

Media Considerations for Covering Mental Health and Substance Abuse Topics

Some General Considerations:

The media's role in accurately portraying individuals with a mental illness and substance abuse disorders is vital. Unfortunately, there have been incidents in the past of references to someone with a mental illness in derogatory terms such as "crazy," "sicko," "weirdo" or "psycho". Terms like these and other incorrect references perpetuate stigma in two ways – by increasing the reluctance of individuals to ask for help for their mental illness and by perpetuating the public's ignorance, fear and rejection of those with a mental illness.

- Report and describe mental illnesses as you would any other treatable condition, analogous with your reporting on any physical illness.
- Avoid labeling or describing individuals by their diagnosis. Since these conditions are illnesses, it is important to describe someone with a mental disorder as a person with an illness, i.e., "a person with schizophrenia", as opposed to "a schizophrenic" or "being schizo".
- Do not portray individuals with mental illness as people to be feared or avoided. The fact is that a far greater number of individuals with a mental illness are victims of crime, not perpetrators.
- There are many individuals with mental illnesses who lead active, productive lives. Treatment is effective when it is accessible and reduces the number of persons with mental illnesses who may act out or have unpredictable behaviors.
- Include local and Internet resources whenever possible. There are more treatments, strategies, and community supports than ever before and with ongoing research and study, more are being developed. However, because of the stigma attached to mental illness and substance abuse disorders, many individuals are not aware of resources and do not seek treatment.
- Do not assume that if someone has a mental illness that they are not able to understand or have a low intelligence level. Many persons with mental illnesses are intelligent, capable and often very creative individuals.
- Use of references in advertising and promotions such as "being out of your mind" or "having to be locked up for offering such crazy deals" tend to be stigmatizing, portraying mental illness in a distorted way.

Deaths by suicide

The media can highlight opportunities to prevent suicide. Media stories about individual deaths by suicide may be newsworthy and need to be covered, but they also have the potential to do harm. Research shows that taking the following into consideration when reporting a suicide incident actually decreases suicide rates.

- The cause of an individual's suicide is invariably more complicated than a recent painful event such as a break-up of a relationship or the loss of a job. An individual's suicide cannot be adequately explained as the understandable response to an individual's stressful occupation or an individual's membership in a group encountering discrimination. Social conditions alone do not explain a suicide. People who appear to become suicidal in response to such an event or a physical illness often have significant underlying mental health problems, though they may be well hidden and unidentified.
- Inadvertently romanticizing suicide or idealizing those who take their own lives by portraying suicide as a heroic or romantic act may encourage others to identify with the victim.
- Exposure to suicide methods through media reports can encourage vulnerable individuals to imitate the method, and some believe the danger is even greater if there is a detailed description of the method.
- Presenting suicide as the inexplicable act of an otherwise healthy or high-achieving person may encourage identification with the victim.
- Reporters strongly are encouraged to question if a victim ever received treatment for depression or any other mental or substance abuse disorder. Conveying that effective treatments for most of these disorders are available (but under-utilized) may encourage those with such conditions to seek help. Acknowledging the deceased person's problems and struggles as well as the positive aspects of his/her life or character contributes to a more balanced picture.
- Referring to a "rise" in suicide rates is usually more accurate than calling such an increase an "epidemic," which implies a more dramatic and sudden increase than what is generally found in examining suicide rates.
- Use of the word "suicide" in headlines or referring to the cause of death as "self-inflicted" increases the likelihood of contagion. In the body of the story, it is preferable to describe the deceased as "having died by suicide," rather than as "a suicide" or as having "committed suicide." The latter two expressions reduce the person to the mode of death and even may connote criminal or sinful behavior. Contrasting "suicide deaths" with "non-fatal attempts" is preferable to using terms such as "successful," "unsuccessful," or "failed."

For more detailed recommendations, see www.afsp.org/education/recommendations/5/1.htm

Some Helpful Facts

- Mental illness will affect at least one in five Americans in a given year, regardless of age, gender, race, ethnicity, religion, or economic status. This makes mental illness the most prevalent health problem in America today -- more common than cancer, lung, and heart diseases combined.
- The number of individuals treated for depression quadrupled from 1987 to 1997, according to *The Journal of the American Medical Association*. Despite this increase, two-thirds of people with depression still receive no treatment.
- Depression is a medical condition that can be very successfully treated in more than 85% of cases.
- Depression and anxiety commonly are found along with other medical illnesses.
- Across all use groups, unmanaged stress can cause physical illnesses.
- 40% of people diagnosed with alcohol dependency and substance abuse display signs of mental disorders prior to initiating drug use.
- In the workforce, depression annually costs an employer \$18,000 for every 100 employees.
- Suicide is this country's 11th leading cause of death, and more than 30,000 people in the U.S. kill themselves every year. Suicide is the third leading cause of death among those 15-24 years old.
- 90% of all people who die by suicide have a diagnosable mental disorder at the time of their death.