

Recommended Media Reporting Guidelines on Mental Illness

Department of Health and Wellness

One in five Canadians will experience mental illness in any given year. Reporting in a way that educates and informs will help ensure that these individuals are treated with respect, while also helping to reduce the stigma associated with mental illness.

This resource for journalists and editors was compiled from the following publications: Mindset: Reporting on Mental Health published by The Canadian Journalism Forum on Violence and Trauma (2014); Preventing Suicide: A Resource for Media Professionals published by the Department of Mental Health and Substance Use, World Health Organization (2008); and the Media Guidelines for Reporting Suicide published by the Canadian Psychiatric Association (2009).

Best Practice in Reporting on Mental Illness

- Take care not to reinforce stereotypes, such as in headlines like “Psychotic Man Kills Wife”
- Avoid implying that all people living with mental illness are violent; most are never violent; put the particular case in context and consider links to broader social issues
- Avoid labeling, such as referring to people living with schizophrenia as “schizophrenics”
- Be careful with and specific about diagnoses
- Include voices of those affected and perspectives from professionals
- Avoid using stigmatization words such as crazy, insane, and mental when describing situations and people

Reporting on Suicide

- Respect the privacy and grief of family members and friends
- Avoid detailed descriptions, repetition of sensitive information and prominent placement of the story
- Include information about where to seek help—Call the province-wide 24/7 crisis line
- Avoid jumping to conclusions; the reasons people take their own lives are usually complex
- Use direct language—say the person “died by suicide,” “took his own life,” or “killed herself”—don’t say the person “committed suicide”
- Avoid details about methods used and location

Describing a Person Declared “Not Criminally Responsible”

- Be clear that the person is not a criminal
- Focus your story on rehabilitation
- Be cautious about relaying characterizations of the person made outside of the court room—“The individual was behaving irrationally ...”

Interviewing People Living with Mental Illness

- Talk to people living with mental illness and include what they say in your stories; at the same time be aware of cultural differences and sensitivities
- Show empathy and ask open-ended questions; be careful not to push too hard, which can re-traumatize the person, such as asking them to recall the situation
- Make sure that the person understands the implications of being interviewed and gives informed consent
- Avoid interviewing people when they are acutely ill, such as when experiencing psychosis
- Take care when using videos and photos in the story

Resources for Mental Illness

If you or someone you know is experiencing a mental illness crisis:

- Call the 24/7 province-wide crisis line 1-888-429-8167 or locally in Halifax 902-429-8167. These numbers connect you to the Mental Health Mobile Crisis Team, which provides assessment, intervention and short-term crisis management for children, youth and adults. Support is confidential, non-judgmental and respectful.
- Go to the nearest hospital emergency room
- Call 911

For immediate mental health services during regular hours:

- Contact your local community-based Mental Health Clinic
- Contact the crisis line anywhere in Nova Scotia during regular hours, after hours, or on weekends and holidays (see phone numbers above)
- Contact your physician

For information on mental health services:

- Call 811 or visit <https://www.811.novascotia.ca>
- Call 211 or visit www.ns.211.ca
- Call The Youth Project (for LGBTQI related issues) 902-429-5429 or visit www.youthproject.ns.ca
- Call the Kid's Help Phone 1-800-668-6868 or visit org.kidshelpphone.ca or teenmentalhealth.org
- Call the Take 5 Gambling Support Network 1-888-347-8888 or visit <https://gamblingsupportnetwork.ca/>
- Visit the Nova Scotia Department of Health and Wellness website www.novascotia.ca/mentalhealth
- Visit the Nova Scotia Health Authority Mental Health website <http://www.cdha.nshealth.ca/mental-health-and-addictions>
- Visit the IWK Health Science Centre website <http://www.iwk.nshealth.ca/mental-health>
- Gain help with self assessment by visiting the Our Healthy Minds website <http://ourhealthyminds.com/HelpSupport/SelfAssessments.aspx>
- Call the Healthy Minds Cooperative 902-404-3504 or visit www.healthyminds.ca
- Call the Canadian Mental Health Association 1-877-466-6606 or visit www.novascotia.cmha.ca
- Call the Mental Health Foundation of Nova Scotia 902-464-6000 or visit <http://www.mentalhealthns.ca/about-mental-illness/>
- Call the Schizophrenia Society of Nova Scotia 1-800-465-2601 or visit www.ssns.ca

If media have questions about the provision of mental health services in Nova Scotia, contact the Communications Offices for the following organizations:

Nova Scotia Health Authority Media 1-844-483-3344

DHW Media 902-424-5886

IWK Media 902-470-6740