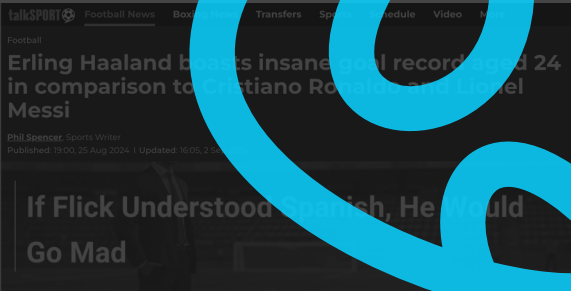


'Mad' turnaround as resurgent Dons face struggling Hearts



Sport In Mind

Mad Headlines

Changing the narrative in sports media

A GUIDE TO BETTER LANGUAGE IN SPORTS MEDIA

By DAVID WOOD FOR MAILONLINE
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Erling Haaland sent Manchester City fans into a frenzy after scoring an outrageous flying back-heel Champions League goal against Sparta Prague.

Sport In Mind 

Mad Headlines

Changing the narrative in sports media

Sport in Mind, the UK's leading mental health sports charity, is kick-starting a movement to shift sports coverage towards more compassionate, supportive language that promotes good mental health.

A 12-month analysis of sports media examined 10 million words of coverage, revealing the widespread use of harmful terms. Alarmingly, **harmful language appeared in 1 in 20 words** and **11% of headlines in sports coverage**, often used deliberately for dramatic effect.

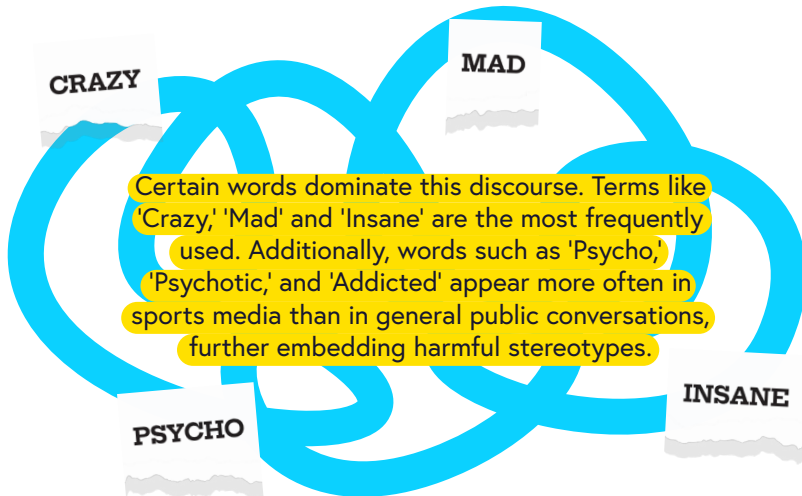
Headlines, in particular, were found to be a major culprit, with stigmatising terms used to sensationalise controversy, conflict and defeat. This language frames sports players as extreme, out of control or mentally unwell under pressure.

Language is more than just words - it's a tool that shapes perceptions, influences attitudes and defines how we understand the world around us. In sports media, the language we choose can inspire, uplift and educate. However, it can also perpetuate misinformation, fear and alienation for spectators as much as those on the pitch.

This guide is part of an initiative to drive change. It's designed to help the sports community to adopt more mindful language, contributing to a shift in how we talk about mental health in sports.



WHY IT MATTERS?



Sport in Mind conducted a new report to understand the real-world impact of this harmful language. The findings were stark - **91% of people living with mental health challenges report feeling negatively impacted by harmful language surrounding mental health in the media.**

With **1 in 4 people likely to experience mental health problems in the UK this year**, this negative language will have a significant impact on the nation's mental health.

This highlights how the harmful language seen in sports media doesn't just remain on the page - it has a tangible, detrimental effect on the mental health of those it refers to. It's harmful for sports fans reading this coverage, and it's harmful to the players too.

Sports players, who often face intense pressure and scrutiny, are particularly vulnerable to the effects of this language. The words we use can either support their wellbeing or impede their recovery. Often, because of the stigma surrounding mental health – which this language perpetuates – it's not until long after the peak in their careers that players seek help.

Stigmatising language has become deeply embedded in everyday conversations, from casual remarks to sensationalist headlines. Though these words may seem harmless, they contribute to:

Barriers to seeking support

Increased discrimination, making harmful language more socially acceptable

Harmful stereotypes, especially in sports media coverage

“

I've been on the receiving end of damaging headlines. It doesn't just sting in the moment - it stays with you. It shapes how people see you, how you see yourself and whether you feel safe asking for help.

That's why I'm backing Sport in Mind's Mad Headlines campaign. We need to change the language - for the players, for the fans, for anyone who's struggling. I've signed the pledge, and I hope others in sport will too.

- Anton Ferdinand



”

“

Sport in Mind's sessions are my safe space and have helped improve my mental health so much. The sessions are non-judgement so I feel I can be myself and be accepted for who I am. When I see negative words about mental health in everyday news headlines, it makes me feel really ashamed about having mental health problems and uncomfortable about talking about how I feel because I'll be judged. That is why it is so hard for me and so many others like me to seek help.

If we can change the way we talk about mental health I know it will help so many people feel more comfortable about reaching out for the help they need, like the amazing help I have received from Sport in Mind.

- Sport in Mind Participant

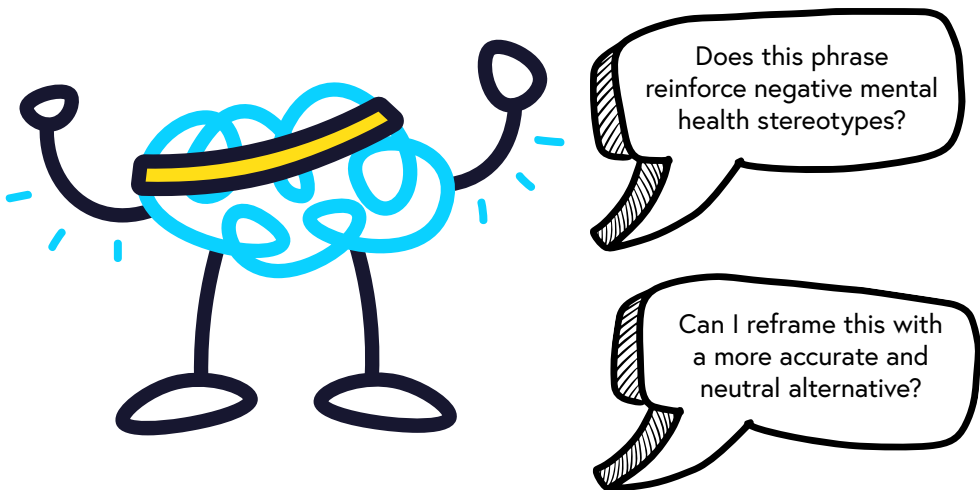
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HOW DO WE INVITE CHANGE?

By using more inclusive language - language that avoids words, phrases or tones which reflect prejudiced, stereotyped or discriminatory views of particular people or groups. Inclusive language also ensures that no one is deliberately or inadvertently excluded from being seen as part of a group.

It is important to note that inclusive language does not mean dull or vague language; it simply means language that has been carefully constructed in ways that treat all people with respect and impartiality.

Before using a term, ask yourself:



Key principles to consider:

Avoid sensationalist language when covering rivalries, controversies or players' struggles.

Use neutral and accurate terms when discussing mental resilience, pressure and competition.

Frame mental health topics with care, highlighting personal stories without reducing individuals to labels.

Avoid euphemisms or outdated terminology that implies victimhood or suffering.

GLOSSARY

To help the sports community make informed language choices, here are some commonly misused terms and suggested alternatives:

HARMFUL TERM	THE PROBLEM	ALTERNATIVES
It's been a crazy/mental/mad/manic/insane game	Reinforces stigma around mental illness	It's an intense/hectic match
Crazy/mental/mad/insane performance or skills	Reinforces stigma around mental illness	Amazing / outstanding skills or performance
That's nuts/bonkers/madness/mental	Reinforces stigma around mental illness	That's weird/strange/unusual/different/exciting
Psycho/psychotic/schizo	Using it to describe someone you dislike, or to describe a person's negative reaction or personality, stigmatises people with a serious mental illness – schizophrenia.	The behaviour was aggressive, erratic, unpredictable
Addicted (to winning, success, etc)	Trivialises addiction	Dedicated, passionate
They are OCD	Misrepresents a serious condition	They are organised, meticulous. Do things in an ordered manner
They committed suicide	The term committed stigmatises suicide, implies criminality ("committed")	They died by suicide
They are needy, fragile	Implies instability	Their needs have not been met

REWRITING THE NARRATIVE

HOW CAN WE INVITE A MORE COMPASSIONATE AND NON-JUDGEMENTAL WAY OF REPORTING WHAT HAPPENS IN SPORT?

By reporting the actuality of the situation, rather than taking a particular slant on the facts, based on the perception of a journalist or what the journalist thinks will 'sell' stories.

The headline below demonstrates that fans feel unhappy about decisions over which they have no control. The use of the word 'psychotic' is inappropriate, harmful and inaccurate.

"WHAT A JOKE!" "ABSOLUTELY PSYCHOTIC" - FANS IN DISBELIEF AS CHELSEA'S COLE PALMER LEFT OUT OF PFA TEAM OF THE YEAR.



It is easy to see how this type of headline is published and how it can incite strong feelings in fans. The headline could easily convey the same message without the quoted phrases, and it would be less unnecessarily inflammatory and harmful.

Equally, the headline "Aberdeen addicted to appointing unsuccessful managers" is factually incorrect. Using addiction-related language when reporting about the recruitment of football managers is diverting and misleading. A better headline might read something like, "Aberdeen stuck in a cycle of managerial misfires" or "Aberdeen caught in a loop of managerial disappointment".

**ABERDEEN ADDICTED TO APPOINTING
UNSUCCESSFUL MANAGERS**



**ABERDEEN STUCK IN A CYCLE OF
MANAGERIAL MISFIRES**



ABOUT SPORT IN MIND



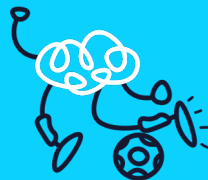
Sport in Mind is the leading mental health sports charity in England and Wales.

Our mission is to transform the nation's mental health through sport and our trailblazing work harnesses the power of sport to inspire, educate, and promote good mental health.

Since its formation in 2010, **Sport in Mind's** long-term partnership with the NHS has enabled us to transform the lives of over **31,000 people struggling** with mental health challenges. While research shows that being active is clinically proven to improve mental health, sedentary living remains prevalent among children and adults with mental health problems caused by many issues (e.g. non-supportive environments, low levels of confidence and self-esteem, social anxiety, mental health challenges).

Sport in Mind's unique UK-based programmes are designed to combat these barriers and champion the benefits of physical activity to make sport accessible to all. We support, unite and transform the lives of some of the most vulnerable, disengaged members of society, creating sustained social impact.

The nation's mental health continues to be on the decline with...



5 million people

accessing mental health care in 2022/2023



an increase of over 1 million people in the last 5 years!

There was also a staggering...



1.2 million people

estimated to be on waiting lists for mental health services in 2023



550,000 adults in England

have a serious mental illness such as schizophrenia or bipolar disorder

1 in 6 school-aged children

has a mental health problem



THE MENTAL HEALTH CHALLENGE IS HUGE

Our impact...

31,000

people with mental health problems supported through sport and physical activity

94%

of people have improved mental well-being after accessing our fun activities

92%

of people have improved self-esteem from being involved in our sessions