



## MTV Looks to Destigmatize Mental Health Issues

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MTV Entertainment Group is launching a multi-year campaign "Mental Health is Health" in an attempt to help destigmatize mental-health issues and encourage people to seek help when they need it.

"We all know the power of storytelling and how narrative can frame the way we look at an issue, which is why we're doing our part to reimagine the role that content can play to demystify and destigmatize mental health, because it's a crisis that's rapidly on the rise and not enough people are talking about," said Chris McCarthy, president of MTV Entertainment Group, in a statement. "The sooner we all start to realize that it's something that impacts all of us, we can begin to help ourselves and others; it's really about creating a bigger conversation that leads to systematic change that becomes the norm and I'm confident that we can help spark this change."

The issue of mental health has loomed even larger during the pandemic, as people struggled with having to stay at home and be without social contact and, at the same time, found it difficult to find help. That encouraged MTVE to push forward with the new initiative.

MTVE, which includes MTV, VH1 and CMT, is committing to airing twice the number of mental health storylines than it currently does, and using those

stories to represent the diversity of its audiences and their mental-health experiences. It also will provide training for all of its content creators—from writers to showrunners to external production partners—to make sure that these stories are told in authentic and nuanced ways.

To determine what it needed to do, MTV in 2020 commissioned the USC Annenberg Inclusion Initiative, which studies diversity and inclusion in entertainment, to study mental-health representation across all of its scripted and unscripted shows.

"A content audit is a crucial first step in creating change. When MTV approached our team to understand how mental health is portrayed in their content, we knew they were interested in taking a clear leadership position on this issue," said Stacy L. Smith, PhD, founder and director of the USC Annenberg Inclusion Initiative, also in a statement. "MTV's storytelling had a noticeable emphasis on help-seeking and support for mental health, though there are always opportunities to grow. With today's commitments, MTV has demonstrated that they take mental health seriously, and that they intend to meaningfully shift the conversation around and representation of mental health in entertainment."

MTV has found that storytelling can move the needle on social and public-health issues through several of its other shows and campaigns. For example, its "Get Yourself Tested" campaign helped increase STD testing 51% at 10 Planned Parenthood facilities between April 2008 and April 2011, according to the Brookings Institute. In addition, Brookings found that MTV's 16 & Pregnant helped the rate of teen-aged moms giving birth drop by nearly 6% or by one-third of what it had been previously.

Some 92% of adults said they felt it was important to highlight mental health in entertainment, according to a recent MTV study; however, USC Annenberg in 2019 said that only 7% of TV characters in the 100 top-rated shows experienced a mental-health condition and many of those were not positive. Of the networks that do showcase characters dealing with mental-health issues, Netflix, Hulu, HBO and MTV rated the highest among the adults surveyed, according to the MTV study.