



THE INVISIBLE OPPONENT

The Marketing Society Awards 2022

Client: Campaign Against Living Miserably (CALM)

Agencies: AMV BBDO & Seven Stones

Category: Effective & Impactful Strategy

Executive summary

Suicide should be considered a public health emergency in the UK, with 125 lives lost every week.

Despite this, mental health is both hard to talk about and hard to understand. Unlike other illnesses, it is hidden from view. An internal, personal struggle for millions of people, many of whom fight it in silence.

We wanted to use the context of sport, an area where men are more comfortable expressing their emotions, to start a new conversation about mental health and to encourage those struggling to seek help.

The Invisible Opponent allowed Campaign Against Living Miserably (CALM) to reach their key audience in a powerful and memorable way, using outdoor, social and the organisation's first ever TV ad.

The results were immediate. The campaign generated conversations throughout the UK, drove awareness of CALM and prompted action from those in need.

CALM's share of voice increased from 27% to 32%. Total monthly website users increased 47%. Most importantly, calls to the suicide helpline rose 74% year-on-year.

In the process, we created a new, long-term brand platform for CALM and a powerful new way of visualising the impact of mental health.

words: 189

Suicide in the UK

Every week 125 people in the UK take their own lives.

There's a life behind every single one of these deaths – a person with friends, family and a community. Research has found that a suicide will directly affect 135 people – that's friends, family, colleagues.

Whilst suicide can affect anyone, it disproportionately affects men.

75% of suicides in the UK are male and suicide is now the biggest killer of men under the age of 45. A bigger threat than heart disease, cancer or road accidents.

Despite a growing awareness of mental health in the UK, suicide remains a topic that is rarely talked about. Many with suicidal thoughts find it difficult to speak about their struggle and don't know where to turn.

More broadly, mental health problems cost the UK economy at least £117.9 billion each year, equivalent to around 5 percent of the UK's GDP.¹

The Campaign Against Living Miserably



The Campaign Against Living Miserably (CALM) is a charity that exists to change the shocking suicide statistics in the UK. Suicide is preventable – with the right support and an open and equal society, no one should ever feel like there's no reason to go on.

CALM believes everyone deserves to get the help they need. They run a free, anonymous and confidential helpline and webchat from 5pm to midnight every day.

But it isn't just immediate crisis support that is needed to prevent suicide – it's culture change too. CALM works with people across industries and communities to raise awareness, tackle stigma and ultimately stop people reaching crisis point.

The stigma around suicide

Centuries of silence have contributed to the shame and stigma surrounding suicide.

Suicide was illegal until 1961. Whilst the law has changed, the language around suicide remains connected to illegal or morally wrong actions. The term "committed suicide" is still widely used today and is an example of the shame that's always been placed on those that have taken their own lives and their families and friends.

The emotions associated with suicide also make it difficult to talk about. Those who are bereaved by suicide have to process difficult emotions, including anger, blame, even relief.

¹ Source: Mental Health Foundation and London School of Economics and Political Science, 2022

In the media, suicide is often painted in a dangerous and damaging way. Whether it's the story arc of a TV series, or a stock image of a sad man in the shadows, suicide is often depicted in a dark and scary way, which can make it harder to talk about and truly understand.

People who take their own lives are normal people going through tough times, but when we regularly see suicide depicted in extremes, it can make us think otherwise and dehumanise those who are struggling.

Normalising conversations around suicide and the support services available can have a huge impact on how many people seek help when they're struggling. In fact, it's proven that engaging with stories that articulate what it feels like to have and move past suicidal thoughts can help people experiencing them and even prevent them taking their own lives.

The objectives

The campaign had three simple objectives:

1. Raise awareness of CALM and the service it provides
2. Help to challenge the negative perceptions of mental health as a sign of weakness
3. Encourage those in need to seek support

CALM does not have a large marketing budget. Whilst this brought challenges, it also brought clarity to our task. We needed an idea that would get talked about, out-performing its paid media support.

The audience

We had three audiences to consider:

Firstly, people at crisis point. It's impossible to accurately size this audience at any given time, but it's a significant group. Research suggests that one in five of us suffer from suicidal thoughts.²

Secondly, anyone who is struggling, whether from isolation, anxiety, health or money worries.

Our third audience was the social networks around these people. Conversations with those you trust can be incredibly valuable in preventing suicide. These are the people who are best placed to spot someone struggling and who can encourage them to talk and to seek help, from CALM or elsewhere.

² NHS - Adult Psychiatric Morbidity Survey: Survey of Mental Health and Wellbeing, England, 2014

The strategy

Using sport to challenge the stigma

Talking about personal mental health struggles can be challenging for men. There is a stigma around issues like anxiety and depression that make them feel like weaknesses, not something a real man should have to worry about. Things to be hidden from view and dealt with in private.

The truth is that mental health issues are indiscriminate and not signs of weakness. Talking about them takes courage and confronting them takes strength. We wanted to flip the narrative in this way; to position talking about mental health as a signal of strength, not weakness.

To do so, we looked to sport. One of the areas where men are more comfortable expressing their emotions.

We saw that a growing number of sports stars were talking about issues like depression and wondered whether we could use sport to start a new conversation about suicide. Elite athletes seemingly have it all. Fame, wealth, physical strength. But none of this protects you from anxiety or depression.

By telling the story of sports stars' struggles, we hoped to challenge the attitude that mental illness is a sign of weakness.

Making mental health tangible

One of the challenges with mental health is that it is hidden. You can't easily spot whether someone is suffering from depression, anxiety or having suicidal thoughts.

We needed to find a way of making these internal struggles tangible. For those struggling, it could reassure them that these emotions are shared by millions of other people. And for our wider audience, it could help them to understand the issue. To *feel* our message, not just hear it.

A long-term platform, not an ad

Our ambition was always to develop a long-term platform around mental health and sport, rather than a one-off campaign. The brand had a history of distinctive and award-winning creative work, but arguably lacked a big idea that could be activated consistently. We wanted to change that. We were looking for a platform that could work with different sports, different athletes and different aspects of mental health over time.

The idea

The insight behind the idea came from combining the truth that mental health is hidden with the competitive context of sport and competition...

Sometimes, the toughest opponents are the ones you can't see.

An idea was born: **The Invisible Opponent**

We would show how mental health feels by removing opponents from powerful sporting scenes. The concept can work for individual sports, like boxing, as well as team sports, like football or rugby. In both cases, it allows us to visualise the internal struggles that people face when dealing with depression, loneliness or suicidal thoughts.

As well as being visually impactful, this approach would allow us to use existing footage and photography, rather than needing athlete access and funding an expensive shoot.

Our financial constraint became a strength. Everyone who has watched a sports film or a betting advert will know that trying to recreate the power and drama of live sport is a fool's game. There's no comparison to the real thing.

The launch

For the launch campaign, we chose to tell heavyweight boxer Tyson Fury's story.

Tyson Fury had been unusually open about his struggles with mental health over the years, including attempts to take his own life. At the end of 2018, his fight with US boxer Deontay Wilder gave us a perfect metaphor for his personal story of overcoming his demons.

In the 12th and final round, Fury is knocked to the floor by two brutal hits. As the referee nears the end of the 10 second count, Fury suddenly gets to his feet, ready to fight again.³

This fight became the basis of our campaign.

Please watch the main film [here](#).

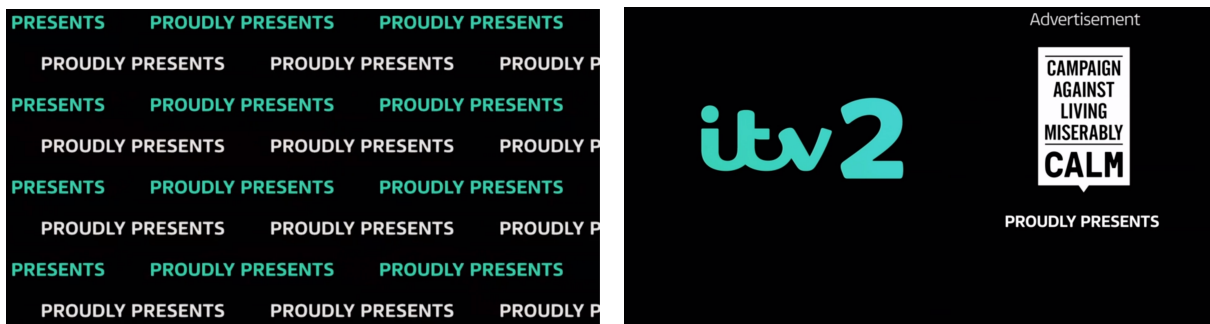
Using real footage from the fight against Deontay Wilder, Fury's opponent was digitally and painstakingly removed so that the film shows him fighting an invisible opponent. MPC meticulously retouched over 1,000 frames to achieve this effect. Fury moves around the ring, throwing and evading punches, with his skin rippling with the impact of jabs as thousands watch on. Fury is knocked down, seemingly defeated.

³ Tyson Fury remains the only undefeated heavyweight champion of the modern era.

Summoning extra strength from somewhere, Fury lifts himself from the canvas and stands tall. The message “Sometimes the toughest opponents are the ones you can’t see” appears on screen over the final sequence, before the words “Don’t fight it alone” and CALM’s logo and helpline number.



With media planning by the7stars, the film first appeared during the ITV2 show Love Island, when we knew a large audience within our target demographic would be watching live. Rather than a traditional ad within the break, it was introduced by ITV2 with an introductory voiceover from the broadcaster, explaining that you don’t have to fight alone.



This placement was also particularly poignant as three Love Island contestants had previously died by suicide after appearing in the show, as well as presenter Caroline Flack.

We wanted to start a conversation about suicide, by encouraging those struggling to talk to CALM or talk to those around them. Love Island gave us the perfect context to do that.

To extend the reach of the campaign we created digital posters that ran in prominent sites throughout the UK⁴, as well as social content for Instagram, Facebook and Twitter.

Overall, we had a paid media spend of just £100k, as well as over £150k of added value from media partners supporting the campaign.

⁴ Please view the digital outdoor format [here](#)



Digital outdoor advertising ran in prominent transport sites

The results

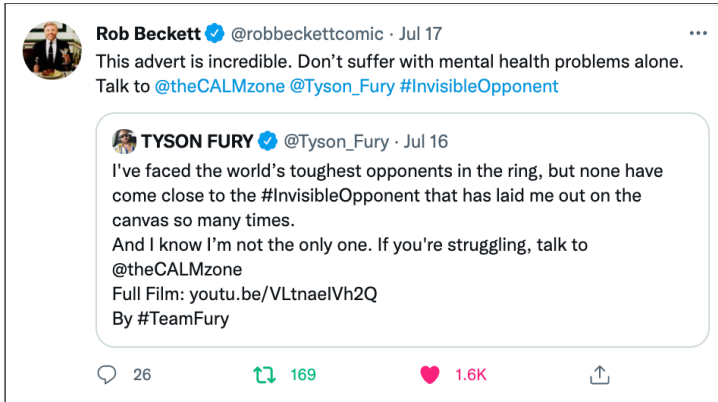
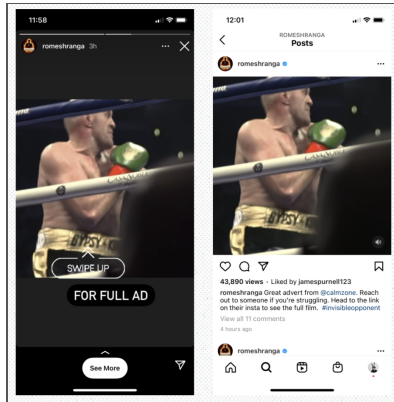
The campaign's impact was immediate, with a significant reach and a powerful response.

Within seconds of the ad appearing on TV, people started talking, about mental health and CALM, and the sentiment was overwhelmingly positive. Exactly as we'd hoped, the film was challenging the perception that mental health challenges are a sign of weakness.



A snapshot of Twitter comments about the campaign

The ad was shared by many prominent influencers, extending the reach of the campaign.



Amplification examples from comedians Romesh Ranganathan (Instagram) and Rob Beckett (Twitter)

The campaign received 484 press mentions within a week of launch and sparked conversations across multiple platforms, from Davina McCall's podcast to Dragon's Den star Steven Bartlett's LinkedIn page. Several digital brands covered the campaign, including LadBible and JOE. All of this amplification was earned media, rather than paid for promotion.

The campaign helped to deliver a significantly higher share of attention for CALM in the month of launch: 32% vs a year average of just 27%.⁵

Even though the ad only appeared on TV for one week (16th-25th July 2021), social stats for the month saw huge increases, with 3m impressions (+150% vs June 2021), 71,367 engagements (+358%) and an audience growth of 2,922 (+95.5%).

On the day of launch, social impressions were up +1,601%, engagements were up +1,894%, and link clicks were up +1,816% vs previous day.

Then came the positive impact across website visits and calls.

Total monthly website users were up +47.4% in July 2021, the month of launch.

Most importantly, calls to the helpline – the biggest indicator of prevented suicides – were up 74% year-on-year during the week of launch. Calls continued to rise even once the ad came off TV, reaching over 4,300 calls per week by mid-August, an increase of 82% year-on-year.

Finally, on a personal level, this campaign meant a lot to us. We were a small team with a connection to the topic. Seeing the reaction and the impact it had has been overwhelming. Below is one example of the many direct messages we received when sharing the campaign.

I love the film you just shared. I love it so much because I've suffered with depression all my life, and it touched a nerve. I really hope it is successful and it gets the platform and exposure it deserves.

⁵ Share of voice calculated vs Mind and Samaritans. CALM runs annual brand awareness tracking, but this is only done once per year, in April, so we don't yet have a post-campaign measure.

Conclusions

This story shows the power marketing has to make a difference where it matters most. Suicide is one of the most pressing challenges of the modern age. Addressing them needs creativity as well as compassion to challenge misconceptions, start conversations and change lives.

There are three key lessons from The Invisible Opponent that will shape future CALM campaigns and we hope can be applied to other challenges across the marketing industry.

1. Embrace the constraints

The Invisible Opponent wouldn't have happened if it had started with a traditional brief and a traditional budget. As Adam Morgan wrote in *A Beautiful Constraint*, "when ambition is exponentially greater than resource... that's when real innovation happens." The lack of production and media budget forced us to think creatively and to pursue something truly original. The fact it was a proactive project also meant that there was no deadline or media plan waiting to be filled; just an idea waiting to be made. Like Tyson Fury, we refused to give up. After two and a half years, the result was worth the wait.

2. The power of truth

When it comes to sport, it's impossible to recreate the drama and emotion of the real thing. Tyson Fury's fight was so powerful as a metaphor for how mental illness can feel that we didn't need to recreate it. We just needed to show it in a new way. To make our audience think differently about what they were watching and what it meant.

Whatever else has changed in the last 100 years, one of marketing's greatest tools remains 'a simple truth, well told'. In this case, the truth was about how suicidal thoughts can feel:

Sometimes the toughest opponents are the ones you can't see.

3. Ideas are bigger than ads

There are, of course, individual ads and marketing stunts that have a big impact on their brands. Some are even remembered fondly decades later. But the bigger opportunity for marketers is to create *ideas* that endure. *Every little helps; You're not you when you're hungry; You either love it or you hate it...* Brand platforms that can contribute both creativity and consistency over time. We believe we have this with the Invisible Opponent for CALM. And the best is yet to come.

words: 2,324

Please view the core campaign film [here](#).

Please view the digital outdoor [here](#).