

## Navigating Anxiety: The Multifaceted Representation of Students with Mental Health Conditions in Netflix's *The Healing Powers of Dude* and *Sex Education*

Katie Brown, School of Teacher Education, Canterbury Christ Church University, UK, [katie.brown@canterbury.ac.uk](mailto:katie.brown@canterbury.ac.uk)  
Meg Loveys, University of Roehampton, UK, [megan.loveys@roehampton.ac.uk](mailto:megan.loveys@roehampton.ac.uk)

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According to the World Health Organization (2022), one in eight people worldwide experiences a mental health condition. For these individuals, they may experience significant challenges with thinking, emotional regulation, or behaviour. This article explores the representation of adolescent mental health conditions amongst students in two Netflix-based television shows: *The Healing Powers of Dude* (2020) and *Sex Education* (2019). The former follows Noah, an 11-year-old boy, with social anxiety disorder navigating mainstream schooling, while the latter features Aimee, a teenager coping with post-traumatic stress disorder attending a UK secondary school. Our analysis identifies three key themes: the use of avoidance as a coping mechanism and its potential negative impacts, the realism of support representations, and the positive influence of peer relationships on individuals with mental health conditions. These themes illustrate the complexities of mental health experiences but also highlight instances of unrealistic portrayals that may perpetuate misinformation. This article on the representation of students with mental health conditions in two television series contributes to screen studies by offering an interdisciplinary examination of mental health representation in media, underscoring the need for accurate and sensitive portrayals in popular culture.

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## Introduction

Over the past two decades, television (TV) series have increasingly focused on characters with mental health conditions, often targeting young audiences with a mix of drama and comedy and featuring young people who are students (E.g., *Girlfriends* 2018; *The End of the F\*\*\*ing World* 2017; *The Healing Powers of Dude*, 2020; *Thirteen Reasons Why*, 2017). Others have included shorter storylines surrounding mental health, such as Aimee's experience of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) in *Sex Education* (2019). This trend coincides with a growing concern over adolescent mental health (Newlove-Delgado et al. 2023; NIMH 2023).

Research has demonstrated that the media we consume has an impact on our behaviour and view of the world (Alfayad et al. 2021). With Netflix's popularity soaring to approximately 260 million subscribers worldwide (Statistica 2024), the portrayal of mental health in their content becomes increasingly influential, and as such, it should be considered how these conditions are being portrayed. In this regard, it is important to consider adolescents, as adolescence is a period crucial for developing social and emotional habits that contribute to mental health (Action for Children, 2024; Peña and Sarrionandia 2023). Moreover, as highlighted by Arroyo and Guerra (2019) adolescents are one of the largest consumers of Netflix, with eight out of every ten adolescents streaming content at least once a day.

Research indicates a significant rise in mental health challenges among young people, particularly anxiety disorders, which affect a substantial portion of the adolescent population globally (Newlove-Delgado et al. 2023; NIMH 2023; WHO 2021). The US Surgeon General declared a 'mental health crisis' in 2022 (Abrams 2023: 63), emphasising the devastating effects on young people (as cited in Chavira, Ponting and Ramos, 2022). Similarly, Mind (a mental health charity in England and Wales) state that 'we are facing a mental health crisis with eight million people on a waiting list for treatment' (2023). Essentially, there are significant numbers of adolescents experiencing a mental health condition. While these statistics and concerns refer to a range of mental health conditions, anxiety disorders are the focus of this article.

As such, we focus on the experiences of Noah, the main character in *The Healing Powers of Dude*, who has social anxiety disorder (SAD), and Aimee, a main character in *Sex Education* (2019) who developed PTSD following a sexual assault; anxiety is the main manifestation in both conditions characterised by feelings of unease, such as worry or fear, which can range from mild to severe (NHS 2022a). SAD, a long-term and intense fear of social situations, can significantly impact relationships, education and daily activities (NHS 2023), all of which are highlighted in the experiences of Noah in the show, showing the multifaceted experiences someone with SAD may experience. PTSD,

an anxiety disorder resulting from extremely stressful events, often leads to flashbacks, feelings of isolation, and difficulties with sleeping and concentrating (NHS 2022b); these manifestations are vividly depicted in Aimee's storyline from seasons 2 to 4.

While some may argue that the premise of a fictional TV show is to provide entertainment rather than accuracy, research suggests that TV series often serve as crucial, primary sources of information on mental health (Lopera-Mámol, Jiménez-Morales and Jiménez-Morales 2023). According to research by Mind and ITV (a British broadcasting network) (2023) accurate portrayals of mental health conditions in media can improve viewers' mental health, and encourage open dialogue, with one in four realising they have a mental health condition or have previously experienced one from watching a fictional storyline. The portrayal of mental health conditions in TV series reflects and influences societal perceptions, emphasising the need for responsible and accurate representations. Many portrayals in the media perpetuate negative myths and stereotypes surrounding mental health conditions, contributing towards stigmatisation (Klin and Lemish 2008; Middleton 2013). Conversely, some portrayals can be overly positive, suggesting mental health conditions can be cured or easily overcome (Middleton 2013). Accurate representations, though, can foster understanding and reduce stigma.

This article sets out to explore the representation of mental health in two popular Netflix TV series (*The Healing Powers of Dude* & *Sex Education*) to assess whether these portrayals of students with mental health conditions are accurate and responsible. By examining these series, we aim to contribute to the discourse on media influence on mental health, highlighting the need for nuanced and realistic portrayals in popular culture.

### **Research approach and the shows**

TV shows serve as both reflections of and contributors to societal attitudes towards various issues, including mental health. They can raise awareness and promote understanding, but they can also perpetuate stigma and misinformation. While there are several sensitive and award-winning portrayals of mental health on screen, negative and inaccurate representations are still prevalent, often portraying individuals with mental health conditions as dangerous or incapable of leading meaningful lives (Stuart 2006; Hoffner and Cohen 2015). These representations continue to contribute to the stigmatisation surrounding mental health, and so, individuals more reluctant to discuss or disclose their mental health status with others. As highlighted by Pirkis et al. (2006) negative representation of mental health support affects audiences' choices to either seek out or continue with support. While much of this research occurred over

a decade ago, negative representations of mental health and support services continue through reruns of older shows, and new TV shows. Thus, this should be of great concern for those with mental health conditions, family members and medical professionals.

Despite efforts to improve representation, research by Smith et al. (2019), which explored the inclusion of characters with a mental health condition in popular TV and film from 2015 – 2017, found that mental health conditions are rarely shown. This limited representation persists even though a significant portion of the population lives with mental health conditions. Given the influential role of TV in shaping public perceptions (Lopera-Mámol, Jiménez-Morales and Jiménez-Morales 2023), this article analyses two popular Netflix series – *The Healing Powers of Dude* and *Sex Education* – to assess their portrayals of mental health conditions in adolescents.

*The Healing Powers of Dude* is a Netflix Original family-based comedy series that follows 11-year-old Noah, who starts middle school after two-years of home-schooling due to his SAD. The show features Noah's relationship with Dude, his emotional support dog, and the challenges he faces in social situations. The series consists of eight episodes, each exploring different aspects of Noah's journey to overcome his anxiety. The show exemplifies the power of friendship that can come in any form, human or not. Although it very much identifies students as studying in the USA, as such, the focus may not be indicative of other social, cultural, geographical, and political contexts.

*Sex Education* is another Netflix Original that ran for four seasons (2019 – 2023). The series centres on Otis, a teenager whose mother is a sex therapist, and his peers at a British secondary school. The show tackles various themes, including sexuality, gender identity, and mental health using a blend of empathy and humour. This article focuses on Aimee's storyline, where she develops PTSD in season 2 following a sexual assault. The assault occurs on a bus she uses to get to school; in the scene, we see Aimee get on the bus and smile politely at the man behind whilst holding a birthday cake for a friend. It is at this moment she realises that this man is masturbating on her; she begins to panic and ask for help, but onlookers do nothing. This experience led to Aimee developing PTSD. While *Sex Education* is based in a British school, throughout the show, we see elements of American culture, for example, pupils who play sports wear letterman jackets (typically worn by high-school and college students in the USA who play sports). As highlighted by actress Gillian Anderson (Pearson-Jones 2019), who plays Otis's mum, this mix of British and American cultures was purposeful in the hope of appealing to both audiences.

The selection process for the shows involved searching Netflix's catalogue and using search engines to identify programmes depicting anxiety disorders within an educational context. *The Healing Powers of Dude* and *Sex Education* were chosen based

on their relevance and portrayal of mental health conditions in adolescents. Following a systematic approach, we undertook the analysis of both shows. We first viewed each episode of *The Healing Powers of Dude* separately, with initial notes taken. We then watched the episodes together to expand our initial notes and discuss interpretations. Once we had viewed the shows we added the transcripts from each episode into a table for a thematic analysis, which involved identifying recurring themes and patterns. Following this process, the same was applied to Aimee's storyline in *Sex Education* (seasons 2–4), with a final review of the themes from both shows to establish an overall list of three key themes.

1. Avoidance as a Coping Mechanism: Examining how avoidance is depicted as a response to anxiety and its impact on individuals.
2. Representation of Support: Analysing the portrayal of support systems and their realism.
3. Importance of Peer Relationships: Exploring how peer relationships are portrayed and their role in supporting individuals with mental health conditions.

Given Netflix's vast global reach and the popularity of *Sex Education* in particular, which was the most watched Netflix launch of 2023 (Kanter 2023), these two Netflix series provide excellent examples of representations of students with mental health conditions on TV that have reached wide audiences. The analysis of 3 key themes within them provides insight into how students with mental health conditions are represented on screen as well as the opportunity to reflect on the verisimilitude of these representations, which can form an educative function for the young audiences at which they are aimed.

## Themes

### *'I just feel safer when I'm by myself': avoidance*

Individuals often utilise coping strategies during moments of internal or external stress and or trauma to help manage difficult emotions (Folkman and Lazarus 1980). For those with anxiety disorders, coping strategies may include meditation, deep breathing, humour, or avoidant behaviour (Mind 2021; NHS 2022c). In *The Healing Powers of Dude* and *Sex Education*, we see Noah and Aimee use avoidant behaviour. Avoidance can manifest in various forms such as distraction, denial, or procrastination; this article focuses on situational avoidance, where individuals avoid specific triggers, people, places, or activities (McKay, Fanning and Ona 2011).

Immediately following an experience of sexual assault, Aimee in *Sex Education* minimises her trauma, as seen in her conversation with Maeve. This minimisation is

a form of cognitive distortion (APA 2023), where Aimee downplays the significance of her experience to cope with her emotions.

Aimee: 'I think he was just lonely, or not right in the head or something, which is weird cause he was quite handsome'

Maeve: 'Aimes, this is serious.

Aimee: It's silly. I'm fine, honestly'.

Throughout the season, Aimee employs avoidance, avoiding triggers such as the bus where the assault occurred and intimacy with her boyfriend. Aimee's avoidance can be seen as critique of the societal tendency to minimize sexual assault. Sexual harassment and assault have become so normalised and minimised in society (Hlavka 2014) that those who use abusive behaviour may not recognise their actions as abusive. While the media has often upheld myths around sexual assault, with sexual assault being minimised (NSVSS 2018), *Sex Education* takes a different approach, which validates Aimee's feelings and trauma, rather than minimising them.

While avoidance may offer a reduction in anxiety, this is short term (Littleton et al. 2007); it prevents individuals from confronting their triggers, potentially worsening their condition over time. This aligns with Snyder and Pulvers' (2001) assertion that avoidance is a maladaptive coping strategy, impeding adequate adjustment to difficult situations. However, as the season progresses, we see a conversation between Aimee and Maeve, who suggests she should speak with someone. Aimee's journey towards seeking therapy highlights a shift towards more adaptive coping mechanisms, illustrating the potential for growth and healing – a situation which is further discussed in theme two below.

Similarly, in *The Healing Powers of Dude*, Noah uses avoidance to manage his social anxiety, avoiding school and social interactions to the extent of being homeschooled. Scholars have argued that homeschooling can be an effective method to reduce anxiety associated with attending school (Fortune-Wood 2007; Wray and Thomas 2013), but its long-term impact on mental health and socialisation is not well-documented (Havik and Ingul 2021). Noah's return to school after two years exemplifies significant avoidance; research indicates that avoiding anxiety-provoking situations can increase anxiety levels, creating a self-perpetuating avoidance-reinforcement cycle (Havik and Ingul 2021). In addition, this representation by *The Healing Powers of Dude*, demonstrates the affluent background of Noah, whose dad is able to stay home to home school him, ultimately using their economic capital to improve Noah's experiences. However, this is not the reality for many families and a significant proportion of young people will not have this same access.



Noah's struggle is vividly depicted when he experiences a panic attack on his first day back at school.

Amara: 'Excuse me, you're blocking my way'

Noah: 'Oh, uh, I uh, I'. [Noah's head grows to symbolise his anxiety attack]. 'No, no, no'

Amara: 'No, you won't move out of my way? [notices Noah is holding his head]. Is something wrong with your head?'

Noah: 'Oh man, you think my head is shaped weird?'

Amara: 'Seems normal shaped to me, I mean, I guess your forehead is kinda long.'

Noah: [Head grows even bigger, and he runs off as he shouts] 'I can't do this'.

This scene illustrates Noah's maladaptive coping strategy and its dramatic impact on his life. Avoiding social situations can hinder academic achievement, social development, and future employment opportunities (Garry 1996, Pellegrini 2007, Taylor 2012).

Using visual metaphors, such as Noah's head growing during his panic attack, *The Healing Powers of Dude* employs visual storytelling to convey the overwhelming nature of anxiety. As a TV show aimed at children and young people, this is an impactful visual to enhance viewers' understanding of the characters experience. Moreover, as highlighted by Stuart (2006) mental health conditions are often portrayed in a generic manner, with no specific characteristics or diagnoses shared in children's TV. Therefore, this is a new type of representation which is important and may enhance children and young people's understanding and awareness of mental health condition.

Both shows underscore that while avoidance may temporarily alleviate anxiety, it can have detrimental long-term effects. By portraying the nuanced experiences of Noah and Aimee, these shows contribute to the broader discourse on mental health, emphasizing the importance of health coping mechanisms and the potential for growth through seeking support and therapy. In essence, the shows offer valuable insights into the complexities of avoidance, presenting it as a common but ultimately unproductive strategy for managing anxiety. These portrayals can educate and encourage viewers to seek healthier ways of coping, reflecting on the shows' commitment to address mental health with sensitivity and depth, as shown by Aimee's move towards therapy, and Noah eventually overcoming his cycle of avoidance through the help of his emotional support dog. Enter, Dude.

### ***'I think you might need to talk to someone': representations of support***

The prevalence of mental health conditions, particularly anxiety, among individuals aged 10–19 is concerning (WHO 2021). Studies show that adolescents with mental health

conditions often feel unsafe at school and a lack of peer support (Newlove-Delago et al. 2022), highlighting the importance of accessible support services. While different types of therapy and support are shown in *Sex Education* and *The Healing Powers of Dude*, these are presented unrealistically. This could lead viewers to misunderstand the complexities and current state of accessing mental health support.

In *The Healing Powers of Dude*, we see Noah unable to make it through the front door on his first day of school; the very next day his parents get him an emotional support dog (ESD), to support him and encourage him to go into the school.

Noah: 'This is the best emotional-support dog out there?'

Karen (Noah's mum): 'Dr. Catasnové said Dude came from a highly renowned service-dog school. I'm sure that he will hit the ground running.'

This representation overlooks several important aspects. Firstly, the process of obtaining Dude is portrayed unrealistically; this happens quickly without acknowledgement of the extensive process of obtaining an ESD. Moreover, unlike service animals, ESDs lack specialised training and do not have the same legal rights to access public spaces (Americans with Disabilities Act 2020; Equality Act 2010). The unrealistic portrayal of anxiety support in *The Healing Powers of Dude*, where Dude is allowed in school without proper supervision and legal considerations, underscores the need for more accurate media representations of mental health support. Furthermore, despite the increasing use of ESDs in the United States of America (USA), particularly in schools, media representations like *The Healing Powers of Dude* overlook the complexities involved in acquiring and integrating ESDs into one's life (APA 2022; Krause-Pareolli et al. 2018; Schoenfeld et al. 2017).

The representation of Noah's parents and their advocacy for him as a young person and student are central to the series. The portrayal of Noah's parents highlights the significant role that economic and cultural capital play in accessing resources and support (Bourdieu 1986). Their privilege allows Noah to obtain Dude with relative ease, contrasting sharply with the struggles faced by families who do not have such resources (Lareau 2011). The portrayal of mental health in media often fails to capture the diverse realities of individuals experiencing mental health conditions. By focusing on a character from an affluent background, the show may inadvertently reinforce a narrow view of mental health support services, overlooking systemic barriers; this aligns with the critique of media representations that tend to highlight individual success stories while ignoring broader structural issues (Ellis 2015).



While Noah's support is in the form of Dude, Aimee seeks support for her PTSD from a therapist. While the assault occurred in season two, *Sex Education* does not disregard this experience, and they continue to address her experience in season three.

Aimee 'I just feel safer when I'm on my own.'

Maeve: 'How long has this been going on for?'

Aimee: 'Since the bus'

Maeve: 'I think you might need to talk to someone professional, Aimes'

Following this conversation, Maeve arranges for Aimee to speak with Jean (a main character on the show who is a sex therapist). Aimee begins therapy in the next episode, attending several sessions; these sessions focus on giving Aimee back her power, letting her know that what happened was not her fault. This portrayal provides a positive and realistic representation of PTSD support. Unlike other shows such as *How I Met Your Mother* (2005) and *Crazy Ex-Girlfriend* (2015), which misrepresent therapeutic relationships for comedic effect, *Sex Education* handles therapy ethically and responsibly.

However, the show's depiction of the speed and ease with which Aimee accesses the therapy is unrealistic. In the UK, current waiting times continue to increase, with more than a quarter of a million children and young people still awaiting mental health support following a referral (de Souza 2024). The rapid access portrayed in the show can mislead viewers about the realities of seeking mental health help. Additionally, the brief portrayal of Aimee's therapy might suggest that a few sessions are sufficient for significant recovery, which is often not the case for PTSD (NHS 2022d).

In season 4, Aimee's storyline continues; in episode one we see Aimee enter a lift with Isaac (a fellow student and recurring cast member who is in a wheelchair):

'Isaac: What class are you off to?

Aimee: Art.

Isaac: Same.

Aimee: I switched from history. I've never done art before but, I'm reading this book that says art can help process trauma, and I'm on a healing journey, so ...'

While Aimee was initially persuaded to seek support in season 3, by season 4 she actively chooses it for herself, indicating her understanding of the need for support and time to heal. This is a positive representation, which demonstrates empowerment of her choice and may encourage viewers, who can relate to her story or mental health condition, to do the same. Previous depictions of characters with mental health conditions have frequently portrayed them as unaccepting of help, with Stuart (2006) noting that TV

representations suggest that individuals with mental health conditions will not recover and are unproductive members of society. Moreover, seeing Aimee's storyline continue is important due to the fact TV shows act as a key source of information on mental health conditions. As highlighted in research by Mind (2023), which examined mental health and media, one in five felt encouraged to seek mental health support after seeing storyline involving characters experiencing mental health challenges.

While art therapy is a common treatment option in clinical practice, Abbing et al. (2019) note that there is a lack of scientific evidence due to limited research. Due to this lack of research Abbing et al. (2019) explored the effectiveness of art therapy for 47 women aged 18 – 65 years with an anxiety disorder; their findings demonstrated that art therapy was an effective method for reducing the manifestations of anxiety. Throughout the season, Aimee finds photography to be particularly therapeutic, aligning with Kopytin's (2004) view that art therapy and photography complement each other well. In the series finale, Aimee revisits the bus stop where the assault occurred, takes photos and symbolically burns the jeans she wore during the assault, symbolising her empowerment and progress. This representation aligns with the findings by Tourigny and Naydenolva (2020), who note that therapeutic benefits of photography for individuals with anxiety.

Overall, *Sex Education* has demonstrated two support options available for those with an anxiety disorder in a positive light; however, there are misrepresentations surrounding the access to and timing of these services. Additionally, *The Healing Powers of Dude* have offered an unrealistic representation with both the type of support and the access to it, whilst also portraying a narrow view of mental health experiences. These representations perpetuate misinformation and offer unrealistic expectations which may have an impact on viewers understanding of mental health support services. As noted earlier, due to the large viewing audience Netflix has acquired and the fact that TV series tend to be a primary source of information on mental health conditions (Lopera-Mámol, Jiménez-Morales and Jiménez-Morales 2023) creators of TV shows should consider the information that they are sharing with their audience.

#### ***'Amigos? that means friends in Spanish': peer relationships***

Social support is often considered a positive coping mechanism that helps individuals manage and process stress in ways that prevent further psychological harm (Cairney, Rigoli and Piek 2013). However, media portrayals frequently depict individuals with mental health conditions as loners, without any personal support systems, such as friends (Stuart 2006). In contrast, both *The Healing Powers of Dude* and *Sex Education* show Noah and Aimee as having strong social support networks that help them overcome significant barriers.

In season 2 of *Sex Education*, following her sexual assault, Aimee is unable to get back on the bus to school due to the trauma. In the season finale, her diverse group of peers, despite not all being friends, collectively support her by getting on the bus with her. This act of solidarity helps Aimee being to move forward from the assault.

‘Aimee: What are you doing here?’

Maeve: Getting on the bus. [Screen pans to Maeve and a group of fellow classmates]

We’re all getting on the bus.

[The group smile at each other and begin to board the bus when Aimee, who is to get on last, looks visibly anxious]

Maeve: It’s just a stupid bus.

Aimee: It’s just a stupid bus [Aimee takes Maeve extended hand and boards the bus]’.

This seemingly small step of boarding the bus is a significant moment for Aimee, who is dealing with PTSD. Avoidance of trauma-related stimuli, as we discussed earlier, is a common manifestation of PTSD (APA 2013; NHS 2022c). The peer support Aimee receives is crucial for helping her confront her fear begin the healing process. Research shows that peer support can significantly reduce distress for individuals who have experienced sexual assault, and secure attachments to peers are associated with lower levels of depression and anxiety (Hébert, Lavoie and Blais 2014). Maeve’s consistent support throughout *Sex Education* underscores the importance of peer relationships for those dealing with anxiety disorders. This theme is also evident in *The Healing Powers of Dude*.

SAD is characterised by worries of negative evaluation during social interactions, causing significant distress and disrupting social functioning (Heimberg et al., 2014). This often impacts peer relationships, leading to low peer acceptance, victimisation, rejection, and poor-quality friendships (Chiu, Clark and Leigh 2021). Children with SAD often adopt avoidance strategies in social situations (Rubin, Coplan and Bowker 2009; Ronchi, Banerjee and Lecce 2020), as seen in Noah’s storyline. SAD can lead to fear of everyday activities like meeting new people, resulting in fewer friendships (Jefferies and Ungar, 2020) and lower perceived social support – the belief that help is available if needed (Barnett et al. 2021). Social support is a fundamental element of relationships (Virtanen and Isotalus 2012), with perceived social support, including those from friends and family, being strong protective factors for anxiety (Roohafza et al. 2014). Despite Noah’s supportive family, it is not until forms true friendships with Amara and Simon that his perceived social support increases. In the final episode, Noah and Simon support Amara when she has stage fright in the school play by standing alongside her on stage in front of the whole school:

Noah: 'Just think. A few months ago, Amara wasn't a musical-theatre star. Simon wasn't bully-free on the bus. And I wasn't...'

Simon: 'Able to stand in a school hallway without screaming and running away?'

[Noah and Simon chuckle]

Amara: 'But here we are now. Best friends.'

[All hug].

As such, while we see Noah initially struggle to develop friendships, *The Healing Powers of Dude* demonstrates that peer relationships are possible for young people with SAD and highlights the positive effects these relationships can have. Although, whilst this is a positive representation, this may not be reflective of all experiences, and it could be argued that the show has created even more misunderstanding around the realities of SAD in relation to the ease at which peer relationships can be built for individuals with the condition.

Overall, both shows underscore the importance of peer relationships in managing anxiety disorders. Individuals with mental health conditions often feel unsafe at school and lack peer support (Newlove-Delago et al. 2021). Therefore, the portrayal of strong, supportive friendships on TV show may encourage changes within educational settings and between peers. *The Healing Powers of Dude* illustrates that individuals with SAD can develop meaningful friendships, potentially empowering viewers who relate to Noah's experiences. While *Sex Education* primarily focuses on sexual themes, it also highlights the importance of strong peer relationships in helping adolescents navigate the path to adulthood and manage PTSD, as demonstrated through Aimee's journey.

## Conclusion

The portrayal of students with diagnosed mental health conditions on TV often diverges from reality, potentially skewing audience perceptions and expectations. Unrealistic depictions, such as those seen in *The Healing Powers of Dude*, where the process of obtaining and integrating an ESD is oversimplified, can mislead viewers about the complexities involved in accessing mental health support. Meanwhile, although the support accessed by Aimee in *Sex Education* is portrayed more realistically, the rapid timing of which it happened is not and does not represent the typical experience of many people (including young students) seeking mental health support. This disparity between fiction and reality may create unrealistic expectations among viewers regarding the ease and effectiveness of seeking mental health help. As a result, individuals might underestimate the challenges they may face in accessing and benefiting from mental health support services, potentially deterring them from seeking help when needed.

Therefore, it is crucial for media representations of mental health conditions and support services to strive for accuracy and depth, reflecting real-life experiences of navigating mental health care systems. By presenting more authentic portrayals, they can play a significant role in educating and empowering viewers to seek and utilise mental health support services effectively.

Despite some inaccuracies, the shows examined in this article represent a new way of portraying mental health. Both shows offer a more positive portrayal compared to many previous depictions, which we argue is a more responsible approach. However, mental health representation remains a broader societal problem, and there is still work to be done to ensure accuracy. Characters with mental health conditions are becoming more common on television, and are starting to play more significant roles, rather than being confined to background characters. Within the two shows examined here, both SAD and PTSD are constructed as main storylines albeit with differing approaches. Our analysis shows that *Sex Education* takes a more considered approach to the ways in which anxiety can manifest. Whereas *The Healing Powers of Dude*, with its exaggerated depictions, we argue, could be more considered. As noted in the Mind and ITV research (2023), representations of mental health on screen should be accurate.

There is significant importance of visibility for mental health conditions in entertainment media; not only to facilitate representation but also to generate and open discussions about topics that children and adults alike may find difficulty in discussing as noted in the research by Mind and ITV (2023). Although it is important to signify that none of these media representations are wholly representative of the complexities and nuances of any one individual experience, or of the diversity of the student population. As more young people and students are diagnosed with mental health conditions, there may be more demand for representation of students with mental health conditions on screen.

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## Competing Interests

The authors have no competing interests to declare.

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