SAMPLE NEWS AND FEATURE STORIES

News breaks. When you arrive at the scene, you’re told that someone central to the event has a mental illness. You’re on deadline: What do you include and not include? What follow-up, if any, is appropriate, and how do you handle those second- and third-day stories?

There is no one answer, but what follows can help. Below are basics to keep in mind while reporting on news and feature stories that might involve people living with a mental illness. And on the pages that follow are several constructed news stories to help journalists put the Reporting Mental Health style guidelines into practice. (Though these are typical of stories that might appear on any given day, these pieces—including the names—are fictitious.) The style guide is available for download at http://www.eiconline.org/calmhsa.

• Don’t assume the cause of irrational behavior or violence is mental illness unless you have confirmation from a reliable source who has access to that information.

• “Mental illness” covers a wide range of conditions. Be specific in the diagnosis when possible and don’t imply that all mental illnesses are the same.

• Avoid referring to someone with a mental illness as a victim or “suffering” from a mental illness.

• When referring to those living with a mental illness, say, for example, “a person with schizophrenia” or “diagnosed with schizophrenia” rather than “a schizophrenic.” People are more than their diagnoses.

• Avoid derogatory slang in any context, for example, “he’s psychotic,” “gone nuts,” “acting deranged.”

• Be cautious in reporting on suicide: Detailed coverage can lead to copycat suicides. For research-based recommendations on how to cover suicides, see reportingonsuicide.org.

• Be sensitive when using photos with stories involving mental illness and avoid perpetuating stereotypes with pictures of people looking disheveled or threatening.

• Include information about local mental health resources and help lines.
SAN FRANCISCO — When Joshua Wong was barely a teenager his mother knew something was wrong with her son. Doctors told May Wong three years ago that he was a schizophrenic. Like most schizophrenics, Joshua, now 17, has struggled to stay on medication that helps him stay healthy. Without it, his mother fears what would happen.

As a victim of schizophrenia, Joshua began to hear voices and have difficulty sleeping. His parents said he suffered from delusions. It wasn’t until he started on medication and picked up his baseball glove that Joshua Wong felt like a normal kid again.

Continued on B7
Medication Helps Teen Cope With Schizophrenia

SAN FRANCISCO — When Joshua Wong was barely a teenager his mother knew something was different about her son. Three years ago, Joshua was diagnosed with schizophrenia. May Wong said Joshua, now 17, does not like the medication doctors prescribe for his condition, complaining that it sometimes makes him lethargic. But without it, his mother says, the teenager would probably not be able to attend high school or enjoy his many athletic activities.

Joshua had begun to hear voices at 13 and was having difficulty sleeping. His parents said he was experiencing delusions and believed that the children next door were trying to kill his dog.

It wasn’t until he worked with his psychiatrist to find the right combination of medication and services for his specific needs that Joshua Wong could pick up his baseball glove and feel like a kid again.

Continued on B7
Schizophrenic Woman
Allegedly Stabs Two Men
Downtown

BAKERSFIELD — Two men were seriously injured Friday when a woman who seemed to be mentally ill stabbed them on a downtown sidewalk, police said. Charlotte Fields, age unknown, is being held at the city jail until she can be assessed by mental health workers. Police said Fields has recently been sleeping on the front stairs of the county courthouse at night.

Witnesses said Fields was muttering to herself outside the courthouse and harassing passersby just before the attack. Brandon Johnson, 32, was stabbed in his right thigh. Fred Sanchez, 52, who came to Johnson’s aid and tried to wrest the knife from Fields, suffered a deep gash across his cheek and was stabbed twice in the arm. Witnesses said another man eventually tackled Fields, who was in a rage, and disarmed her before police arrived.

“This lady was just nuts,” said Michelle Connor, an office worker who witnessed the attack. “I’ve seen her outside the courthouse before, and she sometimes yells at me. She must be schizophrenic or something. I mean, we can’t even walk down the street anymore?”

The victims, both from Bakersfield, were being treated at Memorial Hospital for stab wounds and are expected to recover.

According to Fields’ sister, her sibling repeatedly refused treatment.

“It was just a matter of time before this happened,” said Rhonda Smith. “Charlotte is unmanageable, and she ran off again two weeks ago. I’m glad she didn’t kill those guys.”
Two Men Injured in Stabbing Outside Courthouse

BAKERSFIELD — Two men were seriously injured Friday when a woman stabbed them on a downtown sidewalk, police said. Charlotte Fields, age unknown, is being held at the city jail until she can be assessed by mental health workers.

Witnesses said Fields was muttering to herself outside the county courthouse and verbally harassing passersby just before the attack. Brandon Johnson, 32, was stabbed in the back and his right thigh. Fred Sanchez, 52, who came to Johnson’s aid and tried to wrest the knife from Fields, suffered a deep gash across his cheek and was stabbed twice in the arm. Witnesses said another man eventually tackled Fields and disarmed her before police arrived.

Police said Fields has recently been sleeping on the front stairs of the courthouse at night, and that they’ve received calls over the months from concerned people who live and work nearby and have observed Fields apparently talking to herself and acting erratically.

The victims, both from Bakersfield, were being treated at Memorial Hospital for stab wounds and are expected to recover.

Without corroboration from an authority in a position to know, and without knowing enough facts to be sure that mental illness was related to the assault, the news report includes only details known to be factual and relevant.
**STORY TWO, SUGGESTED FOLLOW-UP:**
This piece would be assigned to include more context about the woman as a person, not just as a suspect. Such a story could include a list of mental health resources.

**Woman Held in Stabbing Has Friends, Family—and a History of Mental Illness**

BAKERSFIELD — Police and mental health workers said Saturday that the woman accused of stabbing two passersby outside the county courthouse Friday had been treated for mental health problems, and that her competency to stand trial is being assessed. At the same time, neighbors have spoken up on her behalf, including a former employer expressing surprise at the allegations.

Jack Quo of the county mental health department confirmed that Fields had been treated by the agency but would not discuss her case in detail, citing patient confidentiality.

“The department is working closely with the police to determine what happened yesterday,” said Quo, who added that Fields will be held for observation until the district attorney decides what charges might be filed or whether she first needs further treatment.

Charlotte Fields, 32, was under the care of a psychiatrist through the county mental health services, confirmed her mother. Judy Fields said her daughter was diagnosed with bipolar disorder eight years ago. Since then Charlotte Fields had taken medications and worked full time at a local garden nursery.

“Charlotte has been a great employee,” said Jeanine Scott, who owns Native Landscapes, a shop specializing in drought-resistant plans. “She’s so sweet, and is incredibly knowledgeable about the desert plants we sell. Our customers would ask for her when they came in. I’m just as surprised as everyone else by what I saw in the news.”

Judy Fields said that her daughter had been living with her sister until an argument resulted in Charlotte’s leaving the household a couple of weeks ago. Police said they had recently noticed Fields sleeping on the steps of the courthouse downtown.

“Charlotte is a good person, but she needs help, and the medications really help her,” said Judy Fields, who added that she contacted police when she heard about the incident Friday. “If the doctors say she needs medicine then she needs to take it. We all hope the men who were injured will recover quickly.”

The Fields’ neighbors Ben and Holly Drake said that Charlotte often walked their dog and cared for their cats when the Drakes would leave town. The Drakes said they were unaware of Fields’ medical history.

“She is so conscientious, and kind, and I’m sorry for her and her family that this is going on,” said Holly Drake in a phone interview.

Mental health experts said that Friday’s incident, in which Fields allegedly attacked the men on a downtown sidewalk and had to be tackled by a bystander, is not common behavior for a person dealing with mental illness.

“This is a sad situation, and we don’t know all the facts yet,” said Dr. Laura Frasier, a psychiatrist with the Institute for Mental Illness of Central California who has not been part of Fields’ care. “But even people with the most serious mental health issues rarely act out against others in this way. The idea that everyone, or even most people, with mental illness are dangerous is a myth.”
Suicide.

There is a link between suicide and mental health disorders.
Some 90 percent of those who take their lives each year were living with a mental illness and/or substance abuse.

There is a link between media coverage of suicide, and suicide attempts.
As reportingonsuicide.org notes, “More than 50 research studies worldwide have found that certain types of news coverage can increase the likelihood of suicide in vulnerable individuals.”

This underscores the need for thoughtful coverage of mental health and suicides.
Below are examples of ways in which news outlets can inform without inciting by keeping the reporting as neutral as possible:

- **Placement.** If you determine the story is newsworthy, don’t dramatize the event by placing it on the front page or by placing “suicide” in the headline. Both types of placement have been shown to contribute to copycat attempts. (In headlines, “dies” is appropriate.)

- **Details.** Avoid details on locations and methods: Such specifics increase the risk of vulnerable people imitating the act.

- **Photographs.** Photographs of grieving relatives show those considering suicide that taking their lives is a way to get attention.

- **Language.** The words “committed,” “succeeded,” or “failed” are inaccurate. Appropriate wording is that someone died by suicide, took his life, or killed herself.

- **Accuracy.** More than 90 percent of suicide victims have a diagnosable mental illness, substance abuse problem, or both. Often the underlying mental health problems leading to someone’s taking his life are not known, even to family members. Suicide is rarely due to one cause or event. Assume that family and friends don’t know the whole story and resist oversimplifying, for example, citing “recent money woes” or “a fight with a spouse.” Context—resources and the complex reasons leading up to the event—prevents labeling and eliminates misconceptions. Do add context if confirmed that, for instance, the individual had a diagnosed disorder.

- **Resources.** Whenever possible, provide local resources for individuals who may need help.
Yet Another Man Commits Suicide by Jumping Off Golden Gate Bridge

SAN FRANCISCO — A 21-year-old suicide walked more than a mile to leap to his death from the Golden Gate Bridge on Friday morning after an argument with his ex-girlfriend. Jose Sanchez was pronounced dead at the scene, said police department spokeswoman Sheila Phillips. It was the fourth suicide of the year from the bridge, an unusually high number in a short time from the well-known site for suicides.

Sanchez’s parents said their son was distraught over his recent breakup with Eleanor Rodriguez, a woman he met in a class at UC Berkeley. The two had been dating for about 10 months when Rodriguez broke off the relationship last week, according to Maria Sanchez.

“My boy had everything going for him, there was nothing wrong with him,” said a crying Mrs. Sanchez. “He was about to graduate with honors.” The mother said her son was a manic-depressive during his freshman year but that he’d been treated by a campus psychologist.

Jose Sanchez reportedly took a BART train into the city Thursday night and walked across town to cut through the park to reach the foot of the bridge, where he called his girlfriend and threatened to commit suicide. Rodriguez said she stayed on the phone with Sanchez for more than an hour, trying to talk him out of jumping as he paced the pedestrian walkway on the bridge. He eventually climbed onto the safety railing and jumped, landing in the icy San Francisco Bay waters that had claimed so many before him.

Jose Sanchez’s fraternity brother and roommate, Matt Taylor, said, “I’m in shock. He was my best friend. We’re all in shock. Our fraternity is making plans to turn our annual dinner next weekend into a celebration of Jose’s life.”

Phillips, the police department spokeswoman, said Sanchez’s was the fifth successful suicide from the bridge this year.
UC Berkeley Student Dies in San Francisco

SAN FRANCISCO — A 21-year-old UC Berkeley student took his life Friday morning by jumping off the Golden Gate Bridge, according to San Francisco police. Jose Sanchez was pronounced dead at the scene, said department spokeswoman Sheila Phillips.

Police closed northbound traffic on the bridge for 90 minutes during rush hour while they investigated the incident.

Sanchez’s mother said her son, a senior from Santa Ana, was studying chemistry.

“He was about to graduate with honors,” said Maria Sanchez. She said her son had a history of mental illness and had been treated for bipolar disorder during his freshman year at Berkeley. Maria Sanchez didn’t know if he was still under a doctor’s care at the time of his death.

James Penton, a psychologist with the county health department, who did not know Sanchez, said anyone who might be considering suicide, or who knows of someone who might need help, should seek mental health counseling.

Friends and family may notice a problem before an individual takes action.

“If you think someone might be in danger of harming themselves, find resources and encourage that person to seek help,” said Penton. “People often think they are alone and have nowhere to turn, but there are many resources and professionals who want to help,” added Penton. “Asking for help might seem hard, but once you take that step by asking, everything can change for the better.”

If you or someone you know needs help, call the Suicide Prevention Lifeline at 1-800-273-TALK (8255) or visit www.suicideispreventable.org.
Avoid slang.

The following examples of slang and derogatory terms are not appropriate in news coverage of any kind:

**In sports:**

- The Lakers could not get their act together on the court last night. One minute they were scoring at will and the next they were turning the ball over at an alarming rate. Talk about *schizophrenic*.

**In arts coverage:**

- He goes *psycho* on the dance floor, especially when his favorite song is played.

- Some people would say that Jackson is *demented*, but he considers himself an avant-garde artist who is on the cutting edge of what’s new in multimedia.

**In business coverage:**

- The stock market was *bipolar* today, starting with a loss of 300 points when the opening bell rang but ending up 150 points higher.

**In stories that could appear on any beat:**

- Chavez’s husband said she goes *loco* when she’s been drinking.

- George is *deranged* when it comes to collecting Star Wars paraphernalia. He once drove three hours to Shasta County just to examine another student’s collection of Han Solo action figures.

- When it comes to protecting her daughters, ages 8 and 10, Francine Phillips is *insane* about limiting their access to the Internet. The girls are never allowed to use the computer without adult supervision.

- His ex-wife said Smith *goes crazy* when he finds out she has a date with another man.

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