

***Portrayal of Mental Health and Symptoms of Psychiatric Illnesses in
Tamil Newspapers in Sri Lanka: A Prospective Study***

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Newspapers play a crucial role in shaping public perceptions and attitudes toward mental health. The literature concludes that responsible reporting reduces stigma, increases understanding, and encourages help-seeking, while negative reporting undermines self-esteem, discourages help-seeking, contributes to social isolation, and perpetuates stigma. This study explored the portrayal of mental illness, symptoms of psychiatric illnesses, and mental health in Tamil newspapers in Sri Lanka. The three most widely read weekend Tamil newspapers were studied prospectively for 5 consecutive weeks. Thematic analysis was used for each article that portrayed mental health-related content. The extracted themes are discussed as follows. Culture was the most prominent perspective, through which mental health is viewed in Tamil newspapers. The causes and remedies for mental health issues were predominantly portrayed through astrology, pseudo-psychology, and exercises including yoga. While the majority of content provided accurate information about mental health thus making an attempt to educate the reader, some content provided inaccurate information. Certain details provided on mental health and symptoms were vague and unclear. The content on mental health was predominantly focused on stress ignoring other mental illnesses. Information provided on pathways to psychiatric care was minimal and help-seeking was not encouraged. The analysis of the identified themes concluded that the heavy influence of culture could be detrimental to understanding mental health issues and that they delay those afflicted from seeking help. Even though accurate information educates the reader, the large focus on stress and limited presentation of other mental health conditions and illnesses may inaccurately convey that mental health is mainly focused on stress. Lack of information on pathways to care in public newspapers was noted as a weakness as it may also delay treatment. Providing misinformation and vague information may mislead the readers, causing harmful consequences to the public opinion on mental health and those affected.

Keywords: Tamil Newspapers, Mental Health, Mental Illness, Symptoms of Psychiatric Illness