



Mental Health  
Commission  
of Canada

Commission de  
la santé mentale  
du Canada

## Why public service announcements don't always work

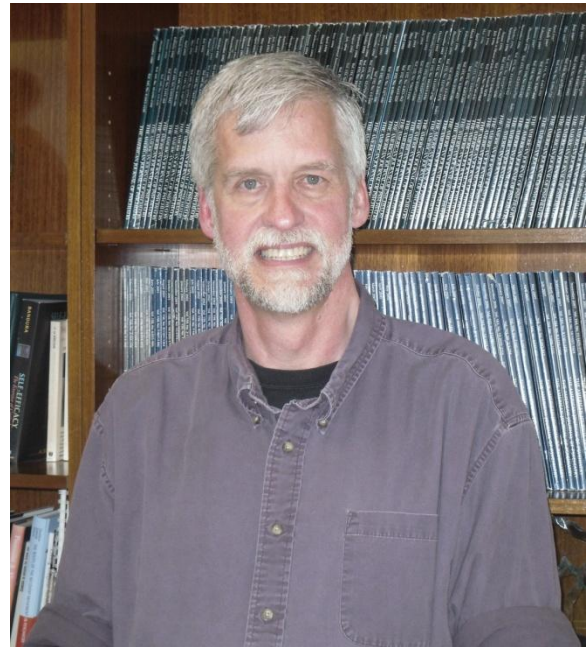
The star power was impressive. The production was directed by Ron Howard, had a soundtrack from John Mayer, and featured Academy Award nominee Glenn Close.

But for all the celebrity, money and good intentions that went into it, Patrick Corrigan says it may have missed the mark. Big, splashy mass media campaigns are a common approach to creating social change. Yet such efforts rarely work, says Corrigan, because they try to reach too broad an audience.

What Ron Howard filmed at New York's Grand Central Terminal in 2009 was a public service announcement (PSA) to raise awareness about mental illnesses and to help combat the stigma against them. The spot shows pairs of people in t-shirts looking directly into the camera. One person's t-shirt identified his mental illness as schizophrenia, while next to him was a woman whose shirt read "mom." (Close's shirt read "sister", while her sibling's read "bipolar.")

It may have looked great, but Corrigan asks, "What was the message it was sending? What I walked away with is that the schizophrenic needs his mother just to function and that perhaps he can't even aspire to becoming a parent."

Corrigan and a colleague recently examined the effectiveness of PSAs in reducing the stigma against mental illnesses. They found positive action is more likely if the message is tailored to



*Patrick Corrigan is an international expert on mental health and stigma.*

a particular target group at the local level and repeated many times.

"A colleague recently introduced me to the term 'slackeracy', he says. "It means slacker advocacy, and it's what a lot of educational campaigns are. They get people stirred up and make them want to do something, but they never actually act on it."