



JOINT STATEMENT

Media accountability: people living with mental health challenges and the stigma and discrimination they experience

In Australia, the relationship between mental ill health and risk to the community is often misunderstood. The three NSW peak bodies Mental Health Coordinating Council (MHCC), Mental Health Carers NSW (MHCN) and Being Mental Health Consumers urge media to better understand how to portray people living with mental health challenges in the news and all forms of communication.

People living with mental health conditions are some of the most disadvantaged people living in our community. Mental ill health and psychosocial disability are both triggered and exacerbated by historical and current trauma, inaccessible mental health care and poor support, physical health and other co-existing conditions, poverty, insecure work and housing, discrimination, social isolation and exclusion driven by fear and stigma. When the community responds to people displaying signs of distress by seeking to discriminate and exclude or control them, this causes more traumatic experiences, creating a vicious circle of trauma, stigma, and discrimination, experienced by many as part of their everyday lives ([MHCC](#)).

The widespread stigma surrounding mental ill health, leads to misconceptions about the risk posed by individuals experiencing mental health issues. Public education and awareness are crucial to combating these stereotypes. It is critical that the community is informed by accurate realities and statistics. The public must be presented with correct information so that they can empathise with the difficulties people face, rather than be made fearful through sensational reporting of situations involving people experiencing mental health challenges or critical events.

Approximately 1 in 5 Australians aged 16–85 (22%, or 4.3 million people) experience mental ill health each year ([AIHW](#)). The most common are anxiety disorders (17%), affective disorders (8%), and substance use disorders (3%). Most people living with mental ill health are not violent. Studies show that individuals with mental ill health are far more likely to be victims than perpetrators of violence ([ABS](#)). Only a small number of individuals with severe mental ill health, such as psychosis, *may* have an increased risk of violent behaviour (ABS) when they are not receiving adequate care and support. When people have effective support, they can manage their conditions with minimal risks to themselves or others.

The suite of evidence-based [Mindframe national guidelines](#) were developed in consultation with media professionals and peak media bodies, suicide prevention and mental health organisations, lived and living experience networks, and the Mindframe advisory group. The guidelines support safe and accurate media reporting, portrayal, and communication about suicide, mental health concerns and alcohol and other drugs (AOD) to reduce stigma and encourage help-seeking behaviour. We encourage the media to access this invaluable resource and make use of the mental health literacy information relevant to their profession.

Language is dynamic, evolves over time, and plays a key role in reducing stigma and discrimination, because it can change attitudes. We urge the media to communicate reflectively and consider that what is being written or said about people may exacerbate negative outcomes. Inaccurate, unbalanced and sensationalist reports of events and people living with mental health conditions can further traumatise other people living with mental ill health, as well as their families, and lead to lowered self-esteem and reduce help-seeking.

Reporting is in the public interest, but it must be accurate and precise, avoiding blame, negative perceptions and/or speculation about individual situations. It is easy to make assumptions about what may have led to an event occurring when, in fact there is much more complexity and detail required to fully understand why an event took place.

The peaks continue to advocate for urgent and significant investment by the NSW and Commonwealth governments in the entire mental health system. We stand ready to work with the Government to build the world-class mental health system that NSW deserves.

Media contacts

- Julian Clarkson, Marketing and Communications Manager, BEING Mental Health Consumers, 0430 606 602, info@being.org.au
 - Jonathan Harms, CEO, Mental Health Carers NSW, 0401 169 921
MHCNadmin@mentalhealthcarersnsw.org
 - Dr Evelyne Tadros, CEO, Mental Health Coordinating Council, 0419 22 33 60,
evelyne@mhcc.org.au
-