

Media Guidelines for Reporting on Mental Health Issues

Equal Opportunities Commission
June 2024



平等機會委員會
EQUAL OPPORTUNITIES COMMISSION

Media Guidelines for Reporting on Mental Health Issues

Introduction

In recent years, the mental health of Hong Kong citizens has become a matter of great concern. Tragic incidents involving individuals with mental health needs not only received extensive media coverage, but also highlighted the inadequate awareness and understanding of mental health among the public, with stigma and misconceptions surrounding mental health remaining serious.

In the light of the situation, the Equal Opportunities Commission (“EOC”) organised a seminar titled “Challenge Discrimination, Eliminate Stereotypes – Seminar on Media Reporting of Mental Health Issues” on 28 September 2023. Supported by the Advisory Committee on Mental Health and the Hong Kong News Executives’ Association, the event attracted around 100 participants, including frontline journalists, editors, academics, health professionals, people with mental health needs and those in recovery. The seminar aimed to discuss the impact of media reporting on mental health issues, with a focus on promoting accurate and balanced media reporting to minimise labelling and stigmatisation of individuals with mental health needs. The majority of the participants at the seminar agreed that a guideline or a charter should be developed to help media practitioners deliver accurate and positive coverage of mental health issues.

Based on the views expressed by the seminar participants, the EOC invited representatives from the Advisory Committee on Mental Health and the Hong Kong Press Council to attend a meeting in February 2024 to discuss the format and content of the proposed guideline. The present guideline was drafted based on the discussion, which will serve as a source of reference for different types of media, including print, electronic, online and social media.

Media Guidelines for Reporting on Mental Health Issues

Basic Principles

The media serves as the primary source of information for the public to understand mental health issues. Through mass media channels, such as news, broadcast and electronic media, as well as social media, the public receives information related to mental health. The information disseminated by the media directly shapes public perceptions and attitudes towards mental health issues. For example, the public may be led to associate people with mental health needs with danger and see them as a threat to society or public safety. These misconceptions may subsequently discourage those with mental health needs from seeking medical help or assistance for fear of stigmatisation.

Given the significant influence of the media and the increasing prevalence of mental health issues in our society, media practitioners should assume their social responsibility by accurately reporting on and disseminating information about mental health, ensuring that the public understands the relevant issues correctly. This will reduce the stereotyping of people with mental health needs and their associates, while also encourage people to approach their mental health needs with a proactive and positive attitude. When reporting on mental health issues or incidents in print, electronic, online and social media, practitioners should treat people with mental health needs with empathy, equality, respect, and understanding. They should strive for accurate, truthful, objective, and comprehensive reporting and adhere to the following principles:

(1) Ensure Accuracy

Media practitioners should ensure that their reports are accurate, objective and comprehensive, and that the reports give a full picture of an incident. Where the report on an incident involves an individual, media should only report on the mental health condition of the individual when it is relevant. The report should be based on factual and authoritative information, with the relevant context and social background included. Conjectures, assumptions or broad generalisations about the conditions of people with mental health needs and the cause of the incident should be avoided. This would prevent the public from inappropriately associating mental health issues with threat or violence. The media should also provide comprehensive information by seeking professional analysis and comments, and should refrain from citing anonymous sources whose reliability cannot be verified.

(2) Minimise Harm

The media should consider the impact of the language, photos, or images it publishes on the subjects and their families. It should refrain from gratuitously reporting or delving into the minute details of the incident, nor should it depict the incident as a tragedy, so as to minimise further harm or secondary victimisation to others.

(3) Protect Privacy

The media should respect the privacy of the subjects and persons related to the incidents associated with mental health, and should refrain from delving into their private lives. The media should also be mindful of the potential disruptions and impact of the reports on the health, safety, mental state and daily lives of the subjects and related persons.

(4) Use proper language and images

Accurate and objective language instead of language with negative connotations should be used to avoid stigmatising people with mental health needs or people in mental recovery. In particular, derogatory or humiliating terms, such as “crazy person”, “nutter”, “lunatic”, or “psycho” should be avoided. These terms should be replaced with expression such as “person diagnosed with mental health issues”. More importantly, the media should not use sensationalised, exaggerated, or clickbait headlines. Images symbolising violence or associations with distress (such as knives or blood), medical procedures (such as hospitals or drugs), or despair and depression should be avoided. Words or images that may induce distress should be minimised.

(5) Help and support

The media should include as much positive information as possible to achieve balanced reporting. For example, people with mental health needs should be encouraged to seek help by including information about support services and contact details of relevant organisations, such as hotline numbers, in the report. Stories that highlight the capabilities, strengths, and diversity of individuals with mental health needs will encourage the public to see them in a positive light. Another positive approach is to give voice to persons with mental health needs, allowing them to share stories about their personal growth, re-integration into society, and their contributions to their families and society. These stories will promote social understanding and inclusion.

Acknowledgement

The Equal Opportunities Commission (“EOC”) would like to express its sincerest gratitude to the following persons for assisting in the compilation of the Guidelines and providing invaluable views and comments to the draft of the Guidelines (in alphabetical order):

- Ms Lily CHAN, Member of the Advisory Committee on Mental Health
- Ms Vicky LEUNG Pui-ki, Member of the Advisory Committee on Mental Health
- Mr Terry WONG Chung-bo, Member of the Advisory Committee on Mental Health
- Ms YUEN Shuk-yan, former Member of the Advisory Committee on Mental Health
- Professor Raymond LI, Member of the Executive Committee of the Hong Kong Press Council and Head, Department of Journalism of the Hong Kong Baptist University

© Equal Opportunities Commission 2024

Equal Opportunities Commission

Tel.: (852) 2511 8211

Fax: (852) 2511 8142

Website: www.eoc.org.hk

Address: 16/F., 41 Heung Yip Road, Wong Chuk Hang, Hong Kong

To cite this guidelines:

Equal Opportunities Commission (2024). *Media Guidelines for Reporting on Mental Health Issues*: Equal Opportunities Commission.

Disclaimer

All the information contained in this Guidelines is for reference only, and it is no substitute for legal advice. If you have any enquiries or need further information, please contact the Equal Opportunities Commission.

Published in June 2024