



# Media Guide

ALABAMA DEPARTMENT OF MENTAL HEALTH

## Journalism with Respect for People

### who we are

The Alabama Department of Mental Health serves more than 200,000 citizens with mental illnesses, developmental/intellectual disabilities and/or substance use disorders. This guide is an educational document, offering suggestions for wording, upholding the dignity of all human beings.

### our mission

Serve · Empower · Support

### our vision

Promoting the health and well-being of all Alabamians with mental illness, developmental disabilities and substance use disorders.



# Introduction

Mental health and related topics can be especially difficult and confusing to cover. This guide is to help those who write about mental health to navigate the often bumpy road of covering mental illness, substance use disorder, developmental disabilities and suicide.

**Research has shown that many people get their information about mental illness from the media. Negative coverage doesn't just damage public perceptions; it also affects people with mental illness. However, appropriate news coverage of mental health issues can help break down stigma barriers and provide people who have a mental illness the opportunity to tell their personal stories.**

The strong stigma surrounding mental illness is often a barrier for recovery. Fear of mental illness is a major problem in itself. Stigma gets in the way of proper treatment and recovery. Mental health problems are surprisingly common. In fact, they affect most families at some point. Studies also show that most people with mental illnesses get better and many recover completely.



All people should be valued and treated with respect, regardless of their gender, sexual orientation, physical disability, illness or mental illness. Having a mental illness is just one aspect of a person, as is having asthma or being confined to a wheelchair. In addition, just as physical illnesses can range from having a cold to having cancer, so can mental illnesses range in severity.

Those who write about mental health can provide a valuable public serving by helping increase understanding and awareness. This brochure was created to provide a tool and resource to help efforts to better represent all persons, seek truth and provide a fair and comprehensive account of events and issues.

# Definitions

## **Mental illnesses:**

A mental illness is a disease that causes mild to severe disturbances in thought and/or behavior, resulting in an inability to cope with life's ordinary demands and routines.\*

There are more than 200 classified forms of mental illness. Some of the more common disorders are depression, bipolar disorder, dementia, schizophrenia and anxiety disorders. Symptoms may include changes in mood, personality, personal habits and/or social withdrawal.

Features of mental illnesses are:

1. A clinically significant behavioral or psychological syndrome or pattern that occurs in an individual
2. Must not be merely an expectable and culturally sanctioned response to a particular event, for example, the death of a loved one
3. A manifestation of a behavioral, psychological or biological dysfunction in the individual

*\*Mental Health America*

## **Intellectual disability:**

Intellectual disability is characterized by significant limitations both in intellectual functioning (reasoning, learning, problem solving) and in adaptive behavior, which covers a range of everyday social and practical skills.\* This disability originates before the age of 18. Intellectual disability forms a subset within the larger universe of developmental disabilities, but the boundaries often blur as many individuals fall into both categories to differing degrees and for different reasons.

*\*American Association on Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities*

## **Developmental Disabilities:**

Developmental disabilities are defined as severe chronic disabilities that can be cognitive or physical or both. The disabilities appear before the age of 22 and are likely to be lifelong. Intellectual disabilities encompass the "cognitive" part of this definition, that is, those disabilities that are broadly related to thought processes. Because intellectual and other developmental disabilities often co-occur, intellectual disability professionals often work with people who have both types of disabilities.\*

Some developmental disabilities are purely physical, such as congenital deafness or visual impairment. These are not intellectual disabilities. Other Developmental disabilities can be caused by cerebral palsy, epilepsy, autism or other disabling conditions. These conditions might or might not include intellectual disabilities.

*\*American Association on Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities*

## **Physical disabilities:**

There are various types of physical disabilities including upper limb(s) disability, lower limb(s) disability, manual dexterity, and disability in coordination with different organs of the body.\*

Physical disabilities can be present from birth or acquired with age, and can also be the effect of a disease.

*\*From Disabled World*

# How to write about Mental Illness

According to the Associated Press Stylebook:

- Do not describe an individual as mentally ill unless it is clearly pertinent to a story and the diagnosis is properly sourced.
- When used, identify the source for the diagnosis.
- Seek firsthand knowledge; ask how the source knows.
- Don't rely on hearsay or speculate on a diagnosis. Specify the time frame for the diagnosis and ask about treatment.
- A person's condition can change over time, so a diagnosis of mental illness might not apply anymore.
- Avoid anonymous sources.
- On-the-record sources can be family members, mental health professionals, medical authorities, law enforcement officials and court records.
- Be sure they have accurate information.
- Provide examples of symptoms.
- Mental illness is a general condition. Specific disorders are types of mental illness and should be used whenever possible: "He was diagnosed with schizophrenia, according to court documents. She was diagnosed with anorexia, according to her parents. He was treated for depression."

Some common mental disorders, according to the National Institute of Mental Health (mental illnesses or disorders are **lowercase**, except when known by the name of a person, such as Asperger's syndrome):

- Autism spectrum disorders.  
These include Asperger's syndrome, a mild form of autism. Many experts consider autism a developmental disorder, not a mental illness.
- Bipolar disorder (manic depressive illness)
- Depression
- Obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD)
- Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD)
- Schizophrenia

## What to Say

Never Say:

Derogatory terms, such as insane, crazy/crazed, nuts or deranged

Mental illness is a factor in a violent crime

Asylum or crazy house (for a mental health facility)

Afflicted with, suffers from or victim of.

Say:

Mentally ill or in treatment for mental illness but do not assume their status

There is no good way to say this. A past history of mental illness is not necessarily a reliable indicator.

Use the term mental or psychiatric hospital.

State the specific disorder. Example: He has obsessive-compulsive disorder.

# How to write about Suicide

Suicide is a public health issue. Media and online coverage of suicide should be informed. Covering suicide carefully can change public misconceptions and correct myths, which can encourage those who are vulnerable or at risk, to seek help.

## Avoid Misinformation and Offer Hope

- Suicide is complex. There are almost always multiple causes, including psychiatric illnesses that may not have been recognized or treated. However, these illnesses are treatable.
- Avoid reporting that death by suicide was preceded by a single event, such as a recent job loss, divorce, or bad grades. Reporting like this leaves the public with an overly simplistic and misleading understanding of suicide.
- Consider quoting a suicide prevention expert on causes and treatments.
- Avoid putting expert opinions in a sensationalistic context.

Use your story to inform readers about the causes of suicide, its warning signs, trends in rates, and recent treatment advances.

Add statement(s) about the many treatment options available, stories of those who overcame a suicidal crisis, and resources for help.

Include up-to-date local/national resources where readers/viewers can find treatment, information, and advice that promote help-seeking.

## What to Say

### *Never Say:*

Referring to suicide as “successful,” “unsuccessful,” or a “failed attempt”

Describing recent suicides as an “epidemic,” “skyrocketing,” or other strong terms

Describing a suicide as inexplicable or “without warning”

“John Doe left a suicide note saying...”  
Investigating and reporting on suicide similarly to reporting on crimes

### *Say:*

Describe as “died by suicide,” “completed,” or “killed him/herself”

Most, but not all, people who die by suicide exhibit warning signs

“A note from the deceased was found and is being reviewed by the medical examiner”

Report on suicide as a public health issue

# How to write about Disability

According to the Associated Press Stylebook:

- In general, do not describe an individual as disabled unless it is clearly pertinent to a story.
- A disability descriptor is simply a medical diagnosis, which may also be used in a service or legal setting. Thus disability is a social construct created to identify those who may be entitled to services or legal protections due to characteristics related to a medical condition.
- Avoid sensationalizing. Portraying persons with disabilities as overly courageous, brave or extraordinary incorrectly implies that it is unusual for people with disabilities to have talents or skills.

## PEOPLE FIRST LANGUAGE

A preferred method to use in referring to specific individuals is to remember that they are PEOPLE first. People First Language puts the person before the disability and describes what a person has, not who a person is. It represents a more respectful and accurate way of communicating.

Important etiquette to keep in mind when writing and/or speaking about and/or to someone with a disability:

- Don't label people with disabilities as a large group, such as "the disabled" or "the mentally ill."
- Speak about the person first and then, if necessary, the person's disability. A disability and/or specific diagnosis only needs to be mentioned in rare cases where it is relevant to the narrative.
- Emphasize a person's abilities, not disabilities.
- Get to know the whole person, not just the disability.
- Always let people with disabilities speak for themselves. If they are not able to, usually either they or a personal assistant will let you know.

## What to Say

### *Never Say:*

The handicapped or the disabled  
Brad is retarded  
Brad is brain damaged  
Normal/healthy people  
She's Down's; a Down's person  
Jim is a cripple

### *Say:*

People with disabilities  
Brad has an intellectual disability  
Brad has an injury  
People without disabilities  
Kate has Down syndrome  
Jim is a person with a physical disability

## RESOURCES

Alabama Department of Mental Health

[www.mh.alabama.gov](http://www.mh.alabama.gov)

Alabama Governor's Office on Disability

[www.good.alabama.gov](http://www.good.alabama.gov)

For definitions of different disabilities

[www2.ku.edu/~lsi/news/featured/guidelines.shtml](http://www2.ku.edu/~lsi/news/featured/guidelines.shtml)

Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders

[www.dsm5.org/Pages/Default.aspx](http://www.dsm5.org/Pages/Default.aspx)

Source for People First Language

[www.disabilityisnatural.com/explore/language-communication](http://www.disabilityisnatural.com/explore/language-communication)

American Association on Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities

[www.aamr.org](http://www.aamr.org)

The Arc of the United States

[www.thearc.org](http://www.thearc.org)

Mississippi Department of Mental Health

<http://www.dmh.ms.gov/>

National Institute of Mental Health

[www.nimh.gov](http://www.nimh.gov)

National Alliance on Mental Illness

[www.nami.org](http://www.nami.org)

Mental Health America

[www.nmha.org](http://www.nmha.org)

Reporting on Suicide

<http://reportingonsuicide.org/recommendations/#important>

Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration

[www.samhsa.gov](http://www.samhsa.gov)

## ADMH and the Media

It is department policy that no employees speak with the media on behalf of the department without going through the ADMH Office of Public Information. If you would like to contact the department for an interview, story, or press release, please call 334-242-3417 or email [publicinformation.dmh@mh.alabama.gov](mailto:publicinformation.dmh@mh.alabama.gov).

Our latest news is available at [www.mh.alabama.gov](http://www.mh.alabama.gov). Additionally, we distribute press releases and statements via email. If you would like to receive these media lists, please email or call 334-242-3417 to add or update your contact information.

