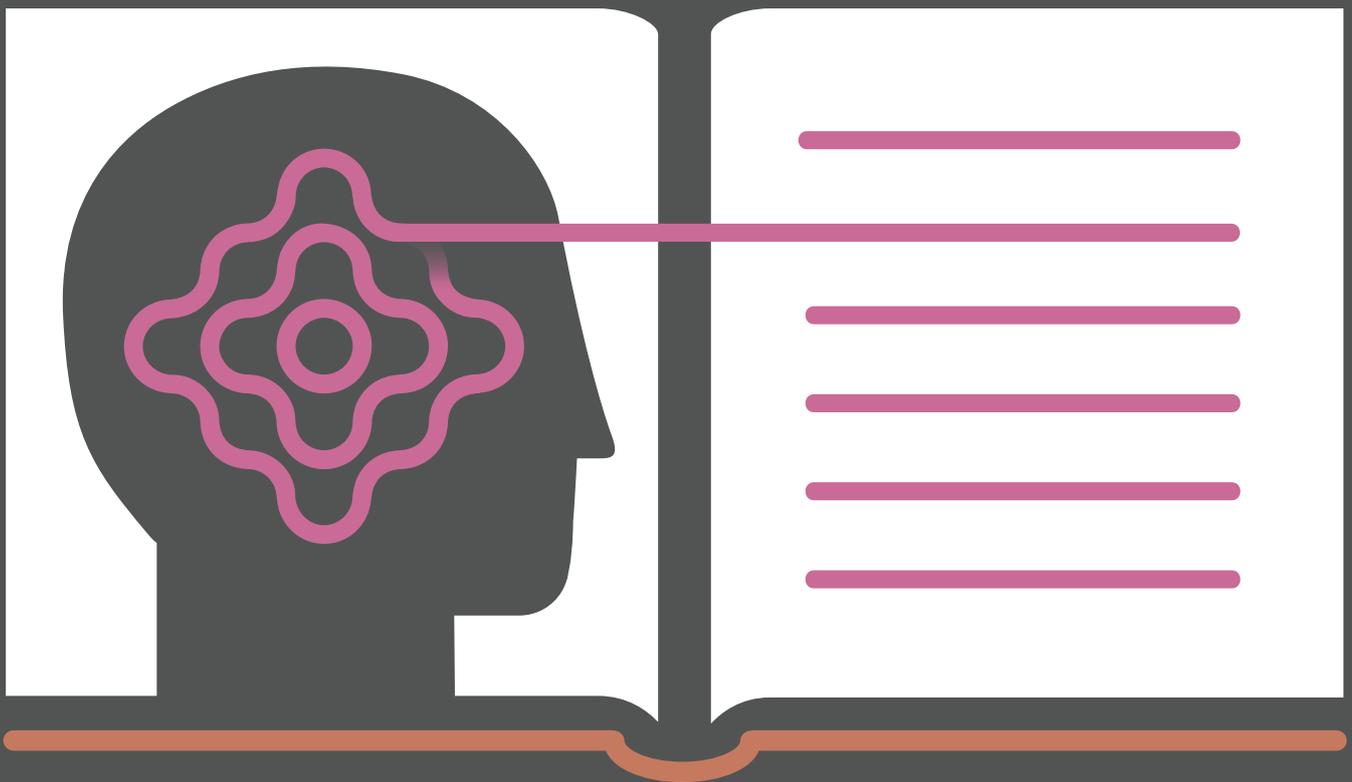


Severe Mental Health Conditions, Trauma and Media Participation

A Practice Guide for Media Professionals



HEADLINE

Supporting media, changing attitudes

COMMISSIONED BY



DEVELOPED IN 2021 BY



FUNDED BY

The National Office for Suicide Prevention under Connecting for Life: Ireland's National Strategy to Reduce Suicide



SUPPORTED BY



St Patrick's
Mental Health Services



Acknowledgements

Headline and Quality Matters wish to thank the following for their support, guidance and contribution to this process:

The research and development team: Aoife Dermody, Caroline Gardner, Isabel Aust, Emma Allen, Áine O'Meara, Elaine Haskins, Jen O'Shea and Juliana Garcia, The National Union of Journalists, The Press Council of Ireland, Shine, See Change, Mental Health Reform, St Patrick's Mental Health Services, Tamara Nolan, Patricia McKeever, Derek Pepper, Ray Burke, Shauna O'Connor, Barbara Brennan, Séamus Dooley, Michael Foley, Peter Feeney, Sinéad Keating, Denis Mockler, Rick Rossiter, Carmel Hennessy, Nicola Wall, Brian Scallan, Brian McNulty, Marie Devine, Deirdre O'Shaughnessy, Colm O'Callaghan, Aoife Kavanagh, Yvonne Judge, Nicky Gogan, Gerry Nelson, Tom Shiggins, Sylvia Thompson, Conor Gallagher, Gráinne Ní Aodha, Sheila Wayman, Garreth McNamee, Kitty Holland, Kim Porcelli, Mel Gardner.

We also express our sincere gratitude to those who took part in this research who wished to remain anonymous.

We believe this guide builds on the innate compassion of media professionals as individuals, and on their professional standards of practice.

We hope it provides reassurance on areas of good practice, poses challenges where practice could be improved, and provides usable, practical ideas for any media professional, including journalists, researchers, camera operators, sound assistants, production assistants and photographers in facilitating safe, respectful and empowering experiences for people with severe mental health conditions and other trauma.

To cite this guidance: Severe Mental Health Conditions, Trauma and Media Participation: A Practice Guide for Media Professionals. Dublin. Headline/Quality Matters

Purpose of this Practice Guide

The Power of Stories

Shared stories help us understand ourselves and each other. This is particularly true of complex and difficult-to-manage human experiences, including mental health conditions and trauma. Interviewing people with experiences of trauma or severe mental health conditions can help to ensure stories are real, nuanced and compelling. It can also challenge ignorance, bias and discrimination.

Many journalists, regardless of the type of story they're working on, wish to provide people with a platform to share their experiences. This guidance is written in recognition of the fact that this is not always easy to achieve.

The research that underpins this guide (see www.headline.ie) indicated that mental health stories lacked representation of people affected by severe mental health conditions. While there is ample representation of those who experience depression or anxiety, this is not the case for those who have experiences such as visual or auditory hallucinations, psychosis and severe paranoia. This is despite the fact that people with experience of severe mental health conditions are often enthusiastic about sharing their stories, as they hope to educate the public about mental health difficulties and to encourage help-seeking in those who may benefit from it.

Many journalists, regardless of the type of story they're working on, wish to provide people with a platform to share their experiences. This guidance is written in recognition of the fact that this is not always easy to achieve.

The media professionals, people with lived experience and mental health professionals engaged in the research cited reasons for this under-representation. Such reasons included journalists' concerns about their own ability to engage people safely, people with severe mental health conditions' previous negative experiences with media, and a lack of access between these two groups.

A Note on the Role of Journalist Well-Being

It is important to note that a journalist who is feeling relaxed and confident is more likely to be able to support the interviewee to feel relaxed and engaged themselves. If you are stressed, you are less likely to have the focus and engagement to empathise effectively and proactively identify discomfort.

Be aware that exposure to other people's trauma and difficult stories can have impact on you. Taking care of yourself and reducing your stress will help you feel better and help you to do a better job as a journalist.

The research explored whether specific experiences or symptoms of severe mental health difficulties required particular accommodation in the course of media engagement, for example paranoia, psychosis or visual/auditory hallucinations. The research found that many people with such experiences participate successfully in media interviews and manage their symptoms in that context. However, facets of the media interview process – a process that is difficult for anyone with limited media experience – can pose intensified challenges for people with experience of severe mental health difficulties.

Whether stories being shared are those of hope, coping and recovery or of ongoing challenges, the telling of traumatic personal stories can add an additional layer of stress to the interview experience. This is especially the case when people have experienced significant stigma or discrimination. There are also a variety of factors which can cause stress or be triggering for participants. Many of these can be mitigated or controlled by an interviewer. The consequence of being triggered into a state of higher stress or fight-or-flight can negatively impact their ability to tell their story, as well as their own well-being.

Guidance Structure

Before, During and After the Interview

The guidance is presented as a series of practice tips for different stages of the interview.

The practice tips are explored in detail, and preceded by a handy checklist that media professionals can use in their work.

Many of the steps detailed in this guidance would be considered standard practice when interviewing any individual about a personal experience. However, ensuring as many of these steps as possible are followed has particular importance in the context of this guide.



GLOSSARY

Interview:

For the purposes of this guide, "Interview" is shorthand for any engagement experience including but not limited to contributions to a print article, in-person or call-in live studio programme, contributions on radio or television, pre-recorded contributions in-person, or virtual contributions at online or real-life communications events.

Media professionals:

By this we mean journalists, researchers, producers, reporters, camera operators, production assistants, etc.

TIPS

GENERAL

Relevant to the whole interview process.

BEFORE

Relevant to recruiting/engaging someone with a view to them taking part in an interview or other media activity.

DURING

Relevant to the process of doing the interview, shoot or other media activity.

AFTER

Relevant to all activities from when the interview ends, through to publication, broadcast and any activity surrounding the story.

Handy Checklist

BEFORE THE INTERVIEW

The interview process: explain...

- The date, time, duration and format (medium / live or pre-record etc.) of the interview and who will undertake it
- The purpose of the interview and what questions will be asked / topics discussed
- That they can have a support person present with them if helpful
- Whether and how confidentiality will be protected
- Any facets of the interview environment that could be stressful – people being busy, cameras / lighting, noisiness etc.
- Any initial information about where it will be published/ broadcast and how their information may appear

Questions to ask the interviewee on language, topics and triggers

- Do you have preferred words or terms to describe your experience?
- Do you have words you would prefer us not to use? Explain that you will do your best to remember these on the day, and that they can remind you if necessary
- Are there topics you would rather not discuss or questions you'd prefer not answer?
- Are there any aspects of the interview/setting that you feel could be particularly stressful for you? If so, is there anything we can do to make you more comfortable?
- Do you have a support person who can help you prepare for the interview? (if not, but they would like one, help them to them to identify a mental health/media support organisation)

Consent: explain that...

- They can withdraw their consent to participate at any time – before, during or after the interview up to (name the exact point: publication/broadcast etc)
- Withdrawing consent will have no negative impact on them
- Once the information is out in the public domain it cannot be withdrawn
- There may be additional engagement (positive or negative) through media / social media with their story after it is broadcast / published
- Explain on/off the record if this is relevant

DURING THE INTERVIEW



Spend a couple of minutes getting to know the person before the official interview (if live, this might be at another time e.g. earlier in the day). This increases trust and honesty.

Focus on their comfort during the interview



Treat them as the capable adult that they are – be respectful but do your job



Proactively look out for signs of discomfort and check in



Be authentically encouraging – connect to their motivation for doing this



Provide choice or control, even on minor issues, wherever you can



Listen to everything, not just the bits most interesting to you



If the person is stressed or nervous, reflect their words back to them to give them time to ensure they're happy with what they have said / have said what they need



Don't rush, but be clear about time limitations in a respectful way.

AFTER THE INTERVIEW

Immediately after the interview: check the following has been done



Check in with the person and thank them for taking part



If possible, offer them a cup of tea or coffee or another gesture to show care



Check that they have someone to talk to or debrief with if needed



If relevant, remind them of how they can review quotes, content or final piece



Give a contact phone number or email address for the interviewer or another team member in case questions or concerns arise



Provide information about publication or broadcast dates and ensure you have their correct contact details should they need to be contacted with changes to these dates.



Highlight the possibility that publication/ broadcast of article/interview may be cancelled / shortened/ postponed by the editor for reasons beyond the interviewer's control



Alert participants to any rebroadcast, if relevant

8 Tips for Effective Interviews

1

Don't be afraid to ask people for interviews



Some media professionals may have unnecessary levels of concern or anxiety about engaging people with mental health conditions. If you have concerns, it can be helpful to go through a mental health organisation.

Some have policies and protocols for recruiting people who are well, can manage their condition, and can manage the impact of their condition through the interview.

Some mental health organisations even provide media training and supports to individuals and journalists, as well as information on navigating concerns about the person's wellness and capacity.

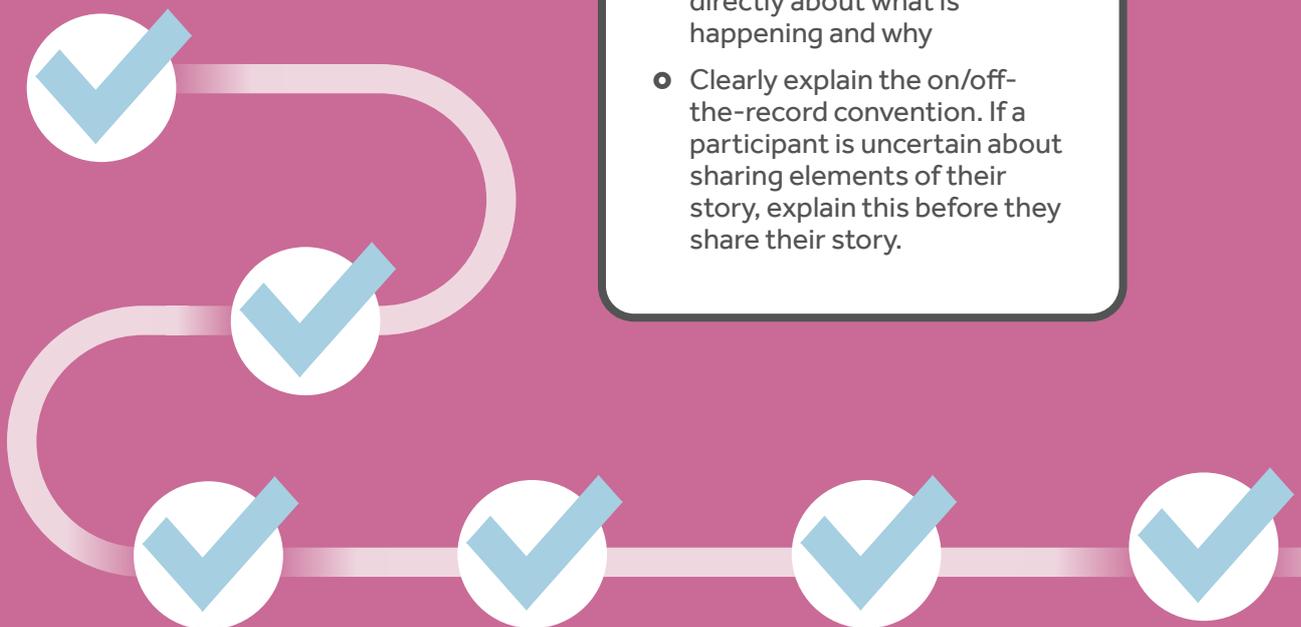
Media Professionals are welcome to contact Headline to find out what supports are available for them or their interviewees.

People may also be supported by a family member. It is important to remember that in almost all cases, the decision to participate or not should rest with the individual and not any professional or family member.

GENERAL

2

Focus on continued consent rather than once-off agreement



Providing full information at the first point of engagement is important – what’s the story, what’s the angle, what will happen to the person’s information, how will their confidentiality be protected, what types of graphics/videos/ images will be included in the feature (if possible)?

In the potentially hectic environment of an interview, it can be difficult for anyone to hear or retain all this information.

Actions that can alleviate anxiety, promote continued participation, and improve the quality of the story being told:

- Check in with the participant at all stages, e.g. while having a microphone fitted, setting up for having a picture taken or signing release forms
- Proactively respond to signs of discomfort
- Communicate clearly and directly about what is happening and why
- Clearly explain the on/off-the-record convention. If a participant is uncertain about sharing elements of their story, explain this before they share their story.

GENERAL

BEFORE

3

Learn language and question preferences to avoid inadvertently triggering interviewees and closing down the interview

Ask the interviewee in advance about what they need and/or what their likely triggers are, as well as their preferred terms to refer to their condition or experience.

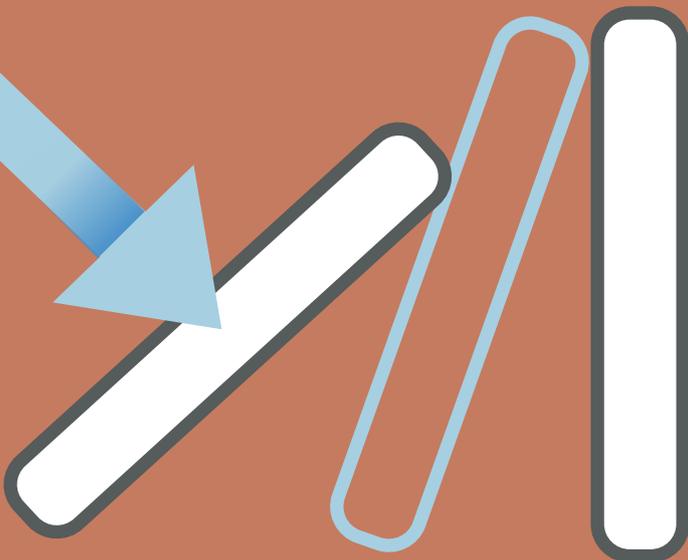
Specifically ask them if there is anything in the process that could make them feel uncomfortable or anything you can do to make their experience easier and safer. It may be useful for the participant to have a support person available on the day and to develop code words/actions to flag discomfort, particularly for live TV or radio.

For example, it could be agreed in advance that raising a hand indicates the interviewer is approaching a topic the person does not want to discuss. The interviewer should know in advance what topics the person is comfortable discussing and what is off-limits.

Simply asking **“Are there any words or phrases you would rather I not use in the interview?”** can help the person feel safe and in control.

If the person does experience symptoms such as hearing voices, the interviewer and interviewee might discuss how the interviewer will know if it's causing any difficulties with the interview, and what they should do, e.g. pause/slow down, etc.

BEFORE



4

Explain how the whole process works; a lack of information increases anxiety and reduces good engagement

BEFORE

Give detailed information on the process from beginning to end, explaining:

- who will be doing the interview and if there may be different people doing the interviewing, e.g. a researcher as well as a presenter
- who will be present
- how long it will take
- what the atmosphere will be like (noisy, busy, quiet, etc.)
- what equipment will be used (cameras, microphones, recording devices, mobile phones, etc.) and if any equipment (e.g. a mic) will be fitted to the individual's person/clothes
- how it will end
- what will happen afterwards and in what timeline
- that the same question may need to be asked multiple times
- issues around consent and how (if) privacy and anonymity will be protected
- if and how things need to be corroborated, what that will involve – this is important in terms of criticisms of services
- potential impacts of going public with a story and other relevant information, e.g. online commentary
- that there is a possibility that publication/broadcast of article/interview may be cancelled/shortened/postponed by the editor for reasons beyond the interviewer's control

If you can, provide a copy of the questions that will be asked in advance, and explain that some additional questions may arise if the person says something of particular interest. Reassure them that the interviewer will not probe on issues they have flagged not to be discussed. If they have previous experience or support from a mental health organisation, the individual may well arrive informed and prepared, and you may simply need to check that they fully understand the process, provide information specific to the occasion, and answer any questions.



DURING

5

Get to know the person before the interview begins; a brief and friendly personal conversation increases trust and respect

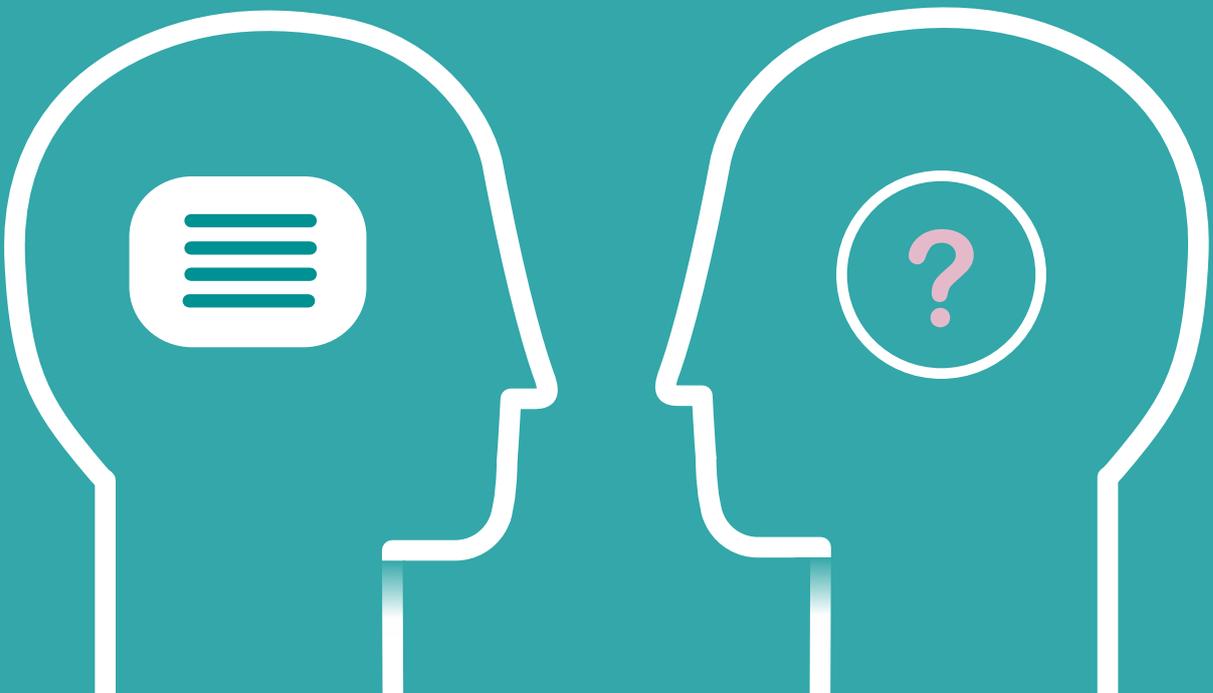
Before the official interview begins, invest a small amount of time getting to know the person. If the interview is live, this may be a call or chat before the show starts.

The aim of this conversation is to ensure the participant senses the interviewer cares about them as a whole person, and not just 'as their illness'.

This can assuage concerns about being represented as a one-dimensional character.

Such an investment may yield considerable benefits; if the interviewee trusts the interviewer, they are more likely to be honest about their difficult experiences and feel valued as an individual rather than objectified.

DURING



6

Continue to focus on the person's comfort as this will likely improve the quality of the interview



SIGNS OF DISCOMFORT MAY INCLUDE

Loss of eye contact

Arms/legs crossed

Shifting or nervousness

Sweating or flushed appearance

Change in tone or pace of speech

Everyone benefits when the journalist and participant work together to tell a good story. One of the best ways to achieve this is by ensuring the interviewee is feeling engaged and respected while giving the interview. This does not mean creating a therapeutic atmosphere, or even a particularly supportive one, but one that feels professional, respectful and safe.

- **Treat the person as the capable adult they are:** While being kind and respectful, journalists should not be afraid to do their job and ask what is needed.
- **Be alert for discomfort, and proactively check in:** If the person shows discomfort through their body language, take time to see if they are OK. Naming a problem may be difficult for some people, so be alert for it and take responsibility for checking in. Trust and mutual respect are fostered when the participant feels as though the interviewer will inquire or pause if discomfort arises.
- **Be authentically encouraging:** Connect to the person's motivation for telling you their story, and remind them of it.
- **Provide choice and control where possible:** Provide choice where you can such as the time of the interview, the location or the order of topics to be discussed. Providing choice increases a sense of control and reduces feelings of disempowerment.
- **Sustain and communicate respectful interest:** Use active listening skills to show you are interested in all aspects of the story.
- **Support communication if the person is nervous or stressed:** Regularly check in on meaning, reflect back, and paraphrase to ensure you fully understand.
- **Do not rush, but be clear about time limitations:** Clarify at the beginning and respectfully signpost how much time there is during the interview. Interviews should not be undertaken if there is not adequate time and space for the individual to share their story or perspective.

AFTER

7

**Take a minute
to check-in;
the ending of
the interview
defines how they
remember it**

A brief but authentic check-in post interview can have a lasting, positive impact on the interviewee, even where the story was positive and everyone seems well and happy.

Telling a story that may have been difficult or be associated with feelings of shame can leave a person feeling vulnerable.

A respectful and affirming connection with the interviewer or another professional can help the person to feel reassured that they have made the right choice, that their story is in good hands, and that they would consider engaging with the media again.

At the end of the interview check in with the person, and:

- If possible, offer them a cup of tea or coffee, and generally show care for their well-being
- Check that they have someone to talk to or debrief with if they need
- Thank them for their engagement, and if relevant highlight how their efforts could assist others

AFTER

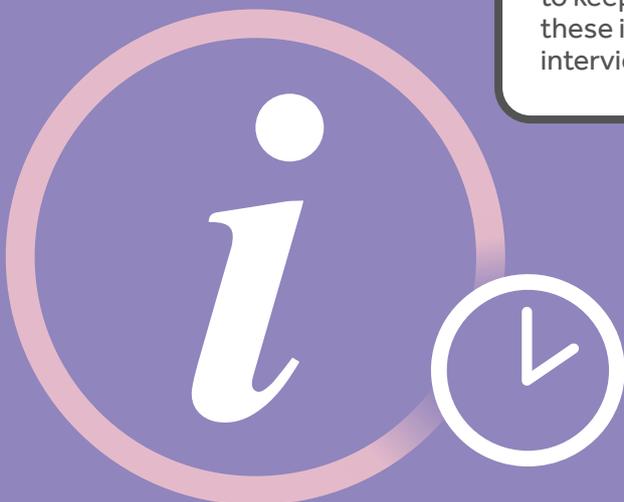


How are you?

8

Provide timely information to the participant regarding when the story will reach the public and what will be in it

This can give a sense of control to the interviewee



Allowing the participant to review content prior to publication or broadcast of pre-recorded material is ideal, but is not always possible, depending on the nature of the story. If this cannot be facilitated, inform the person, and consider other ways to ensure interviewees are as engaged as possible in the final production:

- Allow the person to review quotes that are attributed to them.
- Provide timely information on publication or broadcast. If this changes, let people know
- Send a link to the broadcast or publication
- Send information on impact – if there was a significant reach, positive engagement or additional follow-on content developed, let them know
- If a person chooses to withdraw consent, this should be accepted in a respectful way
- Have a conversation about possible media/social media engagement with the story and how this can in some instances be challenging or negative
- Alert participants to any rebroadcast when and if this happens. Rebroadcasts can set people back in their recovery if they are not expecting it.

Remember, if you're working through a mental health organisation, it's important to keep communication open about these issues so they can share it with the interviewee.



Headline is Ireland's national programme for responsible reporting and representation of mental illness and suicide. Our objective is to work as collaboratively as possible with Irish media professionals across print, broadcast, and online platforms to reduce the effects of suicide contagion and the stigma attached to mental ill health.

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