

## CHAPTER 4

# INTERVIEWING

**Stories about people with mental illness should include the voices of those people. Giving a voice to the people who are actually living the experience makes for better story telling, and better journalism. Including people with mental illness helps break the myth that they are “not like us” when in fact they are in the mainstream.**

Psychotic behaviour – by someone who is out of touch with reality – is easily recognizable. No one should attempt an interview with a person in that state. People with personality disorders such as psychopathy, involving impulsive anti-social behaviour, may also be dangerous. Otherwise, there is no physical danger to the reporter.

The real danger lies in distorting news coverage by ignoring the voices of 20% of the Canadian population. Very often, news reports talk about people with mental illnesses as though they were outside normal social interactions – a throwback, perhaps, to times when mentally ill people were locked up and forgotten.

If you were writing a story about surviving a heart attack, you would almost certainly speak to people who had done so.

Ignoring the voices of mentally ill people also runs the risk of alienating one-fifth of your readers, listeners or viewers. Most journalists have learned to change their approach when they switch from interviewing powerful people to vulnerable ones: Being friendly, taking time, asking open-ended questions, taking care not to push too hard or to re-traumatize, but still seeking clarity and insight.

*I report on mental illness – depression, schizophrenia – and I am aware that in these cases the journalist must use his power with a lot of discretion. It's understood that I will recognize the limits imposed by the person's illness and their fundamental right to respect.*

Michel Rochon  
Health & Science Journalist  
Radio-Canada (2014)

Demonstrating empathetic interest helps. Assuming you know how the person feels or ought to feel doesn't.

Take care to ensure that the interviewee understands that his or her name and diagnosis will be made public, and that the person is in a proper emotional state to give informed consent.

If the person is not in such a state, ask if you can return at a later time to include their words in a follow-up story, if there will be one. Leave a phone number so that they can initiate contact when they are ready. For today's story, try talking to a mental health professional instead.

## **DEFINITIONS OF RECOVERY**

Reporters should be aware that mental health professionals may hold differing views about aspects of mental illness. The matter of recovery, especially in connection with serious illness, is a case in point.

As with physical illness, many people with a mental illness who receive treatment can recover. Reporters and editors who bear this in mind can help reduce stigma.

Among those whose illness is chronic, some are able, with appropriate treatment, to manage their symptoms and substantially improve their quality of life. This is sometimes called 'recovery in mental illness', as opposed to 'recovery from mental illness', or clinical recovery, defined as returning to the state the person was in before the illness occurred.

When interviewing professionals who cite recovery rates, journalists should determine which definition is being used and report accordingly.

*See them as a person, not a diagnosis. There's no reason to fear. Not only ask them about their experience of what it's like to have schizophrenia... you need to ask them what has helped or hindered you in your recovery? What has helped you to have some quality of life? So interview that person just like you would interview a person who has Parkinson's disease.*

Chris Summerville  
CEO, Schizophrenia Society of Canada

## ➤ INTERVIEWING DOS AND DON'TS

- ✓ **Do** talk to people who have mental disorders and include what they say in your stories.
  - ✓ **Do** remember these are people who naturally deserve respect.
  - ✓ **Do** demonstrate empathy, ask open-ended questions.
  - ✓ **Do** ensure the person understands the implications of being interviewed and gives informed consent.
- 
- ✓ **Don't** re-traumatize by pushing too hard.
  - ✓ **Don't** interview people when they are out of touch with reality or psychopathic.
  - ✓ **Don't** be scared: Outside those rare conditions, people with mental disorders are harmless.
  - ✓ **Don't** assume you know how the person feels or thinks.
  - ✓ **Don't** imply their illness is incurable.