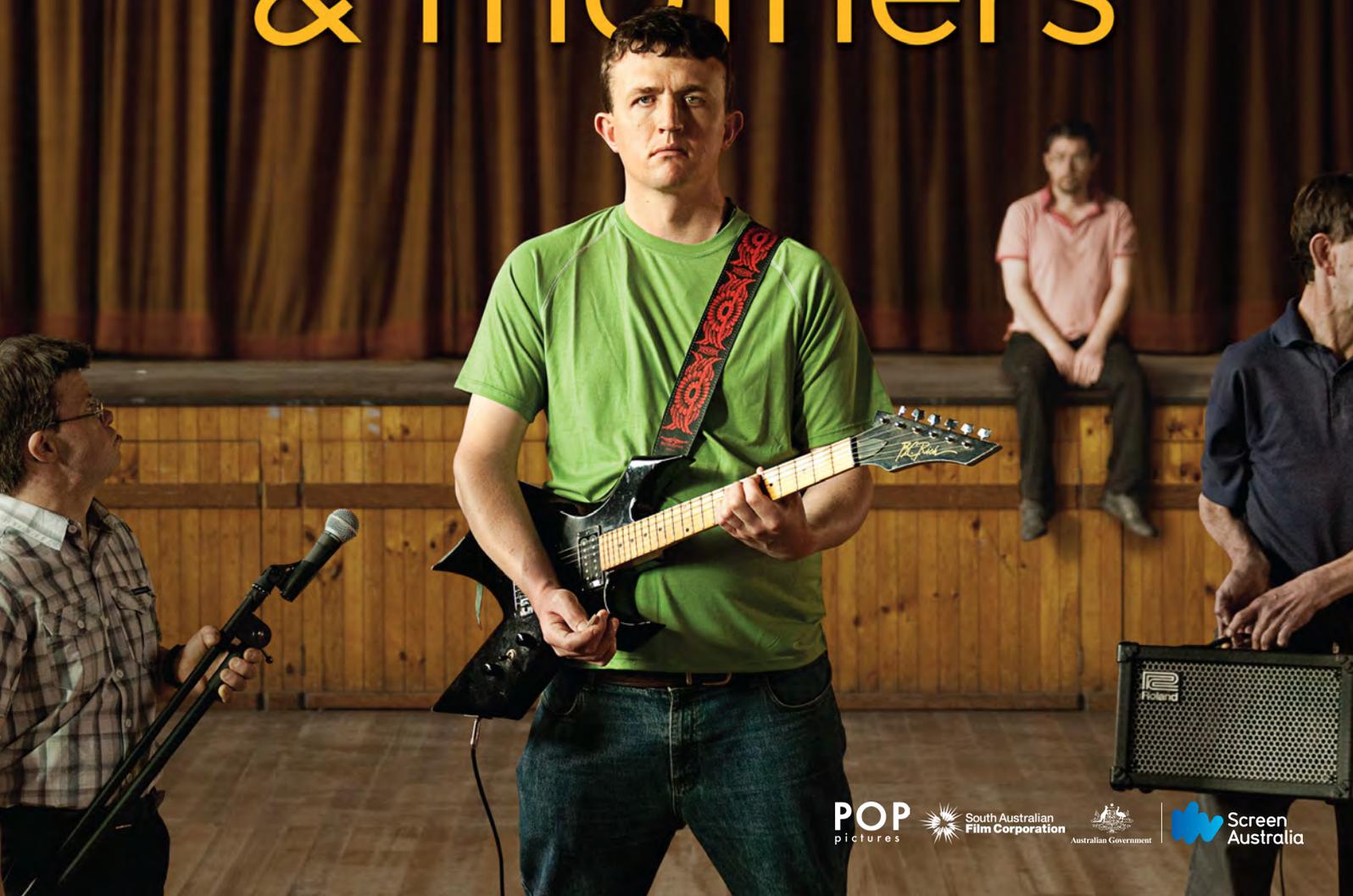


CINEMATOGRAPHY Aaron Gully, Maxx Corkindale SOUND Des Kenneally, Will Sheridan, Pete Best, Scott Illingworth  
EDIT David Banbury, Elendil Archer MUSIC Kyls Burtland EXECUTIVE PRODUCER Kent Smith PRODUCED BY Louise Pascala DIRECTED BY Christopher Houghton

A film by Pop Pictures

# SONS & mothers



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A **STUDY GUIDE** BY CHRISTIE COOK



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*Sons  
And Mothers*  
Directed by:  
Christopher Houghton  
Time: 80 minutes



**TEACHER NOTES**

**Synopsis**

*Sons and Mothers* (2013) is an intimate portrait of a group of marginalised men in Adelaide, the capital of Australia’s festival state. Led by Alirio Zavarce, a Venezuelan-born actor and theatre director, they create a theatrical love letter to the most important woman in their lives – their mother.

Within the sanctuary of No Strings Attached (NSA), a company that creates groundbreaking theatre by disabled artists and performers, Alirio invites members of the Men’s Ensemble – Ricki, Ryan, Damien, Duncan, Abner, Kym and Ben – to expose their innermost secrets.

What unfolds is a poignant and intimate portrait of seven surprising individuals who willingly ‘tell all’ with honesty, grace, and a healthy dose of irreverence. As they offer their hearts for the sake of a theatre show, complications set in and raise concerns about who will make it to opening night.

*Sons and Mothers* is a cinéma-vérité documentary of great intimacy that forces audiences to leave their view of disability at the door and instead experience an insider’s perspective of what it is like simply to be human.



**Curriculum links**

- NSW Stage 6 Preliminary Drama
- Physical Education/ PDHPE: Aspects of the documentary may be useful for units on improving mental health and health priorities in Australia.
- *Sons and Mothers* may also be used when teaching the ACARA Civics and Citizenship syllabus.
- *Sons and Mothers* may be used in conjunction with an English unit on film and multimedia to more closely critique cinéma-vérité.

**INTRODUCING SONS AND MOTHERS**

*Sons and Mothers* follows the work of No Strings Attached, an Adelaide-based theatre company for the disabled <<http://www.nostringsattached.org.au>>. The director of the stage production, Alirio Zavarce, treats cast members with great respect and patiently works to bring out the best in each performer. No Strings Attached demonstrates that the dedication and concern for maximising an individual’s performance matters more to effective teamwork than a performer’s natural instinct for performance. Such a concept is crucial for NSW HSC Drama students, who often struggle to accept the delegation of some students to their group for the Group Performance component of the course. Rather than expecting everyone in the group to have the same ideas or enjoy the same style of performance, acceptance of each other’s differences and making the most of each individual’s strengths should be a key focus when developing the Group Performance. The documentary *Sons and Mothers* deserves praise for developing high-quality performances through demonstrated mutual respect and participation at the expense of personal egos and limitations. This is in contrast to high-school students, who often demand that their ideas and egos supersede that of the rest of the group. *Sons and Mothers* is essential viewing should your Preliminary HSC Drama class be comprised of students who refuse to play second fiddle. Drama teachers will find *Sons and Mothers* to be a truly refreshing and beautiful documentary as it is rare to watch performers who are genuinely humble about performance.



## THEMES & QUOTATIONS

- A key idea throughout the documentary is that of the unique yet mundane relationships between mentally and physically challenged men and their mothers.

The troupe of *No Strings Attached* construct a performance that is both personal and simple yet sufficiently complex in depicting what is typically an overly stereotyped subject. The performer's disabilities serve to show an original and sympathetic perspective on the impact of the mother/son relationship without resorting to oft-repeated clichés.

- *A mother is a helpful and supportive person she can support you in things like sports such as Marshall [sic.] arts.*
- *She wears rollers in her hair ...*
- *What effectively matters is how you feel about your Mum cause she's been there since the start.*
- *Someone who was able to born me ...*

Another topic continuously touched upon in the documentary is that of the difficulties and injustices of living with a disability in Australia.

The cinéma-vérité style of documentary allows the subject of each scene to speak without manipulation or prompting. One of the consequences of this style of documentation is that it allows for authentic dialogue to be recorded. Evidently, the hardship of a brain disorder was a significant part of each performer's life, and yet the subjects did not indulge this as a topic of conversation, nor was

*A mother is a helpful and supportive person she can support you in things like sports such as Marshall [sic.] arts.*

it used as a means of emotionally manipulating the audience. This is one of the admirable qualities of cinéma-vérité – it's honesty, hence the term that literally translates as 'truth cinema'. This style of filmmaking allows audiences to draw their own conclusions regarding not only what is said, but by deducing value from what is not stated. The deduction from *Sons and Mothers* indicates that although bullying and injustice seem to be part and parcel with disability, the subjects themselves understand that they are not defined by these experiences alone; in fact, there are much greater issues and people directing the focus of their lives, namely their mothers.

- *We thought that Ben would get the same opportunities ... found out that wasn't the case ...*
- *... I don't want to complicate things.*
- *Hard times in school? Yes ...*
- *... Everybody's got a disability of some sort.*

Effective teamwork despite incongruent personalities:

- *... I'm not here to entertain you ... we need to work with each other.*

*Sons and Mothers* is as much a documentary about the individual performers as it is about the nature and issues implicit to good teamwork and stage performance.



## FOR STUDENTS

### Synopsis

An all-male theatre troupe set out to create a theatrical love letter to their mothers. As they offer their hearts for the sake of a theatre show, complications set in and not everyone makes it to opening night. *Sons and Mothers* is a poignant and intimate portrait of seven surprising individuals whose disability does not stop them from revealing themselves with honesty, grace and a healthy dose of irreverence.

### Activities

#### Preliminary Drama: Making and Performing

Perhaps one of the reasons for *Sons and Mothers*' success at the Adelaide Fringe Festival was because the performance was based on the experiences of the actors. Consequently, the performance reflected the authenticity and conviction necessary for a solid dramatic performance. In preparation for your Individual Performance, recall an event or episode in your own life that could form the foundation of a monologue. After you have written out your episode, consider which parts of that episode you would want to highlight for an audience. What emotions will you attempt to convey to the audience? In *Sons and Mothers*, the performers commenced the project by defining what the word 'mother' meant to each performer. Rather than assuming that your audience will feel the same way about an event or person as you do, refine your monologue by carefully considering your word choice and the implications and connotations of key words in your work.

#### Directing (the Group Performance)

1. Describe Alirio Zavarce's style of direction. What did you learn from viewing *Sons and Mothers* about his style of direction?
2. Zavarce faced some unique challenges when working on *Sons and Mothers*. Towards the end of the documentary, one of the performers struggles



emotionally and needs to be admitted to hospital in order to take care of his mental health. How does Zavarce deal with the absence of a cast member and see that the performance goes ahead successfully despite setbacks?

3. What have you observed from watching Zavarce's direction that could be applied to your own Group Performance?

#### Multimedia: Making Drama & the Group Performance

1. Discuss the use of multimedia throughout the production of *Sons and Mothers*. More specifically, discuss how the interview with the mothers assists in developing the subject of the play by exploring a different perspective to that of the sons.





POSSIBLE USES OF MULTIMEDIA	SUBSTITUTIONS IN CASE OF MALFUNCTION
Recorded music	Live a Capella, live music solo
PowerPoint presentation	Changes to dialogue/changes to blocking
Recorded voice over narration	Monologue

**2.** What are some of the weaknesses of a multimedia stage performance?

**3.** What would you do in the planning/rehearsal process to overcome any malfunctions that could potentially occur when presenting a multimedia performance?

### Teacher-devised activity

**1.** Divide the class into groups of about five or six and ask each group to develop a short performance (3–5 mins) involving multiple uses of media.

After each group has prepared their task, get each group to perform their piece as planned.

**2.** Ask each group to perform their piece a second time. This time, orchestrate a ‘malfunction’ at some point during the performance by taking away one of the multimedia elements. Has each group adequately prepared for ‘malfunction’?

*See Table this page.*

Although most of the technical malfunctions that can occur on stage are not the responsibility of the performer, this task is a great way to build on improvisation skills as it is a form of ‘planned’ improvisation. Successfully overcoming problems on stage can greatly increase performers’ confidence. This task could also be used in a unit on commedia dell’arte whereby performers have broad personality types and loose scripts that must

be modified according to each performance and due to reactions from the audience. You may like to look at the following sites online before delegating this activity to students.

[http://eprints.qut.edu.au/16336/1/Pauline\\_Sheldrake\\_Thesis.pdf](http://eprints.qut.edu.au/16336/1/Pauline_Sheldrake_Thesis.pdf)

<http://www.nationaltheatre.org.uk/backstage/multimedia/>

See following titles regarding multimedia on the above National Theatre website:

- Stage Managing a multimedia production
- Reinventing the Script on a multimedia production





### Critically studying drama & film

Cinéma-vérité:

- <http://www.parlez-vous.com/misc/realism.htm>
- <http://sensesofcinema.com/2000/11/verite/>

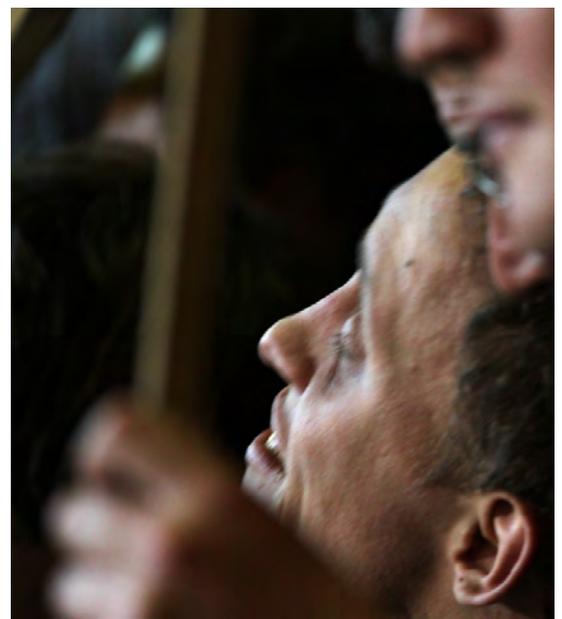
1. The cinematic style of *Sons and Mothers* is best described as 'cinéma-vérité'. In cinéma-vérité (truth cinema), neither actors nor narration are used. Why do you think that the documentary of *Sons and Mothers* employed this technique?
2. Did *Sons and Mothers* change or challenge your impression of disabled people? If so, state how your opinion of disabled people has changed.
3. How does this style of documentary give greater dignity to those with a disability?
4. Although cinéma-vérité doesn't contain narration, chapter headings or interviews by a narrator, it still has structure. What structure could you deduce from the documentary?
5. In the establishing shots of the film, we see close-ups – shaving, violin, video games, guitar, smoking, working at a desk, grocery shopping. What do you learn about each of the performers from the establishing scenes of the documentary?

6. Comment on the non-diegetic sound used at both the start and conclusion of the documentary. Why do you think that this music was chosen?
7. The performers are shown in their homes throughout the documentary. Why do you think that these scenes have been included in the film?
8. Cinéma-vérité has been criticised as a style of film because it has often been considered a form of 'reportage' rather than art due to its lack of effects and traditional cinematography. Debate the following topic: cinéma-vérité is a valid form of artistic filmic expression.
9. Most television programs that claim to be a form of 'reality' television are often highly constructed, partially scripted and selectively edited and do not represent reality at all. If you could produce your own television show using cinéma-vérité, what subject matter would you choose and how would you make the program sufficiently interesting for our current population, who have become accustomed to reality television that contains very little 'reality'?

### Creative therapies

*Sons and Mothers* references music therapy towards the end of the documentary. The purpose of music therapy is to promote emotional wellbeing through creative self-expression. The following is an extract from <http://www.austmta.org.au/wp/wp-content/uploads/Music-Therapy-info-2010.pdf>:

*Music has had a role in maintaining personal and social wellbeing throughout history. Music evolved as a form of social-emotional communication and impacts on our mood, level of arousal and cognition. The emotional power of music makes it an everyday resource with the potential to promote wellbeing and recovery. Music may provide an accessible form of self expression, helping to restore meaningful communication, previous skills and*





personality. The rich cultural and personal associations of music may assist in regaining a positive sense of self and cultural identity. Musical engagement becomes a way of voicing one's participation in the world and a means of giving voice to experiences silenced by mental illness and disability and societal reactions to these.



Music therapy may include listening, playing, singing, song writing, improvising, performance or discussion, either on an individual or group basis. Services are provided in the least restrictive environment in order to maximise choice and opportunity ...

The role of creative therapy is highly beneficial to those who cannot adequately express themselves verbally as it is not dependent on traditional psychological procedures whereby clients are expected to extensively engage in conversations with a therapist before strategies are given and acted upon. Creative therapies are often under-utilised by mainstream society even though the benefits of creative and recreational pursuits are widely acknowledged to be a form of personal fulfilment and relaxation.

**DRAMA STUDENTS:** Research one of the creative therapy sites listed below and consider how participating in a creative therapy workshop may assist you with understanding your own creative nuances and working more effectively as part of a team.

**PDHPE STUDENTS:** Research creative therapies and discuss the ways in which these therapies may assist as a tool for counteracting the effects of bullying and harassment in schools. How could schools utilise creative therapists in order to build more caring and respectful relationships amongst students?

- <http://www.psychologytoday.com/files/attachments/231/malchiodi3.pdf> (Extract from *Expressive Therapies* by Cathy A. Malchiodi)
- <http://www.catagroup.org.au>
- <http://acata.org.au>
- <http://www.healcreativetherapy.com>
- <http://australia.gov.au/about-australia/australian-story/disability-and-the-arts>

The following is an extract from an article entitled 'Theatre must get over disability and help us "put crips in our scripts".' by Kaite O'Reilly <<http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2012/aug/30/theatre-disability-crips-in-scripts/>>:

*Disability is often viewed as worthy, depressing, or a plethora of other negative associations I (and many others) have been trying to challenge and subvert in our work for years. I find this representation astonishing, for the vast majority of my*





**3.** Are there other performance festivals and spaces in Australia that include theatre of disability? Research this topic more thoroughly and devise a proposal for more effectively including disabled artists in mainstream artistic events.

## Civics and Citizenship

### Class discussion

- What are some of the stereotypes surrounding disabilities? What do you imagine when you hear the word 'disability'? Some people assume that the word 'disability' has connotations of being physically impaired. Were you surprised to learn that the actors in *Sons and Mothers* were, for the most part, mentally impaired?
- *Sons and Mothers* highlights the importance of community and relationships for improved emotional health. Besides the actors' relationships with their mothers, what other relationships did you observe that were beneficial for the general wellbeing of the group?
- Until recently, Australian society has largely ignored the needs of the disabled. How has the government introduction of disability care assisted with greater equality for those with disabilities? What has the historical trend of failing to provide adequately for the disabled imply



*disabled friends and colleagues are the wittiest, most outrageous and life-affirming human beings I have ever had the pleasure of spending time with.*

*I identify proudly as a disabled person, but am often struck how to those without this cultural identification the impaired body is 'other'. Disabled people are 'them' – over there – not a deaf uncle, a parent with Alzheimer's or an acquaintance who has survived brain injury following a car accident. Although the vast majority of us will acquire impairment through the natural process of ageing, through accident, warfare or illness, disabled people are still feared, ostracised and set apart.*

**1.** On the one hand, the nature of 'otherness' is actively discussed and focused on by way of the subject matter. In contrast, 'otherness' is not highlighted by use of cinéma-vérité. The producers of the documentary have stated that they... 'have grown incredibly weary of documentaries about disability that rely on the carer or parents to tell us how hard it is for them, or how special their child or spouse might be'. Regarding 'otherness', how does the documentary *Sons and Mothers* break with conventional storytelling regarding the disabled?

**2.** How has the inclusion of *Sons and Mothers* in the Adelaide Fringe Festival helped to promote a more positive view of disability?





about our nation's attitudes towards those with a disability?

### Activity 1

The website <[http://www.togetherwerock.com/sites/default/files/Draper\\_MythsMisc\\_Nov1.pdf](http://www.togetherwerock.com/sites/default/files/Draper_MythsMisc_Nov1.pdf)> looks at the many myths surrounding people with a disability. Read the myths below and consider why these are myths before checking your answers against the website.

**Myth 1:** A person's disability defines who they are as an individual.

Why is this a myth? Hint: This myth suggests that people are the sum of what they can or cannot do.

**Myth 2:** People with disabilities are sick and in constant pain.

Why is this a myth? Hint: This myth considers disability to be more of an illness than a condition.

**Myth 3:** People with disabilities are brave, courageous and inspirational for living with their disability.

Why is this a myth? Hint: This myth, although seemingly positive, places the disabled in a different category from everyone else and further isolates them from those without a labelled disability.

**Myth 4:** People with disabilities are special and should be treated differently.

Why is this a myth? Hint: Do you like to be treated differently from others in everyday life, like when you're at school or in a café?

**Myth 5:** Disability is a personal tragedy and deserves our pity.

Why is this a myth? Hint: Disability for some is a matter of perspective.



**Myth 6:** People with disabilities are dependent and always need help.

Why is this a myth? Hint: Was this true of the men in *Sons and Mothers*? Did any of these men live alone?

**Myth 7:** People with disabilities want to associate with each other.

Why is this a myth? Hint: Most people enjoy friendships with others who are different ages, genders and nationalities.

**Myth 8:** People are confined to their wheelchair.

Why is this a myth? Hint: How do wheelchairs and other apparatus increase mobility and independence for people with a physical disability?

**Myth 9:** People with disabilities are a one-dimensional group.

Why is this a myth? Hint: Discuss some of the differences between the actors seen in *Sons and Mothers*.



**Myth 10:** People with disabilities cannot lead a full and productive life.

Why is this a myth? Hint: Consider different definitions of and perspectives on the meaning of the word 'productivity.'

### Activity 2

<http://www.equalityni.org/archive/pdf/FactSheet4.pdf>

The following table and dot points are taken from a publication by the Equality Commission for Northern Ireland (Disability and Discrimination Act 1995). It is a guideline for the terms that managers and trainers should use when speaking with a disabled person.

- Put the person first, for example 'John Smith, who uses a wheelchair' instead of 'wheelchair user, John Smith'.
- Remember that people are not medical conditions, so do not give them labels, such as 'epileptics', 'suffering from', 'afflicted by' or 'invalids'.
- Toilets which have been designed for use by disabled people should be referred to as 'accessible toilets' rather than 'disabled toilets'.
- If you need to make reference to someone with limited or no sight, use 'visual impairment', 'blind' or 'partially sighted'.

1. Why is it important to use the terms in the second column rather than the first? (See the table below.)

2. Are there other labels that you have heard that should be modified to more correctly describe a condition without unfairly labelling the individual? Write your own table of labels that need to be modified.



### Activity 3

Read the following dot points before answering the questions below: <<http://www.sane.org/information/factsheets-podcasts/204-facts-and-figures/>>

- Nearly half (45 per cent) of the population will experience a mental disorder at some stage in their lives.
- Almost one in five Australians (20 per cent) will experience a mental illness in a twelve-month period.
- During a one-year period, anxiety disorders will affect 14 per cent of the population and depression will affect 6 per cent.
- Depression is one of the most common conditions in young people and increases during adolescence.
- At least one third of young people have had an episode of mental illness by the time they are twenty-five years old.
- Research indicates that people receiving treatment for a mental illness are no more violent or dangerous than the general population.
- People living with a mental illness are more likely to be victims of violence, especially self-harm.

DO NOT USE	USE
'Handicapped' – Some people see the term 'handicapped' as meaning 'cap in hand' (i.e. seeking charity) – or 'the disabled' ('the disabled' implies disabled people are part of a group rather than individuals)	'Disabled people' or 'people with disabilities'
'Cripple' or 'deformed'	'disabled person' or 'person with a (physical) disability'
'mental handicap' or 'retarded'	'learning disabilities'
'midget' or 'dwarf'	'a person with restricted growth'
'deaf and dumb'	'deaf without speech'
'spastic'	'someone with cerebral palsy'
'stutterer'	'someone with a speech impairment'



positive mental health?

**4.** Who is at risk of developing a mental health disorder?

**5.** Were you surprised to learn that many of the illnesses are not permanent but may be only for a season?

**6.** How could we encourage men to seek assistance when suffering from a mental health disorder? What factors pose a barrier for men who should seek help?

**7.** Design a short radio skit that encourages men to seek professional help for depression.

- *Mental illnesses are not purely 'psychological' and can have many physical features.*
- *Anyone can develop a mental illness and no one is immune to mental health problems.*
- *Most people with mental illness recover well and are able to lead fulfilling lives in the community when they receive appropriate ongoing treatment and support.*
- *Women were more likely than men to use services for mental health problems. Approximately two-thirds of people with a mental illness do not receive treatment in a twelve-month period.*
- *It is estimated that up to 85 per cent of homeless people have a mental illness.*

**1.** Which of these statistics surprised you? State reasons for your choices.

**2.** How could the average person contribute towards the positive mental health of others?

**3.** How can strong family relationships assist in



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