



Talking to the media about alcohol & other drugs: Guidelines for consumers

Having a personal story to tell is often a requirement for an article to be published by mainstream media outlets. Personal stories make it easier for audiences to relate to the content of an article and increase the likelihood that it will be read: it's why they usually appear at the start of a story.

Sharing of personal experiences of the impacts of AOD use, treatment and recovery provides opportunities to challenge common myths and stereotypes. People who have lived experience of AOD use (and affected family members) have a unique capacity to connect to a broad audience that researchers or AOD workers do not.

Sharing personal stories is important, but so is recognising the potential risks involved and what impact they may have on your own (or your family's) wellbeing. These risks include:

- **Exposure** – Use of your name &/or image can have a lasting impact. Once published, you have no control over where (or with whom) stories are shared. Think about how comfortable you are with a wider range of people (including friends, family members, potential employers etc) knowing your story.
- **Poor journalism** – Misrepresentation of people's stories (or what they have said in an interview) is a common occurrence. Think about how much trust you might have in a journalist (or the outlet they work for) to respect your story.
- **Relapse** – If you are in recovery, how confident are you in your capacity to cope with negative exposure? What supports to you have in place to help you prepare for sharing your story and deal with any consequences?

Use stories

Depending on the type of story, journalists will sometimes want to speak to someone who currently uses a particular drug type. Typically, the way that use is portrayed in media coverage emphasises potential harm. There are always exceptions, but journalists (or their editors) are likely to have the same stigmatising attitudes towards drugs (and the people who use them) that exist in the wider community. These attitudes are likely to influence how you (and your drug use) are portrayed.

Treatment stories

There are particular risks associated with participating in media stories when you are in the early stages of recovery. Journalists often want to do stories about treatment services but people can be highly vulnerable at this point, particularly if they are currently in a treatment service and are asked to participate by their treatment provider.

Remember, treatment providers have a responsibility to protect your privacy and to avoid putting you in a position where your treatment and/or recovery could be put at risk. If you're thinking about doing it, try to make sure that you have as much information as possible to help you decide and ask what supports will be available to you before, during and after you share your story. If you feel like you're being pressured to participate, or to say things that don't represent your experience, don't do it.

Even if you have agreed to participate, you are free to withdraw your consent at any time if you are concerned about the direction of the story, how you are being treated or if you are not being provided with enough support. Just keep in mind that, once a story has been published, it's out of your hands.



Recovery stories

If you're further along in your recovery, you may be more confident in your capacity to deal with the potential risks.

If you're not currently engaged with a support group or service, you might want to consider speaking to someone to help you decide/prepare. See the list of organisations below who might be able to talk it through with you. Informed choices

To help you make a fully informed decision about sharing your story or speaking to a journalist, try asking the following questions:

- What is the story going to be about?
- What is the context? Why is this story of interest now?
- Who will benefit from the story? Is it pushing an agenda?
- Who is the journalist (and who are they working for)?
- How have they covered AOD issues in the past (are they respectful or sensationalist)?
- Will they just be talking to me, or will there be other people participating in the story?
- Where will the story be published (newspaper, tv, radio, online, social media)?
- Will there be identifying details included (name, image, voice)?
- How do they want to contact me (email, phone, face-to-face)?
- Will I have a chance to see the article (and provide feedback) before it is published?
- What can I do if I am misrepresented in the story?
- Who can support me through this process?

Support

Even after making a fully informed decision, participating in media interviews or related coverage can be a challenging process. It's always a good idea to have someone to support you along the way.

Mindframe Media (a government-funded project working to improve media reporting of mental health and suicide) have developed a useful guide to help consumers and carers prepare for public speaking or media interviews.

The guide is not focussed on alcohol and other drugs, but there are some good general tips to consider.

Media and Public Speaking: A Mindframe Guide for Consumers and Carers can be downloaded from www.mindframe-media.info

Other support options

If you are currently engaged with treatment or support services, your worker(s) may be able to help. Peer and family supports are also important.

For more information about support from peer and consumer advocacy organisations in your area, contact:

Australian Capital Territory

- Australian Injecting & Illicit Drug Users League (AIVL) www.aivl.org.au
- Canberra Alliance for Harm Minimisation & Advocacy (CAMHA) www.cahma.org.au

New South Wales

- NSW Users & AIDS Association (NUAA) nu-aa.org.au

Northern Territory

- Northern Territory AIDS & Hepatitis Council (NTAHC) www.ntahc.org.au
- Territory Users Forum (TUF) www.aivl.org.au/territory-users-forum/

Queensland

- Queensland Injectors Voice for Advocacy & Action (QuIVAA) quivaa.org.au
- Queensland Injectors Health Network (QuIHN) www.quihn.org

South Australia

- Health Consumers Alliance for South Australia (HCASA) www.hcasa.asn.au
- Hepatitis SA hepatitissa.asn.au

Tasmania

- Advocacy Tasmania advocacytasmania.org.au
- Tasmania Council on AIDS, Hepatitis & Related Diseases (TasCAHRD) www.tascahrd.org.au

Victoria

- Harm Reduction Victoria (HRV) hrvic.org.au
- Association of Participating Service Users (APSU) www.sharc.org.au/program/association-of-participating-service-users/

Western Australia

- Western Australian Substance Users Association (WASUA) www.wasua.com.au

