

Information and advice on talking to the media

**The media play an important role in influencing perceptions of, and social attitudes towards, mental illness. The mental health sector can work with the media to raise awareness of the realities of mental illness, advising people where to seek help, and improving understanding about the importance of using accurate and respectful language – to educate rather than alienate the community.**

You may be contacted by the media seeking assistance in developing a story about mental illness. Journalists may request background information or statistics about mental illness, or want to interview a mental health expert or individual with a mental illness. Local and regional media, especially, need to give stories a strong local perspective, and this may be an additional reason for contacting you.

## Things to consider if contacted by the media

- ⌚ Consider whether or not to participate in the story. Does it provide an opportunity to contribute to community understanding about mental health issues, and about your organisation's services?
- ⌚ Is your organisation the most appropriate to respond to the enquiry? Another may be more appropriate.
- ⌚ Who is the most appropriate spokesperson? Someone with first-hand experience of mental illness can put a personal face on an issue and give the audience something to relate to. If providing a spokesperson with first-hand experience of mental illness, see Factsheet *Supporting spokespeople with a mental illness*.
- ⌚ Before agreeing to an interview, see *Factsheet Media interviews*.
- ⌚ Review your organisation's media policy, see *Factsheet Media policy*).

## Choose your words carefully

- ⌚ Consider the impact of using medical terminology: the general public may have a different understanding of 'psychotic', inaccurately confusing the term with 'psychopathic', for example. You could instead refer to someone 'having an episode of psychosis'.
- ⌚ Ensure that medical terminology is not used out of context – for example, 'schizophrenic financial market'.
- ⌚ Don't define people by their mental illness. Rather than stating someone is 'a schizophrenic', say that the person 'has schizophrenia', is 'affected by mental illness' or 'lives with schizophrenia'.
- ⌚ If referring to symptoms, describe the behaviour, not the person: that people experience 'unusual', 'agitated', 'disoriented' or 'confused' behaviour, rather than stating that the person is 'agitated' or 'confused'.
- ⌚ Avoid terms such as 'sufferer' and 'afflicted'. This can create a passive, 'victim' perception of people with mental illness. Use 'person with mental illness' or say he or she 'has mental health problems', for example. Also avoid using terms with negative associations such as 'deranged' or 'mental patient'.
- ⌚ Be careful not to imply that all mental illnesses are the same. The term 'mental illness' covers a wide range of symptoms, conditions, and effects on people's lives.
- ⌚ Ensure any references made to mental illness are accurate and in context.
- ⌚ Familiarise yourself with the Australian Government's Mindframe *Guidelines for reporting mental illness and suicide*. See [www.mindframe-media.info](http://www.mindframe-media.info).

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## Giving advice to journalists

- ① Encourage journalists to include helplines and information about support services. For example, the SANE Helpline is a national Freecall service providing information, advice and referral on mental illness and related issues: 1800 18 SANE (7263) or online at [www.sane.org](http://www.sane.org).
- ① If providing a spokesperson who has experienced mental illness review Media Factsheet: *Interviewing people affected by mental illness*.
- ① Ensure journalists are familiar with the Australian Government's *Mindframe Guidelines for reporting mental illness and suicide*. See [www.mindframe-media.info](http://www.mindframe-media.info).
- ① Provide the journalist with SANE Media Factsheet: *Summary of Mindframe guidelines for reporting of mental illness*.

## Correcting misleading stories

- ① Contact the journalist immediately and raise the issue politely but directly.
- ① Refer journalists to specific studies and research to support your point and help them understand the topic. Direct them to the Mindframe resources at [www.mindframe-media.info](http://www.mindframe-media.info).
- ① Incidents of violence may be incorrectly linked to mental illness, or generalised to suggest all people with mental illness are violent. It's important to use contextual comments in this situation: remind journalists of the importance of highlighting the range of contributing factors, such as whether drugs or alcohol were involved, or whether the person was receiving treatment.
- ① If appropriate, ask the journalist if they would like you to review the article prior to publication to ensure it is factually correct.
- ① Consider writing a letter of complaint to the journalist. **Sample complaint letters** are available from the StigmaWatch pages of the SANE website.
- ① Lodge a report with **StigmaWatch**, SANE's program which monitors media to encourage responsible and accurate reporting of mental illness and suicide.