

YOUNG PEOPLE AND THEIR MENTAL HEALTH

Young people facing serious mental health issues are highly vulnerable, making this both an important field for journalistic attention and one that calls for thoughtful and flexible approaches.

Democratic societies come with a built-in duty of care towards their most vulnerable members. Journalism supports democracy by ensuring the free flow of information that sustains it, and by seeking out and shining light on things that go wrong, holding those responsible to public account. As journalists we cannot ethically play the democracy card to justify our work if we simultaneously ignore the needs of vulnerable people about whom we report. A basic principle of good journalism is to minimize harm. So in covering sensitive subjects like this one, we adjust our approach and practices to fulfill our duty responsibly.

Constructive, incisive and knowledgeable journalism can help. Our stories may at times be shocking, but shock has its value and a place in serious reporting that examines problems and their causes, teases out possible solutions and, where appropriate, seeks accountability. Without such added value, however, shock is little more than “trauma porn.”

Canada has the third highest rate of youth suicide in the industrialized world, and suicide – while not an inevitable outcome of psychological distress – is a significant indicator of poor mental health. Stress and anxiety for young people has increased significantly over the past decade. By the age of 18,

“When we are talking about young people, we have to layer in the vulnerability that comes with the stage of development that they’re at, where their brain development is at, all the really complex contexts within which they operate.”

Dr. Joanna Henderson,
CAMH & University of Toronto;
Executive Director, Youth
Wellness Hubs Ontario

20% of Canada’s young people have experienced significant mental health problems, with less than a third getting access to or making use of services.

General assignment reporters are increasingly likely to be called on at short notice to cover a wide variety of stories involving young people and mental health problems. A basic understanding of context will help them work more accurately and quickly, avoiding making things worse for the subject of the story or others like them. Better-informed work will also help to reduce misconceptions and false assumptions on the part of readers and audiences. First impressions do count.

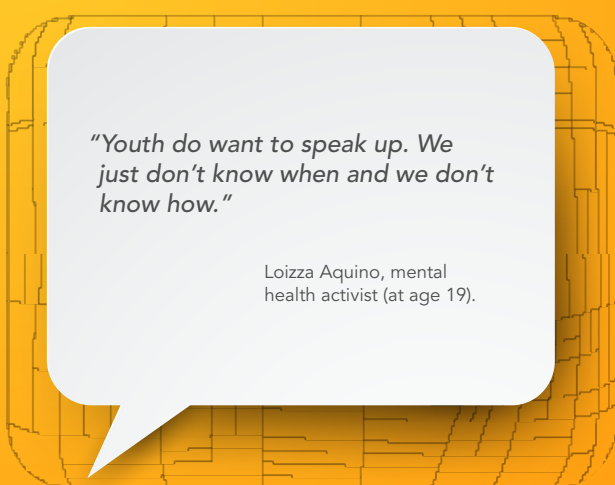
Because this guide is written primarily for these “first-responder” journalists, we have concentrated on stories involving young people and mental health that are likely to be encountered in Canada. Journalists, however, should respect the rights and dignity of children, youth and young adults everywhere,

and in all circumstances. For health, feature and investigative journalists, or general assignment ones who want to dig deeper, more detailed information, discussion and resources can be found on the Mindset website.

Seventy per cent of diagnosed mental health disorders are first observed in childhood or adolescence - times when the still-developing brain leaves many young people vulnerable and confused by society's mixed messages. Social, financial and identity issues contribute to the increased mental turmoil with which today's adolescents contend. Growing up was never easy, but children now are learning to find their feet in a more bewildering world than ever before.

VOICES, AGENCY & CONSENT

Journalists should include the voices of children and youth in their stories but must adjust their approach and interviewing techniques appropriately. Hearing directly from young people makes for more powerful and compelling journalism. Knowing



"Youth do want to speak up. We just don't know when and we don't know how."

Loizza Aquino, mental health activist (at age 19).

they are being heard can help to relieve young people's frustration and emotional distress.

But vulnerability cannot be overlooked. When time permits, consider consulting with community mental health workers about potential interview choices. In any case, getting informed consent for an interview needs to be explicit, the more so as the possibility of negative consequences rises.

Judgement is required to determine whether circumstances warrant obtaining parental consent to interview a young person. In Canada, there is no legal requirement to do so. Some guidelines that follow academic research or medical practice specify that parental consent is required before interviewing any minor. That, however, takes no account of the realities of daily journalism or of journalism's primary focus on public interest. Journalists nevertheless should act ethically, minimizing harm as much as possible within their role.

The dilemma is well expressed in CBC Policy: "Children and youth do not necessarily have the experience to weigh the consequences of publication of their statements. They nevertheless enjoy freedom of expression and the right to information. Their realities and concerns cannot be fully reflected without being heard in our reporting."

Some parents could block an interview for reasons that are opposed to a child's best interests. It can also be very frustrating to a young person to be told that their voice cannot be heard without someone else's consent. In difficult cases, a solution could be to do the interview without parental consent, but withhold the young person's identity.

In obtaining consent from a minor who will be identified, make sure they understand that some of what they say may be

published or broadcast; that not everything they say will be; and that other people may be interviewed as well to corroborate or dispute what they say.

Remember that proper consent is based on a reasonable understanding of the potential consequences of one's actions. That requires, by definition, the ability to anticipate and weigh outcomes in the future. The undeveloped frontal lobe in children, adolescents and even early adults (particularly in males) makes it very difficult, if not impossible, for them to accurately foresee and adequately understand the impact of their actions. In a world in which what is reported is more universally accessible and durable than ever, reporters and editors have a moral duty to consider disguising the identity of minors whose admissions could come back later to ruin their lives.

A degree of power-sharing can build trust and lead to more insightful reporting in the public interest and the interest of the child. With appropriate editorial line agreement, it may also be acceptable to ease the general rule that interviewees are not permitted to vet stories before broadcast or publication. Where a young interviewee has been traumatized or upset, for example, a reporter might go over a draft of the story with them for the purpose of clarifying facts, making it clear this does not grant them a veto or control of how the story is presented. Such decisions should be made on a case-by-case basis. Go to the Mindset website for further exploration of these important issues.

INTERVIEWING TECHNIQUE

Best practice already calls for journalists to adjust their interviewing style when the person is traumatized or vulnerable. Doing so yields better results and also reduces potential harm.

“Go in with an open mind and authentic commitment to engaging and understanding what’s going to be helpful in this context, given the potential risks but also the potential benefits.”

Dr. Joanna Henderson, CAMH
& University of Toronto;
Executive Director, Youth
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Remember that every story is unique to those involved, even if at first it seems similar to others you have covered. Avoiding stereotypical story framing starts with recognizing the individuality of the people you ask to help you understand and convey it, especially if they are children.

A young person being approached for an interview should never be made to feel pressure to comply. Reporters who explain why they think an interview would be helpful and then make it clear that it’s the young person’s right to decide whether to agree will have taken an important first step towards establishing trust. Once an interview is agreed, the reporter should offer to conduct it in a quiet place nearby if circumstances permit, and make clear that the subject can decline to answer any question that makes them uncomfortable.

The interview should not begin without either making it clear that the subject will not see the story before publication or broadcast, or being explicit about the terms of pre-publication access. Transparency here might derail the interview, but that risk is warranted because of the naïveté and vulnerability of young people in these circumstances. For further discussion and background, go to the Mindset website.

Questions generally should be “open-ended” – helping to move the narrative along without implying an expected answer or a binary choice. In TV and radio interviews in which brevity is necessary, it is sometimes best to allow the story to unfold in whatever order the interviewee feels comfortable with, after which they can be asked to summarize parts of it more succinctly

“It’s not our story, it’s their story. Maybe we need to listen more and ask fewer questions in a way, and be less directive, because these kids are thinking and they’re powerful and they’re insightful. And they don’t always know what they need, but they need something and they’re asking for help. And I think if we start thinking about us as a way of communicating what they need, and then demanding answers and services and accountability from other people, maybe that’s how we can change our reporting a little bit.”

Karen Pauls,
National Reporter, CBC News

if necessary, still in their own words. The old adage that the first telling is always the best may not hold when the interviewee is young and feels under pressure. Keep the length of the interview appropriate to the person's age. If circumstances require a longer interview with a young person, allow breaks.

In all of this, remember that you are a journalist and not a social worker. You should not become involved in trying to resolve an individual's situation directly. If you have concerns, contact social authorities and let them handle it.

BWARE OF TRIVIALIZATION

Serious as some situations are for young people, it is unhelpful if media reports paint virtually all of them as having major mental health issues. When minor stresses are generalized and treated as dramatically as serious concerns, young people may find it harder to reach out for the help they need, feeling that if everyone is in the same boat, they should be able to handle their problems alone. Journalists should recognize that exaggeration can be as harmful as indifference. If in doubt, consult a mental health professional in the community to put the story in context.

BWARE OF REPEATING WHAT 'EVERYONE KNOWS'

When reporting about young people and their mental health we need to be especially wary of echoing common assumptions. Social media use, for example, is widely assumed to contribute to young people's mental health problems. But scientific studies have been found it to have both positive and negative influences on them, with frequency and quality of use emerging as key factors, rather than total screen time. Similarly, playing online videogames – often popularly associated with antisocial outcomes – has been found to improve

concentration skills. Check the Mindset website for updates on the latest research findings.

PHOTOGRAPHS AND IDENTIFICATION

There are circumstances in which it is simply not practical to try to obtain consent before taking photographs of children and youth – an obvious example being a school shooting in which children stream out with their hands up. Young people taking part in a public march or demonstration would be another. It should nevertheless be normal practice to obtain consent in less dynamic situations when mental health is an issue.

Using photographs posted on social media sites by minors can have legal consequences, unless attribution is made and permission obtained. An exception to the latter may be using a photograph of themselves posted by a minor with public access, but it is always better to ask.

Using a photograph of a minor posted by someone else, even in a public setting, should not be done without careful consideration of any risk to the subject. Photographs posted in circumstances involving bullying should not normally be used, unless no more harm can be done to the victim and the picture has clear deterrence value.

There are also circumstances under which identification of minors is prohibited under provisions of the federal *Youth Criminal Justice Act* (YCJA), the *Criminal Code* or provincial/territorial legislation such as Ontario's *Provincial Offences Act*, *Mental Health Act* and *Child and Family Services Act*. Courts can also issue publication bans on identification in civil cases.

The YCJA prohibition on identification extends to young witnesses and victims of crimes alleged to have been committed

"Kids aren't born resilient. Resilience is something that we build up over time, by going through difficult circumstances, by coming through it and understanding who our people are, who's got my back, where can I turn for support?"

Ainsley Krone, Deputy Manitoba
Advocate for Children and Youth

by a person under the age of 18, as well as to the alleged perpetrator. There are exceptions, including one that, in cases where a young victim or witness has died, allows parents to agree to the publication of their child's identity. Legal advice is recommended when any of these situations arises.

RESILIENCE AND HOPE

Stories about resilience and hope are important and are a helpful part of accurately covering the mental health of young people. News of steps towards alleviation of a problem is as important as reporting on the problem itself. Such developments and initiatives should be reported, and tested critically, remembering to include young people's perspectives. Many young people who find themselves in emotional difficulties do in fact find ways to make the moment pass, alone or with help. Journalists can help by mentioning this in their

stories, without implying fault of the part of those who have not yet done so. Adding information about where to turn if readers are feeling overwhelmed or suicidal is also good practice.

MULTIPLE SUICIDES

If suicide or potential suicide features in your story, please also refer to the suicide chapter in this guide. Be aware that suicide contagion and suicide clusters are not the same phenomenon. Clusters – which may be more likely to occur among young people – are differentiated by the fact that those involved were connected to one another before the first suicide or attempted suicide occurred. Such groups, whether gathered in person or through social media, often form around a shared vulnerability.

Contagion is a term properly applied to copy-cat suicides among people with no previous personal connection to the trigger or to one another. They are assumed to have learned about the initial death through news reports, social or entertainment media or by word of mouth. Much deeper consideration of this phenomenon and its varied implications for journalism is contained in the suicide chapter.

Members of a group within which a suicide cluster forms usually do not need the media to tell them that a death has occurred. Yet the possibility of contagion outside such groups must also be considered, with care also taken not to present the deaths as a solution to problems or to detail methods used.

INDIGENOUS YOUTH

If your story concerns young Indigenous people, be sure to read chapter 8, *Mental Illness Among Indigenous Peoples of Canada*, which debunks stereotypes and explores why

Indigenous Peoples suffer disproportionately (but not uniformly) from mental illness compared with the Canadian population as a whole.

INVESTIGATIVE WORK

There is an honourable place in every branch of journalism for investigative work that seeks to bring abuses or failings to light and to hold people, institutions or systems accountable. In investigative work involving the mental health of young people, the balance between public and private considerations may sometimes need adjustment. General guidelines intended to protect children should never be used to try to block or inhibit such enquiries. Equally, journalists should do all they can to minimize collateral damage, short of rendering the reporting ineffective.

➤ CHECKLISTS

- ✓ **Do** act ethically, reducing potential harm as much as possible within journalism's legitimate role.
- ✓ **Do** include the voices of children, youth and young adults in stories about them.
- ✓ **Do** consult appropriate professionals to help establish the context and significance of the story.
- ✓ **Do** explain clearly why an interview is needed, how it will be used and that the young person has a right to decline.
- ✓ **Do** take into account the inherent vulnerability of children and youth due to stages of brain development.
- ✓ **Do** include discussion of possible consequences when obtaining consent for interviews from young people.
- ✓ **Do** obtain additional parental consent when appropriate and circumstances permit.
- ✓ **Do** adjust interviewing technique to the circumstances, avoiding leading questions.
- ✓ **Do** keep interview length age-appropriate, providing breaks if necessary.
- ✓ **Do** consider relaxing protocols to give a traumatized young person some share in editorial control.
- ✓ **Do** include appropriate mention of resilience and hope, action being taken to alleviate problems and local resources for young people in emotional difficulties.

► CHECKLISTS

- ✓ **Don't** pressure young people to give interviews.
- ✓ **Don't** focus stories on shocking aspects alone. 'Trauma porn' is lessened when reporters dig deeper.
- ✓ **Don't** frame stories stereotypically.
- ✓ **Don't** rely on common assumptions about the influence of social media, video games, social, financial or gender issues – seek facts.
- ✓ **Don't** exaggerate minor concerns, which can make some young people feel they must solve their problems without help because 'being in emotional trouble is normal'.
- ✓ **Don't** cross the line between journalism and social work by direct intervention.
- ✓ **Don't** concede editorial control to professionals or organizations consulted for advice.
- ✓ **Don't** breach legal requirements regarding identification of minors, including as witnesses, in certain circumstances.