

BACKGROUND INFORMATION
AND A GUIDE FOR
REPORTING ON MENTAL ILLNESS

MEDIA
GUIDE



PREFACE

“Mental illness and news often collide in stories and events involving police and the courts. Such stories are often fast developing and hit with a splash. I cut my teeth on these beats and know police, prosecutors and even victims and their families are trying quickly to surmise why something happened. Mental illness is a catch-all, convenient and quick. It's why I like the media guide. One read through it and I've already made notes about things to avoid.”

John Stucke, Reporter
The Spokesman Review
Spokane, WA

Journalists recognize the power of the words and images they use in defining and characterizing their subjects. At least since the civil rights era of the 1960s, reporting guides and practices have encouraged reporters and editors to avoid stereotypical language and ensure careful use of images when referring to ethnic and racial minorities and to people with disabilities.

The 2007 edition of the Associated Press Stylebook states, “Do not use derogatory terms... except in direct quotes, and then only when their use is an integral, essential part of the story.” The Stylebook makes similar rules regarding reporting on people with disabilities. It states, “In general, do not describe an individual as disabled or handicapped unless it is clearly pertinent to the story.” It lists a number of terms referring to people with physical or developmental disabilities that should be avoided.

Unfortunately, there is no widely used guidance for journalists when their reporting includes a person with mental illness. Yet, clear evidence exists that language commonly used in news stories (as well as other mass media) as well as a persistent negative focus on violence contributes to prejudice and discrimination for people with mental illness that leads to their social isolation, difficulties finding and retaining employment and housing and reluctance to seek treatment. The materials in this information packet include practical tips for reporting when mental illness is part of a story, background information about the relationship of mental illness and violence, and summaries of the best current studies regarding recovery and prevention. A detailed content analysis of Washington state newspaper coverage of mental illness is also available. This analysis concludes that our state's newspapers are typical of national media in their inaccurate portrayals of mental illness.

The purpose of this guide is to raise awareness among news organizations, journalists, journalism students and professors, and news story informants on how to improve reporting on mental health issues. If you write entertainment reviews or sports stories that sometimes involve people with mental illness, this guide is relevant for you too.

More information and resources for Washington state journalists is available at <http://www.mentalhealthreporting.org>

SOME BASIC (BUT NOT WIDELY KNOWN) FACTS ABOUT MENTAL HEALTH

Recovery Happens



“At the end of June I will graduate with honors as a member of Phi Beta Kappa. I made the President's and Vice-President's academic list for academic achievement. I'm really looking forward to working as a paralegal, but I have decided, with the encouragement of two advisors at school, to go on and at least get my bachelor's degree, and then maybe law school. I may be retirement age by the time I get there, but hey, you gotta have a dream.”



“I was able to go to school to become a peer counselor. Finding a job was a sign of hope for me. Before, I had nothing going for a long time. Recovery happens boy, does it ever. It might have happened sooner had I not been told when I received a diagnosis that I would have this life without improvement.”

Mental illness is widespread. About 22 percent of the U.S. adult population has one or more diagnosable mental disorders in any given year. Five to seven percent of adults have serious mental illness in any given year. The disability and economic costs of mental illness are substantial. In the U.S. and other market economies, mental illness ranks second only to heart disease in disease burden.

The vast majority of people with mental illness are not violent. Numerous studies clearly show that the vast majority of people who are violent do not suffer from mental illnesses. Violent crimes committed by people with serious mental disorders are concentrated in a small fraction of the total number, and especially in those who abuse alcohol and other drugs, and among individuals having paranoid thoughts or hearing voices that command them to hurt others (called command auditory hallucinations). However, even when these factors are taken into account, mental illness still accounts for a very small percentage, at most, 3 percent, of all violence committed in the U.S. In fact, people with serious mental illness are far more likely to be victims of violence than perpetrators.

Recovery from mental illness happens. Today's psychosocial and pharmacological treatments for serious mental illness are highly effective. With support, between 70 and 90 percent of individuals have a significant reduction of symptoms, an improved quality of life, and find a satisfying measure of achievement and independence.

Prevention works. A significant portion of mental illness is now believed to be preventable, and research continues to identify new ways to implement prevention. Research has improved knowledge about biological and environmental factors related to mental disorders, including serious mental illnesses such as schizophrenia. Evidence shows that prevention efforts can be successful with disorders that are the result of both genetic and psychosocial influences.

Stigma gets in the way. Public perceptions of people with mental illness often result in social isolation, problems finding employment and housing and failure to seek needed treatment. Many people do not admit their symptoms for fear of receiving a diagnosis of mental illness. Many who have been diagnosed feel shame when their illness is disclosed to others.

The American Psychological Association has found that only a small subgroup of people with serious mental illness is at risk of becoming violent, and with treatment and taking medication, this group is no more violent than the general population (APA fact sheet 1994).

“Sixty-one percent of Americans think that people with schizophrenia are likely dangerous to others.” -- President's New Freedom Commission on Mental Health (2003)

A GUIDE TO REPORTING ON MENTAL HEALTH

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In Alabama, a man with a history of **mental illness** killed two police officers with a rifle he bought on Christmas Eve.

Comment: Was mental illness a causal factor in the man's actions? Who is the source of this information?

With the proper medication and follow-up, it is far less likely that Testa would have behaved in such an erratic and dangerous manner. Most likely, his **schizophrenic** episodes were exacerbated by the wrong prescription, along with the incredible stress of living on the streets.

Comment: Use of schizophrenic as an adjective is inappropriate. Schizophrenia has many symptoms most of which do not result in "erratic and dangerous" behavior. Better to describe the nature of the episode (viz. his delusional episodes.)

Reporting when a story includes both violence and mental illness. News stories about violence committed by people with mental illness will continue to occur. By following a few guidelines, news organizations can more accurately report about these tragic situations.

- Ask whether mental illness is important to the story. Follow Stylebook guidance for reporting on people with disabilities. Do not assume that an illogical act of violence is the result of mental illness. Like people in the general population, people with mental illness are involved with violence when there is no connection between their illness and actions.
- When quoting a witness or first responder, avoid unsubstantiated attributions of the violence to mental illness. For example, the statement that a crime was committed by a person who has a "history of mental illness" is often made on-scene by a first responder who may not have direct knowledge of a subject's history. Even if this information is accurate, it may not be relevant to the incident. Such comments should always be attributed to a reliable source with actual knowledge about a subject's history and can speak to the relevance of this information.
- Question whether reporting someone's history of mental illness is relevant to the news story. Mental illness is not a defining characteristic of a person. Mental illness in the past may not have relevance to behavior in the present.
- Avoid descriptions of an individual's behavior that would contribute to the impression that all persons with that illness exhibit similar behavior. For example, terms such as "schizophrenic rage" create the impression that rages are common behaviors for people experiencing schizophrenia. Make a mental health expert a part of the story. Privacy laws make it difficult for mental health professionals to comment on news stories in which they are directly involved. A mental health expert can, however, provide perspective on the story even if they are not directly involved.
- Make a mental health expert a part of the story. Privacy laws make it difficult for mental health professionals to comment on news stories in which they are directly involved. A mental health expert can, however, provide perspective on the story even if they are not directly involved.
- Recognize that people with mental illness who commit violent acts are not typical of others with the same or similar diagnoses. When possible, emphasize the statistical fact that mental illness contributes very little to the overall rate of violence in the general population.
- Try to convey that mental illness is treatable and recovery happens.
- Remember that for every story written about mental illness and violence there are many more that can be written about a person with a mental disorder in recovery who serves a valuable role in society. There are many people who have lived through an experience of serious mental illness who have a compelling personal story about recovery. Write human interest stories when possible. When the readers or viewers see only stories about violence and mental illness, they get a distorted view of the facts.

Police opened fire hoses, sprayed pepper spray and fired bean bag projectiles in an attempt to subdue the **schizophrenic** man. The leisurely way police handled the encounter, which shut down traffic through city thoroughfares from late morning rush hour through the evening TV newscast, angered some residents who would have preferred a quicker resolution.

Comment: An adjective or two describing the man's actual behavior would work here. Schizophrenia has many symptoms that may or may not have been influencing the man's behavior. Use of the word schizophrenic is inappropriate here.

In returning the guilty verdict, a federal court jury rejected Duran's insanity defense. He had claimed he was shooting at an evil "mist" hovering over the White House, but psychiatric experts disagreed about whether he was deranged.

Comment: The word "deranged" conveys a stereotypical image about mental illness that is generally inaccurate.

Eliminating Stigmatizing Language and Portrayals.

- Use and encourage editors, headline writers and others to use **People First Language**. Follow the guidance from the AP Stylebook for reporting on people with disabilities. Use phrases like "a person with schizophrenia" rather than describing someone as "schizophrenic." Maintain the individuality of people rather than defining them by a condition. **People First Language** emphasizes worth and abilities and puts the person before the diagnosis or the label.
- As with disparaging words related to race and ethnicity, some words should never be used in reporting, commentary or headlines. Examples include:

crazy/crazed	nuts	lunatic
deranged	psycho	wacko
- Negative stereotypes to describe people experiencing mental disorders should be avoided. They sensationalize news stories and contribute to stigma and discrimination towards mental illness in society. Common stereotypes about mental illness pertain to dangerousness, incompetence and the portrayal of people with mental illnesses as anti-social.
- Phrases such as **afflicted with, crippled with, suffers from, victim of, stricken with** pass negative judgment on the quality of life for people with mental illnesses. "**John is afflicted with depression**" sounds more dramatic and can act to sensationalize mental illness. Instead, use **People First Language**. For example: "**John, who has depression ...**"
- Pictures are powerful. Be sensitive when using photographs with stories involving mental illness. For example, photographs that unnecessarily show people with mental illness looking disheveled or ominous perpetuate negative stereotypes.

Other tips for improving accuracy when reporting on mental illness

- **Symptoms.** Double-check specific symptoms and diagnoses. Be especially careful to avoid attributing behaviors to mental illnesses that are common to many people. Sadness, anger and exuberance are normal human emotions. Most of us experience periods when we want to be alone and don't want to socialize. People who experience mental illness have normal emotions that should not be misinterpreted. For a description of common symptoms of mental illness see. <http://www.mentalhealthreporting.org>.
- **Cause.** Avoid descriptions of mental illness as having a single cause. Most mental illnesses have multiple causes. For example, mental illnesses that are believed to have a genetic or biologic links (such as schizophrenia or bipolar disorder) often develop within the context of disadvantaged socioeconomic conditions, trauma or drug use. Belief that illness arises from a single cause has been shown to contribute to prejudice and discrimination for both individuals and their families.

Prevention Works



"I was running in the streets a lot, I didn't have a job, any direction and I was angry. Then I made a connection at a Youth N' Action retreat talking with others who faced challenges like me about positive things. I realized things can change and there are people who care. That's what helped change me. The more my mind was focused on doing good, the less I was focused on the problems I had and the less I was involved in the street. That's how I created resiliency in my life."

• **Recovery & Prevention.** Mental illness is treatable, recovery happens and prevention works. Care should be exercised to avoid creating the impression that mental illness results in hopeless prospects for individuals experiencing symptoms. News stories about the latest scientific advances featuring examples of people who are in recovery tell an important fact about mental illness that can help offset the tragic, but atypical, instances where a person with mental illness commits a violent act.

Sidebar: A Word about the word "schizophrenic"

The word "schizophrenia" and derivatives are very commonly misused in everyday language and news reports. A person who cannot make up his mind is called "schizoid." Changeable weather is "schizophrenic." Someone who is very worried about her safety has "schizophrenic" thoughts. Not only is such usage hurtful to people with schizophrenia, it is inaccurate.

Schizophrenia is a serious mental disorder. Three types of schizophrenia exist, each with somewhat different symptoms. Symptoms can include hallucinations, delusions, confused thinking and speech, behaviors that do not make sense, altered senses to everyday sights, sounds and language, and misunderstanding feelings such as joy or anger. Others include emotional flatness, lack of expression, and a temporary inability to start and follow through with daily activities (American Psychological Association).

Instead of using schizophrenia (or its derivatives) to describe something other than the illness, find other words. A person who can't make up his mind is indecisive. A situation that keeps changing is unsettled.

Tips for interviewing a person experiencing a mental illness

- **Setting-Up an Interview.** When setting up an interview with a person with a mental illness, always ask the interviewee whether special accommodations are needed, including:
 - Meeting at a specific place or time that is convenient to him or her
 - Being accompanied by another person during the interview
- Be frank and direct about the purpose of the interview. To help the interviewee feel prepared and comfortable, send some of the questions you plan on asking ahead of time.
- Allow ample time for the interview. A person's experiences might be painful and he or she may need extra time to discuss difficult subject matter.

Stigma Gets in the Way



“Mental illness is not accepted in society yet. It makes it hard to find work and a place to live. I can't go around talking about my experiences with mental illness to just anybody. So I have learned my place. I go to support groups and talk with my friends who have a mental illness and we share our hopes and strengths. And when I'm not around them, I keep my mouth shut and hope for the best.”

• **During the Interview.** If you do not know something, ask. People with mental illness appreciate that you are taking the time to become informed and will answer your questions.

• **Actively listen.** While it is important to contribute to the conversation and establish rapport, take care not to make assumptions. Also, be sure to give the interviewee time to answer and be sensitive to the fact that some interviewees may need additional time to answer, especially if questions are deeply personal.

Tips for reporting on suicide

Copycat/ Suicide Contagion is real. Research shows that the incidence of suicide increases following news coverage of suicide. The following guidelines are suggested to minimize copycat attempts:

- Refrain from using photographs of grieving relatives and friends when a suicide has occurred. Photographs might encourage someone contemplating suicide to act as a way to get attention or get back at someone, creating a dangerous copycat effect. Youth are especially vulnerable to these effects.
- Do not report the method or place of suicide in detail. Exposure to suicide methods, including photographs, can encourage imitation among vulnerable individuals.
- Do not portray suicide as a heroic or romantic result of a single event or cause. This obscures the long and painful process that results in completing suicide. Over 90 percent of suicide victims have a significant psychiatric illness at the time of their death.
- Always include information about crisis intervention services in the area and a referral phone number.
- Do not use suicide in headlines, even when they take place in public. This unnecessarily dramatizes the event and shifts the focus from the tragic loss of life. There are exceptions, as in the term “suicide bomber” when reporting on terrorist activities.

CHECKLIST FOR REPORTING ON MENTAL ILLNESS



- ✓ **Write with awareness that people with mental illness face prejudice and discrimination..**
- ✓ **Ask, “Is mental illness relevant to the story?”**
- ✓ **Verify statements that mental illness is a factor in a violent crime. A past history of mental illness is not necessarily a reliable indicator.**
- ✓ **Avoid using language that implies people with mental illness are violent.**
- ✓ **In stories on mental illness and violence, provide context whenever possible. Most people with mental illness are no more likely to commit violent crimes than a person who has not been diagnosed with mental illness.**
- ✓ **Use People First Language.**
- ✓ **Avoid using stereotypical words or phrases in describing people with mental illness.**
- ✓ **Be sensitive when using photographs for stories involving mental health issues.**
- ✓ **Double-check specific symptoms of diagnoses with valid mental health resources, as necessary.**
- ✓ **When possible, emphasize that treatment is available and effective, recovery happens and prevention works.**
- ✓ **When interviewing a person with a mental illness, be clear and repeat important information and give the interviewee ample time to answer the questions posed.**

www.mentalhealthreporting.org

... use *People First*
Language in news
stories.

Editors/Assignment Editors:

If there is a major story involving someone with a mental illness committing a violent act, or having something violent happen to them, try to balance with a story containing information about recovery. This does not have to be a sidebar, nor does it have to appear the same day or on the same page, but a broad balance in the publication is helpful.

Around holidays, when media often speak about loneliness and depression, balance things with a recovery story.

If there is coverage of a "system failure," provide balance on the issue sometime during the following week with a "system success." There are many good stories to tell about how treatment and prevention works.

During legislative budget times, seek out stories about the money working well. Too often when cuts are proposed, stories often describe a pitiable situation for individuals receiving services. There is another way to tell the story that is less likely to present the story's subject as helpless and dependent. Reporting how funding helped a person recover can make the same point when funding is in jeopardy.

Put policies in place that will help support journalists to accurately report on mental health issues and avoid stigmatizing portrayals. For example, adopt a policy that journalists use People First Language in news stories.

Sidebar: Stereotypical images can show up in any section of the newspaper, sports and entertainment sections included. Here's an example:

**Lighting the dark corners of schizophrenia
Movie Review**

Few movies probe as deeply into the souls of the mentally damaged as Lodge Kerrigan's heartbreaking new thriller, "Keane." Fewer still start right off by emphasizing the more troubling aspects of derangement. Kerrigan all but dares you to keep watching his central character during the early scenes.

William Keane is introduced as a schizophrenic, the kind of out-of-control creature you'd instinctively avoid on the street.

Comment: Here is the lead from another review of the same movie that avoids negative stereotypes:

Keane is the story of a man in his mid-thirties who is haunted by memories of his daughter being abducted in New York City's Port Authority bus terminal. He also struggles with mental illness that, like much of the film, is never explained to the viewer. The audience is plunged into Keane's world without the knowledge of whether his daughter was really abducted or even existed at all.

... changes do not
have to be drastic to
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mental illness.

Copy Editors:

You can right the mistakes of a wire service! Editorial changes do not have to be drastic to make a significant difference in how the article portrays mental illness.

Be particularly aware of entertainment reporting. A movie or play can often be described quite well **without** using stereotypical language and images.

Watch headline placement and wording. Remember, this is what people see at a glance on the newsstand or porch. Placing inaccurate mention of a mental illness in a headline could perpetuate stereotypic ties between mental illness and character traits such as dangerousness.

Substitute with **People First Language** and edit for stereotypic portrayals of mental illness.

Reporters:

Watch for Pitfalls in the Field:

Who is telling you there is a “history of mental illness?” If it is a police officer or a public information officer, ask the follow-up – “Who is reporting this?” Or – “How do you know?” “Who is the expert in the field that confirmed this statement?”

If a family member or neighbor is saying the person is mentally ill, try to get more information before including their statement in your story. Sometimes neighborhood rumors get stated as fact or the speaker may have other agendas. Each time mental illness is suggested as a cause of violence or criminal behavior, whether true or not, it contributes to the public’s view that people with mental illness are dangerous.

Photographers & Photo Editors:

Take care with captions. It is rare that a mental illness should be mentioned in a caption unless it is the most relevant aspect of the story it represents. Be aware that readers may take the caption as the whole story and be misled.

Placement makes a difference. An image depicting violence placed next to a headline or story containing references to mental illness leads the reader to make assumptions about or unknowingly link violence and mental illness. Take care when physically placing stories, headlines and photos and how they might relate to one another.

As always, be sensitive to your subject, particularly with those people diagnosed with a mental illness. Too often faces are grim or contorted. Readers need to see positive images of those with mental illnesses, just as we see positive images of those with physical disabilities.



**Recovery
happens.**

Be part of the change.

The authors who worked on this report would like to thank the many people whose commitment of time and energy made this report possible. This includes members of the News Media and an Editorial Board comprised of individual consumers of mental health services, social services and mental health providers across the state.

Notice: The guide was produced in collaboration between The University of Washington (Assistant Professor, Jennifer Stuber and Communications Graduate Student, Peg Achterman) and Harris and Smith Public Affairs.

Funding for this document was made possible by the Mental Health Transformation Incentive Grant Award No. 6 U79 SM57648 from the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA). The views expressed in this document do not necessarily reflect the official policies of the Department of Health and Human Services; nor does mention of trade names, commercial practices or organizations imply endorsement by the U.S. Government.