

# TIPS FOR MENTAL HEALTH REPORTING



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## Recovery and Treatment

- ✓ Seek out positive stories about recovery, prevention and treatment. These stories are important to raising community awareness that treatment can be effective and that devastating consequences from mental illnesses can be prevented.
- ✓ Develop relationships with community mental health and substance abuse providers, with mental health experts, with persons in recovery, and with regional support network administrators by reaching out to develop news stories with a recovery and treatment angle. These relationships will prove to be invaluable in the long run.
- ✓ Ask your news organization, whenever possible, to list community-based mental health resources in a sidebar and on the website.
- ✓ Effective treatment for mental illnesses can consist of psychosocial, alternative, spiritual, peer-to-peer and pharmacological interventions. All forms of evidence-based and promising treatments deserve attention by the news media.
- ✓ Mental illnesses have multiple causes, i.e. biological predisposition, psychological and environmental factors all play a role. Convey this complexity in news stories that describe a cause and avoid simplistic phrases like “mental illness is a brain disorder.”
- ✓ Being in recovery from a mental illness does not necessarily mean being symptom-free. People experiencing symptoms of a mental illness can be reliable and valuable news informants.

## On Violence

- ✓ Be careful when linking violent or criminal behavior to mental illness even if police or family sources do so. The Surgeon General concluded in 1999 that “the overall contribution of mental disorders to the overall level of violence in society is exceptionally small.”
- ✓ Violent events almost always have multiple causes. Symptoms of mental illness are rarely the only cause. Consider additional factors such as poverty, unemployment, homelessness, desperation and drug misuse, which often are major factors.
- ✓ People with mental illnesses are much more likely to be victims than perpetrators of violence. Write news stories that reflect this fact.
- ✓ Question the relevance to the news story of one’s “history of mental illness” even if that history is readily available

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- ✓ When writing news stories about the problem of untreated mental illnesses, consult with mental health 'experts' including mental health providers, persons in recovery, Department of Social and Health Services officials and with regional support network administrators. While privacy laws make it difficult to comment on news stories in which mental health experts are directly involved, they can still provide valuable perspective on the problem of untreated serious mental illnesses.
- ✓ Follow-up stories that highlight the problem of untreated serious mental illnesses are worthwhile, but whenever possible strive to highlight specific problems with the mental health system, the current laws or lack of access to treatment in the community.
- ✓ When possible, emphasize the statistical fact that mental illness contributes very little to the overall rate of violence in the general population.

## On Language

- ✓ Always use 'people first' language, which does not identify someone first and foremost by a diagnosis or by a mental illness: e.g., say, "John Doe has schizophrenia," not "John Doe the schizophrenic;" "people with mental illnesses," not "the mentally ill."
- ✓ Whenever possible, be specific about the diagnosis and the symptoms that are relevant to the news story. Mental illnesses have different symptoms and forms of treatment.
- ✓ In general, only the person living with a mental health diagnosis can accurately define how he or she is doing at present. Descriptions of people with mental illnesses as "struggling" or "tortured" should come directly from the person alleged to be feeling this way.
- ✓ Use unsensational descriptions of people with mental illnesses: e.g. "John Doe experiences symptoms of schizophrenia including paranoia and delusions that people are out to kill him," not "John Doe acted in a schizophrenic rage."
- ✓ Explain legal jargon when it is used in a news story. For example, 'insanity defenses' are where defendants argue that they should not be held criminally liable for breaking the law because they were legally insane at the time of the crime. A defendant attempting such a defense undergoes a mental health exam beforehand. The legal definition of "insane" is quite different from psychiatric definitions of mental illness. When the insanity defense is successful, the defendant is usually committed to a psychiatric hospital [not a mental hospital] .

These tips were developed in consultation with members of the news media.