



Headlines
promoting mental health in the media

Working with  mind

Supporting our colleagues

A guide for journalists and media professionals



WITH SUPPORT FROM



Helpful definitions

For the purpose of clarity, when we refer to ‘mental health’ in this guide we are using it in the broadest possible sense. Some useful definitions to terms used in this guide can be found below.

Mental health

We all have mental health, just as we all have physical health. How we feel can vary from good mental wellbeing to difficult feelings and emotions, to severe mental health problems.

Mental wellbeing

Mental wellbeing is the ability to cope with the day-to-day stresses of life, work productively, interact positively with others and realise our own potential. When we talk about wellbeing we are referring to mental wellbeing.

Poor mental health

Poor mental health is when we are struggling with low mood, stress or anxiety. This might mean we're also coping with feeling restless, confused, short-tempered, upset or preoccupied. We all go through periods of experiencing poor mental health – mental health is a spectrum of moods and experiences and we all have times when we feel better or worse.

Mental health problems

We all have times when we struggle with our mental health. A mental health problem is when difficult experiences or feelings go on for a long time and affect our ability to enjoy and live our lives in the way we want. You might receive a specific diagnosis from your doctor, or just feel more generally that you are experiencing a prolonged period of poor mental health.

Common mental health problems

These include depression, anxiety, phobias and obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD). These make up the majority of the problems that lead to one in four people experiencing a mental health problem in any given year. Symptoms can range from the comparatively mild to very severe.

Severe mental health problems

These include conditions like schizophrenia and bipolar disorder which are less common. They can have very varied symptoms and affect your everyday life to different degrees, and may require more complex and/or long-term treatments.

Work-related stress

Work-related stress is defined by the Health and Safety Executive as the adverse reaction people have to excessive pressure or other types of demand placed on them at work. Stress, including work-related stress, can be a significant cause of illness. It is known to be linked with high levels of sickness absence, staff turnover and other issues such as increased capacity for error. Stress is not a medical diagnosis, but severe stress that continues for a long time may lead to a diagnosis of depression or anxiety, or other mental health problems.

Burnout

Burnout isn't technically a diagnosis, but instead refers to a collection of symptoms. You may feel exhausted, have little motivation for your job, feel irritable or anxious and you may see a dip in your work performance.



Introduction

Being able to cope with pressure is often seen as an integral part of a journalist's DNA. The first comprehensive research into journalists' mental health was carried out two decades ago, showing that journalists are largely resilient. However recent years have ratcheted up work demands for many in our industry.

At the same time few feel able to ask for help when support structures are patchy, invisible or non-existent. In a fast-paced industry, juggling work is sometimes seen as a badge of honour and putting your hand up to say you're struggling is taboo.

Journalists facing job cuts, or financial insecurity or those who come from communities or identities marginalised by our traditional media, may feel even more reluctant to speak about their experiences for fear of the impact this might have on their reputation or career progression. Freelancers, who largely work in remote settings but who are part of a wider network, may also seek or need support but can experience challenges in accessing it.

Although many of us are generally reticent to speak about our mental health, conversations with trusted colleagues, either in newsrooms, external support groups, or peer-to-peer networks can be a source of solace and comfort at work.

Newsrooms still retain their hierarchical and macho structures even now, but trust and support can also come from line managers who care about modelling empathy and good leadership.

As journalists, we can be there for our colleagues and fellow journalist friends too and support them when they are struggling with their mental health.

At **Headlines Network**, we want to work with all journalists – whether they are freelancers or newsroom leaders – to create environments where everyone feels safe to acknowledge, support and achieve good mental health at work.

In late 2021, we launched a pilot series of workshops for journalists across the UK at different stages of their careers. More than 120 journalists from diverse backgrounds, media and geographical regions participated in the programme.

This guide has been made possible with the support of the **Google News Initiative**. It is drawn from our recognition of the realities of the journalism industry, combined with insights from **Mind**, the leading mental health charity, and good practice tips collated during our workshop conversations with colleagues. We are grateful to all of them for supporting the creation of this work.

This guide will give you:

- An understanding of the potential signs to spot in a colleague who might be struggling in the newsroom
- An understanding of how to approach a conversation with a colleague who you are worried about
- An understanding of what to say and not say in a conversation with a colleague
- An understanding of appropriate boundaries
- An understanding of how and where to signpost

This guidance is for anyone working in journalism who is worried about a colleague. Some of the tips will also be useful for line managers who are concerned about someone they manage. But we know that managers play a key role in supporting their teams, and have more formal responsibilities for employee wellbeing, so we will be developing more detailed guidance for line managers specifically in the future.



Spotting the signs of poor mental health

Colleagues who know their fellow journalists well are often in a good position to spot any signs of stress or poor mental health at an early stage. Often, the key is a change in typical behaviour, for example a colleague who is often social and participatory in meetings seeming to suddenly withdraw.

Symptoms will vary, as each person's experience of poor mental health is different, but there are some broad, potential signs to look out for. These are summarised in the table on the following page.

It is important to remember that displaying one or more of the below signs does not mean a colleague has a mental health problem. It might be a sign of another health issue or something else entirely. Some of the indicators below might also be a sign of poor mental wellbeing and it is important to remember that this can be a healthy response to events, for example feeling low and tearful following a family bereavement. Be sure not to make any assumptions, jump to conclusions, or listen to third party gossip – approach your colleague and check in with them directly.

We also know that sometimes there is no outward sign that someone is experiencing poor mental health so it is important we create an open culture where people feel able to talk to colleagues and seek support.



Physical signs

- ✔ Fatigue
- ✔ Indigestion or upset stomach
- ✔ Headaches
- ✔ Appetite and weight changes
- ✔ Joint and back pain
- ✔ Changes in sleep patterns
- ✔ Visible tension or trembling
- ✔ Nervous trembling speech
- ✔ Chest or throat pain
- ✔ Sweating
- ✔ Constantly feeling cold

Psychological signs

- ✔ Anxiety or distress
- ✔ Tearfulness
- ✔ Feeling low
- ✔ Mood changes
- ✔ Indecision
- ✔ Loss of motivation
- ✔ Loss of humour
- ✔ Increased sensitivity
- ✔ Distraction or confusion
- ✔ Difficulty relaxing
- ✔ Lapses in memory
- ✔ Illogical or irrational thought process
- ✔ Difficulty taking information in
- ✔ Responding to experiences, sensations or people not observable by others
- ✔ Increased suicidal thoughts

Behavioural signs

- ✔ Increased smoking and drinking
- ✔ Using recreational drugs
- ✔ Withdrawal
- ✔ Resigned attitude
- ✔ Irritability, anger or aggression
- ✔ Over-excitement or euphoria
- ✔ Restlessness
- ✔ Lateness, leaving early or extended lunches
- ✔ Working far longer hours
- ✔ Intense or obsessive activity
- ✔ Repetitive speech or activity
- ✔ Impaired or inconsistent performance
- ✔ Uncharacteristic errors
- ✔ Increased sickness absence
- ✔ Uncharacteristic problems with colleagues
- ✔ Apparent over-reaction to problems
- ✔ Risk-taking
- ✔ Disruptive or anti-social behaviour



CASE STUDIES: SPOTTING THE SIGNS

“With the people I know best it’s picking up on subtle cues. They might not be quite as jovial or they are more withdrawn.”

Anil

Anil Dawar, who works on the news desk of a UK national newspaper, has been supporting his colleagues during the pandemic. “With the people I know best it’s picking up on subtle cues. They might not be quite as jovial or they are more withdrawn. There’s also the importance of listening to what other people are saying about someone who may need support.” In one case a colleague confided in him that they were struggling. Once that happened Anil felt he could “engage in a conversation where I could share my own feelings to help them and myself at the same time”.

Natasha

Losing face-to-face contact at work during Covid-19 added a further complication for **Natasha Hirst**, a freelance photographer, who is deaf and uses a cochlear implant to hear and also to aid lipreading. “I try to check in with my colleagues whenever I have a chat with them. That became a bit easier in the pandemic, because there was a recognition that everybody had had a hard time.” The effects of being in lockdown still continue to be felt as the world now opens up. “If I’ve been speaking to a colleague and I’m thinking they look tired or stressed, I’ll ask them, ‘You look tired. Are you alright?’ And then that can often open up a conversation.”

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Approaching a conversation if you're worried about someone

If you think that a colleague might be struggling or experiencing a difficult time then you might want to check in with them. Here are some top tips on how to start the conversation.

Choose an appropriate place

Somewhere private and quiet, away from the newsroom, where the person may feel more comfortable and there are no power dynamics. You could consider a local coffee shop if there isn't a suitable place in the workplace.

For remote workers, you can ask if they would like to meet you for a walk, or a chat if they are comfortable with that, or have the conversation virtually.

Encourage people to talk

People can find it difficult to talk about their mental health. Ask simple, open and non-judgmental questions and let people explain in their own words how they're feeling and what's going on for them. See our conversation checklist below for some suggestions on questions to ask.

Don't make assumptions

Don't try to guess what might be going on for someone and how this might affect their ability to do their job – many people are able to manage their mental health and perform their role to a high standard but may require support when experiencing a difficult period.

Listen to people and respond flexibly

Everyone's experience is different so treat people as individuals and focus on the person, not the problem. Adapt your support to suit the individual and help them to explore their own solutions to any work-related difficulties they're experiencing.



Respect someone's privacy

People need to feel reassured that you will not share this more widely as they might be sharing sensitive and personal information with you.

Reflect on your privilege

Be aware that the industry has a poor record when it comes to diversity, representation and inclusion. It would be helpful to reflect on your experiences and the privileges you may have if you're approaching someone from a different background to yours.



Discuss next steps

Support your colleague to agree on possible next steps. This might be seeking support from their GP or speaking to their line manager. If they're unsure on how to broach a conversation with their line manager about the type of support that might be helpful, looking at [Mind's Wellness Action Plan](#) template could be a useful tool. However, if they are experiencing a mental health problem then they should seek professional help.

Encourage people to seek advice and support

Next steps might also involve seeking support. If your employer has an Employee Assistance Programme (EAP), you might suggest your colleague get in touch to explore support options. The Mind Infoline can signpost people on to support and their network of local Minds across the country can also help source advice and support. See our section on signposting below for further information.

Reassure people

People may not always be ready to talk straight away so it's important to reassure them that you are available to listen when they are ready to talk and remind them of the wider support that is available. It's also really important to reassure someone that the conversation is not going to impact their work progression.

Seek advice and support yourself

You might want to seek advice and support yourself or simply increase your understanding on some of what may have been discussed.

Mentors who are separate and not connected to your place of work can be a useful and impartial sounding board for you, particularly around mental health issues that are related to job performance and progression if that is what your colleague has shared with you. News organisations are increasingly setting up mentorship projects and networks such as [Women in Journalism](#) have a programme for their members. Mentors may have better mental health practices at their place of work which you can take to your newsroom leaders as suggestions.

Conversation checklist

Our conversation checklist and question suggestions below can help you start a conversation with a colleague who you are worried about.

Facilitating the conversation

- ✔ Avoid interruptions – switch off phones, ensure colleagues can't walk in and interrupt
- ✔ Ask simple, open, non-judgemental questions
- ✔ Avoid judgemental or patronising responses
- ✔ Speak calmly
- ✔ Maintain good eye contact
- ✔ Listen actively and carefully
- ✔ Encourage the employee to talk
- ✔ Show empathy and understanding
- ✔ Be prepared for some silences and be patient
- ✔ Focus on the person, not the problem
- ✔ Avoid making assumptions or being prescriptive

Questions to ask

- ✔ How are you doing at the moment?
- ✔ You seem to be a bit down/upset/under pressure/frustrated/angry. Is everything OK?
- ✔ What would you like to happen? How?
- ✔ What support do you think might help?
- ✔ Have you spoken to your GP or looked for help anywhere else?
- ✔ How do you feel about speaking to your line manager about support from them that would be helpful?
- ✔ Is there anything I can do to help?

Questions to avoid

- ✔ You're clearly struggling. What's up?
- ✔ We've all noticed a change in you, why won't you tell us what's going on?
- ✔ Why can't you just get your act together?
- ✔ Everyone else is in the same boat and they're okay. Why aren't you?
- ✔ Who do you expect to pick up all the work that you can't manage?



CASE STUDIES: STARTING A CONVERSATION

“What we can do and what I’ve been trying to do is just engage in conversation and ask: ‘Are you okay?’ It makes such a huge difference to someone just checking in.”

Dhruti

“When it comes to offering support to colleagues, the pandemic has made people act differently,” says freelance journalist **Dhruti Shah**. “What we can do and what I’ve been trying to do is just engage in conversation and ask: ‘Are you okay?’ It makes such a huge difference to someone just checking in.” Asking this simple question has led “to some really important conversations”, which has secured support and resources for colleagues.

Sarah

Building a reputation as being trustworthy is sometimes as powerful as a direct approach, says **Sarah Ward-Lilley**, a former managing editor, who now works as a media consultant. Even when you model good leadership and empathy, it can take time to “filter through the grapevine” to colleagues. For people to feel comfortable with an approach, it’s helpful when colleagues hear from others that “you’re someone they can talk to”. Peers can also act as a crucial “go-between or bridge” to help start a meaningful conversation with a colleague about mental health.

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CASE STUDIES: OFFERING APPROPRIATE SUPPORT



He took the time to listen. He didn't try to diagnose anything or jump in with two feet. He made it clear that helping me was the priority.

Jon

Jon Birchall, an audience and content director at a UK publisher, took time away from work for his mental health six months into the pandemic. One person who helped him do this was his line manager. “He has a huge team of people and he’s responsible for a significant part of our business,” says Jon. “He took the time to listen. He didn’t try to diagnose anything or jump in with two feet. He made it clear that helping me was the priority. And I should take whatever time it needed to get better.”

Laura

In her last staff newsroom role, freelance journalist **Laura Oliver** chose to apply for an extended period of leave. “I’m so grateful to my bosses that they said yes and allowed me that time. They didn’t really ask why I’d asked for time out, which I found interesting, but they signed it off and, in that moment, I was thrilled. At the time I wasn’t sure that my career was going in the right direction and I wanted to travel for a long time. But when I look back on it, I was massively burned out.”



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A note on boundaries

Connecting with others can help us have a greater sense of belonging and reduce feelings of loneliness and isolation. It can also provide a support system to draw upon when we are finding times tough and enable us to support others when they need us.

Boundaries

Boundaries exist to protect everyone. Being clear about what you can and cannot support a colleague with will help you to manage expectations and protect your own wellbeing.

Boundaries that might be important to consider are:

- **Time:** Knowing how much you can offer your journalist colleague(s) and when you can make yourself available e.g. during regular 'office' hours
- **Knowledge, experience and abilities:** Being clear about your knowledge and experience of mental health. You might have your own personal experience of a mental health problem or have taken a mental health awareness course. You should make clear you are not a mental health professional. Even if you are a Mental Health First Aider, Mental Health Champion or hold a similar role, you should remember your key role is to listen and to signpost to professional support if needed.
- **Confidentiality:** Being clear on what you can and cannot keep confidential and the circumstances when things that have been shared with you might need to be shared with others. You might want to familiarise yourself with your news organisation's safeguarding policy if they have one to understand if you have an obligation to report any concerning conversations internally and contact the emergency services as appropriate if you believe anyone is at immediate risk of harming themselves or others.

Ensuring your wellbeing

Supporting a colleague can be rewarding, but it can also be time-consuming and emotionally overwhelming.

You might also find that discussing subjects or traumatic events close to your own experiences, or that of others close to you, may be triggering – especially if you're feeling unwell yourself.

If you are supporting a colleague, we encourage you to think carefully about how you look after your own wellbeing and make sure you have appropriate support in place.



Signposting to support

It's great to start the conversation in your newsroom or network and we hope that this resource and those we have referenced in this guide help you to do this. Sometimes this can mean that people currently experiencing mental health problems will need some support as sensitive conversations may bring up difficult things.

We would encourage you to highlight the support tools that your employer currently offers, but you may also wish to direct staff to some of the third-party support services available below, particularly if they work as a freelancer or are part of a smaller newsroom.

Mind Infoline

📞 **Telephone: 0300 123 3393**

Mind provides confidential mental health information services. With support and understanding, Mind enables people to make informed choices. The Infoline gives information on types of mental distress, where to get help, drug treatments, alternative therapies and advocacy. Mind also has a network of nearly 200 local Mind associations providing local services.



Samaritans

📞 **Telephone: 116 123**

Whatever you're going through, Samaritans are there to listen – 24 hours a day, 365 days a year. Samaritans offer a safe place for you to talk any time you like, in your own way about whatever's getting to you. They won't judge or tell you what to do, they'll listen to you.

Shout, text support

📞 **Text: SHOUT to 85258**

Shout is a free, confidential 24/7 text messaging support service for anyone who is struggling to cope. The service is anonymous and won't appear on any phone bill.

CALM helpline

📞 **Telephone: 0800 58 58 58**

The CALM helpline is there for anyone who needs to talk confidentially about a tough time they are experiencing. Calls are taken by trained staff who are there to listen, support, inform and signpost you to further information. The helpline is open from 5pm to midnight every day, 365 days a year.

Side by Side, Mind's online community

Side by Side is a supportive online community where you can feel at home talking about your mental health and connect with others who understand what you are going through. We all know what it's like to struggle sometimes, but now there's a safe place to listen, share and be heard. Whether you're feeling good right now, or having a hard time, it's a safe place to share experiences and listen to others. The community is available to all, 24/7. **Side by Side** is moderated daily from 8.30am to midnight.

There are multiple organisations which provide help and support to journalists in the UK. Please note this list is not exhaustive, with many more that can be found online.

Dart Center

The Dart Center for Journalism and Trauma is a resource body and think tank for journalists who cover violence, conflict and tragedy around the world.

Google News Initiative

The Google News Initiative works side-by-side with publishers and journalists to build a more sustainable, diverse and innovative news ecosystem. Its journalism resources page lists the best digital tools from Google and beyond.

Journalists' Charity

The UK charity offers confidential advice and support to journalists of all ages and backgrounds working across the industry. It also provides emergency support and financial assistance.

Journalism Diversity Fund

A fund administered by the NCTJ which awards bursaries to aspiring journalists from socially or ethnically diverse backgrounds who do not have the financial means to support themselves through journalism training.

Journo Resources

A non-profit start-up which creates free-to-use resources and runs practical events across the UK, as well as publishing multiple weekly advice features.

LGBTQ+ Journalism Network

A Facebook group which aims to be a supportive community and network for people who identify as LGBTQ+ and work in, or are studying, journalism in the UK.

National Union of Journalists

Works on behalf of staffers and freelancers in broadcasting, national and regional newspapers, photographers, magazine and book titles. It helps members with legal support and training, upholding the health and safety of journalists at work. The union also has active LGBTQ+ and disabled members' councils.

PressPad

An award-winning social enterprise which links young people with work experience in London with journalists who can offer a spare room.

Rory Peck Trust

An international NGO that provides direct financial and practical support to freelance journalists and their families globally.

The Society of Editors

An industry body for 400 members in national, regional and local newspapers, magazines, radio, television and digital media, media lawyers and academics in journalism education. It campaigns for freedom of speech, the public's right to know, high standards in journalism and diversity in newsrooms.

Women in Journalism

A not-for-profit organisation that helps UK women journalists be empowered in managing their careers. Runs a mentoring scheme for 100+ women each year from diverse social and ethnic backgrounds in addition to a busy events programme.

These guidelines were co-authored by Hannah Storm and John Crowley at Headlines Network and Andrew Berrie and Emma Mamo at Mind. They were designed by Mary Schrider.



Headlines comprises founder Hannah Storm and John Crowley. Over the last two decades they have led newsrooms, journalism safety charities and run news sites. Both are qualified mental health first aiders and bring knowledge and lived experience around mental wellbeing. headlines-network.com

Working with 

Mind is the leading mental health charity in England and Wales (registered charity number 219830). Mind provides advice and support to empower anyone experiencing a mental health problem. Mind campaigns to improve services, raise awareness and promote understanding. mind.org.uk

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