

Supporting spokespeople with a mental illness

Information and advice on talking to the media

The media often want to include comments from someone with first-hand experience in a story, to put a personal face on the issue, and give their audience someone to relate to. This is especially valuable for mental health stories – someone describing how they've personally dealt with mental illness is a powerful and effective way to explore the topic and to combat stigma.

If you plan to ask someone affected by mental illness to be involved in a media event, either consumer or carer, it's important to realise there is an essential duty of care to ensure that person is fully supported, and understands what is involved and the potential impact of 'going public'.

What makes a good spokesperson

- ⌚ Generally, it's best to have someone who has been living with mental illness, or caring for someone with a mental illness for some time, rather than someone recently diagnosed. There can be a range of emotions and issues in dealing with a diagnosis, and it may place them under pressure to have to share their thoughts and feelings with a wider audience while still coming to terms with it themselves. It is important that carers discuss the issue with the person they are caring for.
- ⌚ Someone who has achieved a degree of recovery is also a good interview choice. They will be more able to discuss the earlier stages with some distance between themselves and emotions.
- ⌚ If the interviewee has shared their story and experience before the interview, it can help to clarify what they are comfortable talking about or what they would prefer not to discuss. It's important they've shared it with you and at least a few other people such as family or friends – to help them prepare for questions and get used to talking about living with a mental illness.

Before the interview

- ⌚ Always ask the interviewee if they wish to be involved before discussing them with the journalist.
- ⌚ Find out what kind of questions the journalist wants to ask, before you speak to the possible interviewee.
- ⌚ Check with the journalist about anonymity options, so everyone has the same understanding, and ask the journalist if you or the interviewee can review the story before it is made public.
- ⌚ Ensure the journalist is familiar with the Australian Government's Mindframe *Guidelines for reporting mental illness and suicide*. See www.mindframe-media.info. See Factsheets *Media enquiries about mental illness* and *Media enquiries about suicide*, for more guidance on issues associated with working with media.

Preparing the interviewee

- ⌚ Make it clear there's no obligation to be involved. The aim is to raise awareness of mental illness, while never causing distress to anyone.
- ⌚ Clearly explain the purpose of the interview, the issues involved, and who else is being spoken to. Ensure there is 'informed consent', that the interviewee is well enough and understands the situation.
- ⌚ Check to see if the interviewee has shared their views on mental illness with friends, family and colleagues. Make sure they understand the potential for people they know to come across the item in the media, and discuss anonymity options (such as first name only, for example).

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- ④ Ensure the interviewee understands that by doing the interview, the quotes and information they give to the journalist may be used in the story – this can include someone’s name, age, area they live, and diagnosis. Make sure they are happy for this information to be widely known. If not, make sure the journalist knows this before the interview starts – this information could be a key part of their story, so it may be better to find someone else.
- ④ Clearly identify which media outlets will be airing or publishing the story. Let the interviewee know if it may be used in more than one publication, program, or television station, and in more than one State.
- ④ Journalists are skilled at putting people at ease, in getting them to open up. It’s good to remind the interviewee that what they say can be used in a story. The casual style may lead people to delve much deeper than may be preferred.
- ④ Ensure the interviewee understands that at any point during the interview they can say they are not comfortable talking about certain things.

What media may ask

- ④ The media are interested in how a person feels about living with mental illness, how they reacted to their diagnosis and resulting changes in their life, how it’s affecting their lives and how their friends and family reacted.
- ④ Keep in mind that many journalists may have limited understanding of mental illness, so they may ask a lot of questions about the actual experiences of living day-to-day with a mental illness.
- ④ Some journalists may want to speak to friends and family, to gain a wider understanding of how mental illness affects a person’s life.
- ④ Print and television are always seeking visual content to go with their story. They may want to photograph the interviewee or their family, or interview them on camera. Where possible, ask if you or another key person can be present at photoshoots or filming.
- ④ The media may ask personal questions about sensitive issues such as drug use, legal matters, family experience of self-harm or other delicate topics. Make sure your interviewee has told you what areas they are not comfortable discussing and that they feel confident in declining to answer those questions.
- ④ Having a member of your organisation present at the interview can provide support for the interviewee and keep the interview within appropriate guidelines.

After the interview

- ④ Follow up with the interviewee on how they felt the interview went, if they were happy with the topics discussed and their responses. It is essential to ensure they have access to support and resources if the experience was unsettling.
- ④ Let the interviewee know there are no guarantees in the media. The story may be much shorter than first planned, despite the length of the interview. Make it clear to the interviewee that if it is smaller, or not featured when planned, it’s not because of them.
- ④ Try to get a rough idea of when the story will appear. It can be hard to get an exact date, but a general timeframe helps manage expectations.
- ④ Try to get a copy of the story, for yourself and the interviewee. It gives you an idea of what the journalist was interested in and it’s good to see the final result.