WORKING WITH THE MEDIA TO TELL YOUR STORY
a mental health-focused toolkit
for community organizations and individuals

The news media help shape public opinion on issues, including mental health. A basic understanding of a journalist’s job and how best to tell your story can increase your effectiveness during interviews with the press. In addition, this understanding can help you deliver messages that reduce the stigma and discrimination of mental health challenges and promote the fact that recovery and a fulfilling life are possible.

A journalist’s goal is to gain an understanding of the issues, collect relevant facts, obtain quotes from reputable sources and balance opposing viewpoints. A journalist does this by conducting interviews with expert sources — mental health providers, researchers, clients and family members who live with mental health challenges on a daily basis. Reporters rely on you — the mental health stakeholder — for personal stories, facts and commentary, and that’s where you can really make a difference.

This toolkit is designed to give you the tools you need to understand how the media work and deliver effective messages that support your — and your organization’s — goals. You can obtain additional information by visiting www.eiconline.org/teamup.

The sections include:
• Tips for Working With the Media
• Capturing the Reporter’s Interest
• Creating Effective Messages
• Sticking to Your Message
• Preparing for a Media Interview
TIPS FOR WORKING WITH THE MEDIA

Pre-think your agenda. What is your objective for news interviews? What messages and anecdotes illustrate that goal? Draft a few talking points, and support them with compelling stories and statistics. The tips below will help you prepare for an interview with a reporter from print, radio, television or Web-based media.

Return a reporter’s call promptly. Ask if the reporter is “on deadline,” and find out exactly when the reporter needs your information. Even if the deadline is “right now,” give yourself a few minutes to prepare by telling the reporter you’d like to get a drink of water or complete an email you’re writing, but don’t delay very long when returning the call.

Help the reporter. If you have time before the interview, provide the journalist with background information. If you’re being interviewed for a print article, provide data and statistics that support your objectives, and offer high-resolution digital images with captions.

Do your homework. Before the interview, ask about the journalist’s deadline, when the story will appear and the general line of questioning. Read, watch or listen to the reporter’s previous stories to learn more about the interviewer’s style and perspective on the topic.

First things first. During the interview, get your most important points across first and then, if time allows, add messages that support your objectives. Throughout the interview, you can repeat your most important messages for emphasis, but don’t overdo it, as you may come across as “overselling.”

Prepare your responses to potential questions in advance. For broadcast news interviews, practice the delivery of clear, concise, 20- to 30-second responses.

Be brief. Give your answers in a clear, concise manner and then stop talking, even if the reporter remains silent. Before the interview, prepare sound bites — short, memorable and compelling phrases — that advance your objectives.

Use “bridging.” Transition words and phrases (bridging) will help you move from an interviewer’s question to a point you want to make. [See the section of this toolkit called STICKING TO YOUR MESSAGE.]

Avoid using jargon and acronyms. Common words and phrases such as “lived experience” or “recovery” are jargon to someone unfamiliar with mental health issues. If you use jargon or an acronym, be sure to explain the meaning to the journalist so he/she describes it accurately to the media outlet’s audience.
Use facts. Data and summaries from recent research articles will back up your key messages and increase their credibility. It’s useful to provide reporters with a written fact sheet in advance, but be sure to elaborate during the interview to provide context.

Anything you say is fair game. Whatever you say during an interview can be quoted or used in a story, even when you ask a reporter to keep what you’re saying “off the record.”

Be honest. If you don’t know an answer, say so. Offer to find out the answer and get back to him/her.

Stay calm. Don’t lose your cool. The risk of damage from a rash remark is great.

Never say “no comment.” When you use that term, you may appear evasive. Use this opportunity to explain why you can’t comment on a particular issue, and then respond with a related issue in a way that forwards your objective for the interview.

Don’t take what a reporter says “on faith.” Reporters may cite studies that are unfamiliar to you. Rather than comment on something you don’t know about, respond by talking about a related study that you are familiar with and its results.

Watch out for legal liability. Avoid providing any information or statement that could be construed as accepting responsibility for a situation that may result in legal action. Video/audio tapes and reporters’ notes from an interview with you can be subpoenaed as evidence in court. Always check with your supervisor on policies in place about talking with reporters and sharing newsworthy stories.

Be constructive if something reported is incorrect. If the story gets a key fact wrong, misrepresents your views or misquotes you, tell the reporter in a constructive way, as the same journalist may interview you in the future. Avoid emphasizing minor mistakes, and don’t expect a retraction.

Make the story relevant. Use related media stories to make a parallel with your story. Bringing up current national conversations is a great way to tie in your locally based stories.
CAPTURING THE REPORTER’S INTEREST

To increase the chances of your story being told by the media, frame it in a way that will make it compelling and useful for a reporter. When crafting your story, make sure that:

The story is newsworthy. Journalists look for story ideas that are of sufficient interest and importance to resonate with their local audience. Examples of newsworthy items include describing a new approach to mental health treatment, citing a recently released study or report, or depicting how to handle emotional reactions to a natural disaster. Show how the issue affects the community at large, as well as in specific ethnic/cultural populations.

The story is timely. Timing is everything. Try to present journalists with story ideas that have not already been covered by the press. If you would like to augment a story that has already appeared, don’t delay. Contact the media and demonstrate how, in a new way, your story illustrates information recently in the news.

The story is concise. Keep to the essentials, concentrating on messages that support your organization’s goals. Include WHO was involved, WHAT happened, WHERE and WHEN it took place, WHY it’s important for the public to know about it, HOW your organization made a difference and WHAT was the result. You can add the supporting details later.

The story is clear to an audience unfamiliar with mental health issues. Mental health stories should be compelling, relevant and free from jargon and acronyms. Keep your responses brief, uncomplicated and clear, while focusing on your objectives for the interview and the messages your organization wants to get across.

The story localizes a trend. If a national study or news story shows an increase in the number of veterans who attempt suicide, describe what your organization/county is doing to address this issue at the local level. Offer to connect the reporter to community-based spokespeople who can humanize the story.

The story is dramatic. Personal stories that illustrate an individual’s journey from experiencing a serious mental health challenge to being in recovery and living a full life have heart as well as engage the audience.

The story highlights innovation. The expansion of a local suicide hotline or the release of a report that includes new and potentially surprising data that impact outcomes is of interest to the media.

The story demonstrates what is unique about your organization. Focus on what makes your programs effective and how your organization benefits the community in a unique way. Personal success stories are particularly compelling to the media.

The story cuts against some expectation. The element of surprise or information that is counterintuitive makes a good story great and captures the audience’s attention.
CREATING EFFECTIVE MESSAGES

Preparing for an interview is key. Developing your organization’s main messages or talking points before the interview will mitigate the nervousness everyone feels when being interviewed by reporters and support your organization’s goals as well.

**Target your message to your audience.** Adapt your messages to the particular audience served by the reporters. For example, if your target audience is parents, be sure to use appropriate terms and messages that relate to that population. If the participants in the story are not proficient in English, work with a trustworthy translator. You will reach a wider audience and respond directly to the communities that share an ethnic background.

**Sample message:** “It’s important for parents to understand that even young children may experience a serious mental health challenge. Know the warning signs to watch for in your child, and know that help is available in your community.” [Provide information about appropriate local services.]

**Develop key messages in advance of the interview.** Messages should be brief, clear and concise; vivid; and specific about what you want your audience to know and do.

**Sample message:** “Many people say that the effects of stigma and discrimination can be a bigger challenge to their quality of life than their mental health challenges.”

**Illustrate your message with anecdotes, similes or metaphors.** Using appropriate analogies is a powerful way to communicate memorable messages.

**Sample message:** “People with serious mental health challenges are more likely to be victims of violence than perpetrators.” You can also add an anecdote to the previous statement to make it more memorable. “For example, Mary, a shy, anxious child, was frequently pushed around and bullied on the playground, and she was always picked last for any team.”

**Reporters love a good story.** Anecdotes should demonstrate how your organization and/or mental health support services made a difference in someone’s life. If you’re not using your personal story or an anonymous depiction of someone else’s story, include data to support your message.

**Sample anecdote:** “A homeless man who had lived with a mental health challenge for much of his life told our organization he was afraid to go to a nearby homeless shelter for fear of being robbed or victimized, something that happens all too frequently. Working with our staff, we found him resources that included a supportive, homelike environment where he could safely put down roots.”

**Don’t forget self-promotion.** Make sure that you have information about your organization readily available for the reporter and target audience for follow-up purposes. As mentioned above, use success stories to promote your organization and the work that has been done. Make sure that you include your social media handles and website address.
STICKING TO YOUR MESSAGE

While it can sometimes feel as if you have no direct control over an interview, you still have control over your messages and the strength and energy with which you deliver them. During the interview, a reporter may ask a difficult question or a question that does not seem to give you the opportunity to convey your key messages. Bridging from the reporter’s question to an answer that supports your agenda can help you have more control over the interview. Keep a positive outlook and continue to develop a relationship with the reporter, regardless of the question.

Before your interview, think about some of the questions you may be asked, and craft talking points that support your agenda. Learn to rephrase your core message — the point that most supports your agenda — in a variety of ways.

Bridging Guidelines, or What to Do If…

• A reporter asks a question outside the scope of the subject of the interview. Acknowledge the question and bridge to a relevant point you want to make. For example, “While your point is well-taken, it would appear that the key issue here is…”

• You don’t know the answer to a question. “While I’m not familiar with [X], what I do know is…”

• You get a question you don’t want to and/or can’t legally respond to. “It would be inappropriate for me to speak on behalf of the individual or his/her family, but what I can speak to is…” [If the reason you cannot comment is based on law, say so, and bridge to a related message.]

• A reporter cites a study you are not familiar with or that has results that do not support your agenda. “I’m not familiar with that study, but I do know of studies that demonstrate…” Be able to give the study’s name, author and date.

• A reporter asks an obtuse, off-point or obvious question. Remember that he/she knows less than you do about mental health, and the reporter is likely asking the same things your target audience may be thinking. “That question raises an interesting point, but I want to emphasize…”

• The reporter asks a hypothetical question. Bridge to a true example. “Rather than speak hypothetically, I’d like to tell you about…”

• Convert differences of opinion into issues that can be discussed thoughtfully and respectfully. “It looks like the salient issue here is…”

• A reporter asks a question that only requires a “yes” or “no” response. Rather than simply answering “yes” or “no,” respond with a full sentence, moving directly to a relevant talking point. If an interview is edited and you use a one-word answer before elaborating, your explanation may be edited and your key message will not have been made.
PREPARING FOR A MEDIA INTERVIEW

Consider the following issues when preparing for an interview with a reporter to help you collect your thoughts, focus on the type of interview and its audience, and make sure you get your key messages across. Use the interview worksheet on the following page to collect your thoughts.

**Subject of Interview:** Reporters are likely to call about breaking news, the results of a new study or information that helps the community, such as what to do during a natural disaster, or information on gun violence, holiday “blues” or depression in general.

**Type of Interview:** Be aware of the type of media outlet and its opportunities. For example, you might be interviewed on a television or radio news show, in which case your answers must be VERY brief. In a public affairs program, you’ll have a longer time to make your points. You may be able to enhance the interview with fact sheets and data. Television stations may want to have information to post on the screen, such as phone numbers or websites, or additional data to supplement the interview.

**Audience for Interview:** The reporter is simply the conduit to deliver your information to your target audience. For example, if your intended audience is veterans, focus on the mental health challenges that veterans face; if your audience is a specific ethnic community, be mindful of cultural considerations and perspectives; and if you are speaking to legislators, emphasize how laws can support mental health. Have a translator readily available or mention the communities that you serve so that the audience can relate.

**Reporter’s Agenda:** A reporter’s goal for the interview is first and foremost to get a “good” story, one that resonates with the media outlet’s audience. Other objectives include helping the audience understand the issues involved, collecting relevant facts, obtaining quotes from reputable sources and balancing opposing viewpoints.

**Your Agenda:** What is your goal as a result of this interview? Examples include conveying the idea that “mental health assistance is available and recovery is possible,” highlighting how your organization makes a difference in people’s lives, or helping individuals cope with the likely emotional responses to a natural or man-made disaster.

**Key Messages:** Determine the main points you want to make during the interview. You may not have time to use more than two or three messages in a brief interview, so be very clear about what the priority is for your audience.

**Anecdote:** Develop a brief anecdote or story that illustrates your agenda. For example, if your agenda is to encourage people with mental health challenges to seek support, tell a “success story.” You could talk about someone who got the help he/she needed and who now has a job, a loving family and a great life.
INTERVIEW WORKSHEET

Subject of interview:

Context of interview:

Type (TV/radio talk show, TV/radio news program, press conference, etc.)

Audience (for this media outlet)

Physical setup, time allotted

Interviewer’s presumed agenda:
[Note that the reporter’s main interest (agenda) is always TO GET A GOOD STORY!]

Questions the journalist is likely to ask about the subject of the interview:

Your main purpose (agenda) for the interview:

Prioritize three specific points you want to make:

1.

2.

3.

Humanizing example/anecdote/story that illustrates your agenda:
ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

• **Speak Our Minds** - [http://www.speakourminds.org](http://www.speakourminds.org)
  Talking points, fact sheets, and a guide to mental health experts and speakers

• **Each Mind Matters** - [http://www.eachmindmatters.org](http://www.eachmindmatters.org)
  Information and resources for California’s mental health movement

  Comprehensive toolkit (PDF) for people and organizations engaged in suicide prevention from the Know the Signs campaign

• **Mental Health Reporting Style Guide, Toolkit and Other Media Resources** - [http://www.eiconline.org/teamup](http://www.eiconline.org/teamup)
  Resources for journalists, media professionals and anyone who wants to communicate accurately and effectively about mental health from the Entertainment Industries Council’s TEAM Up project

  Statistics from the California Health Care Almanac

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**TEAM Up (Tools for Entertainment and Media)**
The TEAM Up project provides resources and assistance to help journalists and the entertainment industry create accurate stories on mental health issues.

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