

## ***Portrayal of Mental Health and Symptoms in English Newspapers in Sri Lanka: A Prospective Study***

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Newspapers play a vital role in disseminating information and shaping public attitudes. Portraying mental health-related content accurately and positively can help raise awareness and promote mental well-being. However, inaccurate and negative portrayals can perpetuate negative stereotypes and stigma, discouraging help-seeking behaviour in individuals affected by psychological conditions. Therefore, the objective of this study was to explore how mental health, mental illnesses, and their symptoms were portrayed in English newspapers within the Sri Lankan context. Considering the sales numbers, the three most widely-read weekend English newspapers were studied prospectively over five consecutive weeks. Thematic analysis was conducted on 60 articles that portrayed mental health-related content. The predominant theme was mental health awareness and education, which was presented with minimal misconceptions. This theme focused mainly on causes of mental distress and the availability of services and treatment, with a particular emphasis on stress. Mental health in the digital environment and the workplace was also highlighted. Prevention and recommendations for maintaining positive mental health was an equally significant theme. Addiction, particularly to illicit drugs, was also given considerable attention, probably reflecting the contemporary efforts to weaken drug abuse within the country. Some life stories of celebrities afflicted with drug addiction were reported. Success stories of individuals with mental health conditions and criminal behaviour of people with mental illness were both minimally reported. Suicides were briefly reported including causes and methods. In conclusion, the prominence of education and promotion of mental health in weekend English newspapers suggest a largely positive outlook towards mental health. However, reporting causes and methods of suicides could endanger readers searching for means of self-harm. The pragmatic representation of mental health in the workplace and the digital environment was timely and commendable. Additionally, increased representation of related success stories may further inspire empathy and help-seeking behaviour in the community.

**Keywords:** Mental Health, Symptoms, English Newspapers, Sri Lanka, Themes