



Tools for Entertainment and Media



INTERVIEW TIPS FOR STORIES RELATED TO MENTAL HEALTH OR SUICIDE

A part of the TEAM Up toolkit on covering mental health concerns

To provide a more realistic picture of mental health for your audience, uncover the stories that go beyond breaking news. Show how recovery is possible for people living with a mental illness, for instance, by interviewing those who can give first-person perspectives.

When conducting interviews with people who are living with mental health challenges, keep in mind the following:

Ease: Ask interviewees where they would be most comfortable being interviewed; let them know it's OK to have someone accompany them.

Explain: Explain the purpose of the conversation and, if possible, send questions in advance.

Cultural considerations: Determine whether interviewees for whom English is not their first language might be more comfortable using an interpreter, both for their comfort and for the accuracy of the story. When crafting your questions, keep the subjects' cultural background in mind and avoid making assumptions. Beliefs about mental illness vary among cultural and ethnic groups, so do not assume anything about their—or their friends' and family members'—understanding and acceptance of their mental health situation. Researching cultural beliefs about mental health is the best way to understand them; for statewide data on various cultural perspectives, see the California Reducing Disparities Project (www.dmh.ca.gov/Multicultural_Services/CRDP.asp).

Take time: Leave plenty of time for the interview so neither you nor the interviewee feels rushed. Ask questions if you don't understand an answer.

Watch your language: Best practices as laid out in the Style Guide: Reporting Mental Health count here, too. Don't use slang, or phrases such as "suffering with" or "afflicted by" in regard to a mental illness.

Fact check: Check the facts with credible mental health organizations or other authorities regarding symptoms that come up in the interview. Resources can be found at: National Alliance on Mental Illness (www.nami.org) or the Mental Health Association in California (www.mhac.org).

After a suicide: Take extra care when quoting grieving family members after a death by suicide. Their comments and knowledge of the context might be incomplete, leading to a story that implies to readers, viewers, or listeners that the suicide was due to one cause or event. Ask if the deceased had a known history of documented mental illness or substance abuse if that fact has not been established.

In all reporting: Emphasize that prevention and treatment can be effective and recovery is possible.

866.284.9767

TEAMup@eiconline.org

www.eiconline.org/teamup



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