



MENTAL HEALTH: WHAT JOURNALISTS SHOULD KNOW

A PRACTICAL GUIDE FOR
INFORMED REPORTING

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Mental Health: What Journalists Should Know

A practical guide for informed reporting

Every day, journalists tell stories about people living, working and contributing to their communities while managing mental health challenges. Mental health conditions affect individuals across all backgrounds and professions. While many people live full and meaningful lives, mental illness can make day-to-day activities more difficult.

Because media coverage plays a powerful role in shaping public understanding, it is essential to approach reporting on mental health with accuracy, care and empathy. This guide offers tips to support responsible, respectful coverage.

Before You Report: Questions to Ask Yourself

Before including mental health in a story, ask yourself:

1. Is mental illness relevant to this story?
2. Does including this information add necessary context or understanding?
3. What is your source for facts?

Mental health details should not be included for dramatic effect or speculation. If the information is not essential, consider omitting it. Also, when expert insight is needed, seek out mental health professionals, researchers or organizations with demonstrated expertise.

Language Matters

When reporting on mental health, it is important to choose your words carefully. The words used shape how audiences perceive the people and communities you are reporting on. Use language that is accurate, respectful and stigma-free.

Best Practices for Mental Health Language

- **Put the person first.** Focus on the person, not the condition. Mental health is one part of a person's life, not their defining characteristic.
- **Be specific.** Avoid vague terms when describing conditions.
- **Avoid derogatory or sensational language.**
- **Do not generalize.** Mental health conditions affect people differently.



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- **Be mindful of details.** Avoid unnecessary descriptions that may invade privacy or cause harm.
- **Include content warnings.** Be mindful of topics that may be triggering.
- **Avoid oversimplifying causes of mental health conditions.**

Reporting on Suicide

Coverage of suicide requires heightened sensitivity. Include information about help and support whenever possible. Language choices can either reduce or reinforce stigma and risk. Suicide and crisis resources can be found at [988lifeline.org](https://www.988lifeline.org).

Terms to Avoid and What to Use Instead

- **Avoid:** "Failed suicide" or "unsuccessful attempt"
Use: "Suicide attempt" or "attempted suicide"
- **Avoid:** "Successful suicide" or "completed suicide"
Use: "Died by suicide" or "suicide death"
- **Avoid:** "Committed suicide"
Use: "Lost their life to suicide" or "died by suicide"
- **Avoid:** "Chose to kill themselves"
Use: "Died as the result of a self-inflicted injury"
- **Avoid:** "Threatened suicide"
Use: "Disclosed thoughts of suicide"

How to Interview Someone About Mental Health

When interviewing people about their mental health experiences, preparation and empathy are essential.

Interviewing Tips

- Clearly identify yourself and your role.
- Explain how the interview will be used and where it will appear.
- Respect a person's right to decline the interview.
- Offer breaks and allow people time to respond.
- Avoid assumptions or diagnoses.



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- Be extra sensitive when interviewing children.
- Maintain a respectful and calm tone.
- Be culturally aware and sensitive.
- Recognize when it's time to end the interview.
- Take care of yourself when covering emotionally difficult stories.

Why Responsible Reporting Matters

Accurate reporting helps reduce stigma and improve public understanding. Consider these facts when providing context:

- One in five adults in the U.S. have a diagnosed mental health disorder.
- One in 20 adults live with a serious mental illness.
- One in six adults have a substance use disorder.
- Half of all chronic mental illness begins by age 14.
- Suicide is the 11th leading cause of death overall in the U.S.
- Suicide is the 2nd leading cause of death among people ages 10-34.
- Suicide is a more common death than homicide.
- 46% of people who die by suicide have a diagnosed mental health condition.
- 90% of people who die by suicide have experienced symptoms of a mental health disorder.
- Most people with mental illnesses are no more likely to be violent than those without a mental health disorder.
- People with mental health conditions are more likely to be victims of violence.
- Nearly 35% of adults with mental illness also have a substance use disorder.
- About 19% of people experiencing homelessness have a serious mental illness.
- At least 8.4 million Americans provide care to an adult with a mental or emotional health condition.
- About 12% of emergency department visits made by adults in the U.S. each year are related to mental health.

At its core, responsible mental health reporting starts with empathy. Take time to understand the conditions you are covering, use reliable data and amplify the voices of people with lived experiences whenever possible. Thoughtful reporting can educate audiences, reduce stigma and encourage people to seek help.



Sources

[American Psychiatric Association](#)

[NAMI](#)

[Mental Health America](#)

[National Press Foundation](#)

[Mind](#)

[TEAM Up](#)