

Guidance for journalists

The media's engagement with people with lived experience of mental ill-health, distress or trauma

This guidance was produced as part of NSUN's 'Not Just a Story' research project. **You can find the full report here on our website.**



**National Survivor
User Network**



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These recommendations are for journalists and/or representatives of media bodies to take into consideration when approaching individuals with lived experience of mental ill-health, distress or trauma for comment, contribution or interview. It is important to communicate the full details of what involvement entails as soon as possible, so that an informed decision about taking part can be made, and contributors can ask questions and clarify uncertainties.

Implications of engaging with the media

-  Journalists should initiate a conversation about the possible consequences of taking part in media engagement, now or in the future. Participants should be offered full anonymity, or for their contributions to be attributed to a pseudonym. If recording for e.g. TV, other anonymising options can be offered, such as the use of a voiceover.
-  Identifying information such as someone's name, location or place of work should never be published without consent, and consideration should be given to whether sharing identifying information is necessary in any instance.
-  Journalists and media representatives should also consider sharing information about the nature of the media that may be unfamiliar to participants. For example, we heard that former media contributors were surprised by the way in which unfamiliar media outlets were able to cross-purpose published articles on different sites, with unmoderated comments. While this cannot always be avoided, we recommend communicating the likelihood of such events.

-  It is important to make it clear to contributors whether they can withdraw their contribution before publication/have their contribution removed after publication and if so, the process for doing so. If this isn't possible at all/by a particular date, this should be specified, along with the details of an alternative contact at the media outlet to ensure long-term contact can be maintained.

Payment

-  Participants should be paid fairly for their time, and expenses should be covered. We encourage journalists to start conversations in their places of work about budgets for contributors, referring to the **National Institute for Health and Care Research guidelines** to give an example of the rate of payment expected for lived experience work (while the rates relate to research environments, they can be used as a benchmark).
-  Information and signposting should be given to participants on the implications of receiving payment on tax and benefits.

Respect and sensitivity

-  Treat contributors as an individual rather than a story, not focussing explicitly on the most personal elements of a person's experiences while ignoring the wider picture, and maintaining an awareness of how uncomfortable it can feel to be asked probing questions about traumatic events.
-  Allow participants' contributions to shape the angle and content of a piece, rather than endorse an existing narrative. If you can't do this, explain the existing narrative clearly so that participants can give informed consent.

-  Use the language that participants themselves use to describe their experiences of mental ill-health, distress or trauma in relevant contextualising information outside of direct quotations – for example, respecting if someone prefers the use of non-medicalised language to describe themselves. Speak to participants in a private environment wherever possible, or inform the person you are speaking to if you are making a call from a location where there is the possibility they will be overheard by others.
-  Journalists could consider sharing if their motivation to write the piece is connected to their own lived experiences, if they feel comfortable doing so, in order to help establish trust and mutual understanding. However, it is important to be aware that there is still a power dynamic at play, and that perspectives may differ from their own.

Support and flexibility

-  Journalists should initiate contact by asking participants if they have any access or support requirements they would like to share via an access document or otherwise. Journalists and media outlets could consider creating a template access document for completion by participants, and proactively offering ideas for adjustments and flexibility.
-  During an interview, participants should be allowed to take breaks whenever they would like, bring a trusted person with them for support, or reword an answer/decline to answer any question. The ability to do these things should be communicated to the participant at the earliest opportunity.
-  If possible, alternative modes of contribution should be offered and arranged at request, e.g. by allowing a participant to record their own video, provide written answers to questions via email, or receive their interview questions in advance and prepare their answers.

-  Participants should be provided with a detailed schedule of events when in-person contribution is required, including a breakdown of the day and information on private spaces which can be accessed and used.
-  Journalists and media outlets should consider facilitating access to media training for people with lived experience who are acting as spokespeople.
-  Journalists should give consideration to the emotional impact that contribution may have on participants. If therapeutic support is available, this should be given to participants (and/or signposting to a wide range of external sources of support), and journalists should check in with participants at a scheduled date after publication has taken place.

Control and agency

-  Journalists should clarify what is and is not on the record from the outset, and at various points throughout the process.
-  Journalists should offer participants the chance to establish what topics they do and do not want to talk about before engaging.
-  When approaching participants, journalists should communicate which (if any) other contributors they are approaching for simultaneous comment, especially if their contributions are going to be presented as oppositional.

-  Participants should be given the opportunity to review the final draft and make changes. As detailed above, it is also important to make it clear to contributors if and how they can withdraw their contribution at any stage of the process, including after publication. If relevant, it is also worth communicating to contributors the hierarchy of decision making within the media outlet e.g. if there is a senior member of staff who may be able to make final adjustments to the publication without oversight.

Being kept informed

-  Participants should be kept in the loop throughout the process, including being informed of where and when the piece will be published and sent link(s) once it is live, and kept updated on any developments based on the piece, particularly for investigative journalism.
-  Participants should be told if there is a chance that a piece will not actually be picked up for publication, e.g. if a freelancer is collecting contributions for a pitch.



National Survivor User Network
489 Green Lanes
London
N13 4BS

020 7820 8982
info@nsun.org.uk
www.nsun.org.uk

Registered Charitable Incorporated Organisation in England (no.1135980)

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