

Actor Simone Buchanan talks to Mindframe about the importance of research in theatrical portrayals of mental illness

In the world of entertainment, it is important to use accurate information and research when developing a character with mental illness, as entertainment often plays a significant role in shaping and reinforcing community attitudes.

In 2008, Network Ten's *Neighbours* character Samantha Fitzgerald (played by Simone Buchanan) developed bipolar disorder. To ensure the portrayal was as accurate and sensitive as possible, the story development and crew worked with the SANE Media Centre and *Mindframe*.

Kim McNaughton from the *Mindframe* team recently had the opportunity to talk to Simone about her role as Samantha, including the challenges she faced, accessing a person with lived experience of bipolar disorder, and any advice she has for scriptwriters looking to portray a character with mental illness.

***Mindframe:* What was it like to play a character with bipolar disorder?**

Simone Buchanan: "It was an interesting experience.

"A lot of research was done prior to my role and there was a distinct focus on the details being correct. The production team were really open to keeping the information current. It was well done.

"The role was challenging and tiring. It felt real. There were themes that required a lot of crying and hysteria."

***Mindframe:* You were able to draw insight from a family member who lives with bipolar disorder. Did having access to someone with lived experience assist you to accurately and respectfully convey the character of Sam?**

Simone Buchanan: "Having access to someone with lived experience definitely helped. It was great to have contact throughout my role. Having no access would have made the role tough to understand the disorder.

"It was an exhausting role, but it also provided me with insight as to what it must be like to live with this condition every day.

"I received 'Thank You' letters from people who live it daily. It was really important to some fans that the details were correct."

***Mindframe*: From an actor's perspective, what would your advice be to scriptwriters portraying characters with mental illness?**

Simone Buchanan: "Research! Get your research from reputable organisations and experts. Get the details right."

ENDS

Mindframe for stage and screen resources were developed with the assistance of screenwriters, the Australian Writers' Guild and the Department of Health. The free resources assist scriptwriters, playwrights and television story departments with truthful and authentic portrayals of mental illness.

For more information on *Mindframe* for stage and screen and free downloadable resources, go to: www.mindframe.org.au or contact *Mindframe* on 02 4924 6904.

Mindframe workshops are conducted through the Australian Writers' Guild and provide scriptwriters, playwrights and television story departments with accurate information based on research. *Mindframe* workshops can also provide scriptwriters, playwrights and television story departments with access to spokespeople with lived experience.