $n=29$) of characters with a mental health condition received therapy for their mental health condition. This reflects an increase from 2022 (25.3%) and from 2016 (21.8%) in the percentage of characters receiving therapy.

Of the characters in therapy, 51.7% ($n=15$) were female and 48.3% ($n=14$) were male. This is a significant increase for male characters from 2022 (23.8%, $n=5$) and from 2016 (36.8%, $n=7$). Correspondingly, there was a decrease for female characters on this measure (2022=76.2%; 2016=63.2%).

A larger share of White characters (69%, $n=20$) were in therapy compared to underrepresented characters (31%, $n=9$). There was a slight increase from 2022 (61.9%) but no change from 2016 (66.7%) in the percentage of White characters with mental health conditions.

Only 11.8% ($n=11$) used medication for *treatment* of their mental health condition. More male ($n=9$) than female ($n=2$) characters used treatment. This is a reversal of the trend observed in 2022. White characters ($n=9$) were also more likely than underrepresented characters ($n=2$) to use medication for mental health. This is consistent with what was observed in 2022. Notably, no women of color used medication for treatment of a mental health condition in 2024.

Finally, we were interested in whether characters *without* a mental health condition were shown in therapy or treatment. In terms of therapy, about 1% of all speaking characters ($n=51$) were shown in therapy. More than half of those ($n=29$) had a mental health condition, but 22 characters without an underlying condition were shown seeking support for mental health. Fewer characters (0.3%, $n=12$) were shown using treatment, and all but 1 had an underlying mental health condition.

The results in this section reveal that mental health support and treatment are still rare in popular film. In the final portion of this report, we review the findings and trends identified and propose solutions for change.

Conclusion

The goal of this report was to update our previous studies on the presentation of mental health conditions in popular film. By examining the most popular movies of 2024, this report provides key insights on how often and in what context mental health appears in storytelling. Below, we review the major findings and offer solutions for change.

Mental Health Remains Underrepresented in Popular Film

Our first report on this topic was released in 2019 and overviewed movies from 2016. In the five years since the initial release of this study, there have been countless articles, events, and advocates pushing for increased representation of mental health in popular media. Alas, there has been little change. Less than 2% of all characters in 2024 were shown with a mental health condition. More than half of the films evaluated had no depictions of mental health struggles. The absence of mental health conditions in movies does not reflect the 23.4% of the U.S. population who lives with a mental health issue.⁶ This underrepresentation means that viewers rarely see stories that humanize mental health.

Mental Health Portrayals Do Not Represent Reality

In this study, more male-identified characters than female-identified characters were depicted with a mental health condition. While the overall trend is one that approaches a 50/50 split, in the US, women are more likely than men to experience a mental health condition.⁷ Characters with a mental health condition were primarily White— but 20.9% of African American adults live with a mental health condition, as do 20.7% of Hispanic/Latinos and 17% of Asians.⁸ These figures are not reflected in the films examined for this report. We saw few depictions of mental health conditions that appeared in childhood or among elderly characters— compared to 21% of children⁹ and 11.5% of elderly adults in the U.S. with a mental health condition.¹⁰ The lack of authenticity is a problem for two reasons. First, it means that those living with mental health conditions from these groups rarely see their stories on screen. Second, it makes mental health conditions a problem for a fraction of the population instead of an issue facing people from all backgrounds and ages.

The Context Surrounding Mental Health is Negative

As in prior studies, the contextual factors surrounding characters with mental health conditions reflect a view of mental health that is predominantly negative. Characters with mental health conditions are disparaged and stigmatized for their mental health. Additionally, mental health is linked to violence— both the kind that is perpetrated by those with a mental health condition and the kind that targets these characters. Roughly a quarter of these characters died during the movies examined. Connecting mental health to these negative experiences does little to give viewers a broader understanding of living with a mental health condition or interacting with others who experience adverse mental health. These contextual factors may dehumanize, increase stigma, or contribute to negative attitudes about mental health— which may have real-world, off-screen consequences.

Help-Seeking for Mental Health is Still Rare

Fewer than one-third of characters with mental health conditions were in therapy and less than 15% used any form of medication to treat mental health issues. In other words, films present mental health conditions in such a way that they seem untreatable. This is counter to reality, as there are many treatments and therapeutic modalities that can reduce symptoms of mental health conditions and allow individuals to live full, healthy lives. By not depicting these remedies, films advance a view of mental health that is outdated and once again may create stigma and bias about people who live with and successfully manage mental health conditions.

Solutions for Change

Our prior work has presented numerous ways that storytellers can improve the portrayal of mental health in popular media. At their core, those solutions involve:

1. **Present more characters and stories about mental health.** This is perhaps the most straightforward suggestion— simply include more characters with mental health conditions in storytelling. This can be characters at any level, whether the main character discloses a mental health issue or a tertiary character indicates a mental health condition. Whether it is the major focus of a story or an incidental depiction, including mental health in any form is the first step to creating change.
2. **Improve the context surrounding mental health.** Creatives should be mindful of the way stories may spotlight mental health. In particular, reviewing scripts for disparagement, keeping violence to a minimum, and showing therapy and treatment can all be important ways to counter the trends surrounding mental health illuminated by this study.
3. **Consult with mental health experts.** Telling more, accurate, and less negative stories regarding mental health often involves working directly with experts who can provide feedback and insight on integrating mental health in a positive way into storytelling. There are numerous groups and individuals who have consulted on productions to ensure that mental health storytelling is reflective of real-world experience. Find a list of organizations and advocates through the Mental Health Storytelling Initiative (<https://mentalhealthmediaguide.com/>).

These are merely a first step in creating opportunities for audiences to engage with storytelling on mental health. However, these are important steps in expanding the ways that viewers see mental health and how that translates to their offscreen attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors.

Limitations

There are a few limitations to note in this report. First, only the most popular, theatrically-released films of 2024 were evaluated. Less popular films, or those released on streaming platforms may contain more or different depictions of mental health. Second, the definition of mental health focuses on significant and persistent conditions. A wider spectrum that includes episodic periods of psychological distress might capture additional portrayals. Despite these limitations, this study provides a critical set of findings on the prevalence of mental health in popular films.

In conclusion, there are still opportunities to improve how often and how well mental health is shown on screen. At a time when mental health is a struggle for many across audiences and industry members, storytelling offers a way to show hope, healing, and improve viewers' perceptions of those living with mental health conditions. By embracing the power of storytelling, creatives can foster real change.

Acknowledgements

Special thanks to our colleagues at the Annenberg Inclusion Initiative who assisted with this project: Ariana Case, Sam Wheeler, Katherine Neff, Sarah Neff, Terrell Shaffer, Zoily Mercado, Karla Hernandez, Zoe Moore, Matthew Davis, Braxton Albers, Brooke Kong, and Bryan Davis. We are also grateful to the students who assisted with this project. We could not do this without you!

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Footnotes

1. The definition of a mental health condition was developed by Dr. Stacy L. Smith and the Annenberg Inclusion Initiative with details reported in the footnotes of 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/aia-study-mental-health-media_052019.pdf. Please refer to this report for relevant insights on the definition of a mental health condition as well as other variables.
2. Center for Behavioral Health Statistics and Quality. (2025). Results from the 2024 National Survey on Drug Use and Health: Detailed tables. <https://www.samhsa.gov/data/data-we-collect/nsduh-national-survey-drug-use-and-health/national-releases>
3. In 2019 the methodology used to count characters included each demographic change, however in the other years studied characters were counted once. Using the same methodology in 2019 there would be 31 films with one character and 2 films with 4+ characters. All other values would stay the same
4. Information presented in the story was used to determine the type of mental health condition experienced by the character. As characters could experience more than 1 mental condition they could be counted in multiple categories. The categories presented in text are aligned with those in 2016 and 2019.
5. The Annenberg Inclusion Initiative's methodology requires creating a new line of data when a character undergoes a demographic transformation, such as a change in age. Across the sample, 77 characters experienced a mental health condition. These characters were evaluated for overall prevalence and demographic characteristics. For the remainder of the measures evaluated, the full 93 characters with a mental health condition were assessed. This allows us to capture additional variation across character portrayals.
6. Center for Behavioral Health Statistics and Quality. (2025).
7. Center for Behavioral Health Statistics and Quality. (2025).
8. Center for Behavioral Health Statistics and Quality. (2025).
9. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (2025, June 5). Data and Statistics on Children's Mental Health. <https://www.cdc.gov/children-mental-health/data-research/index.html>
10. Center for Behavioral Health Statistics and Quality. (2025).
11. About Mental Health. (2025, June 9). Mental Health; Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. <https://www.cdc.gov/children-mental-health/data-research/index.html>