

Section 3: Supporting People with Lived and Living Experience of Drug Use

A journalist reporting on the overdose crisis will often want to talk to someone with lived or living experience of drug use or other related experiences relevant to their story. This takes time to coordinate, and the person with lived/living experience may need an accommodation to ensure their safety (i.e., a pseudonym, video recording from their back, or help with childcare). If you are an organization supporting a person with lived/living experience who will be sharing their story with the media, they may want you to stay with them for support during the interview.

If you are a person with lived/living experience who will be speaking to the media, it is important to understand the risks and rewards when sharing your personal story or experience.

- **Risk:** Your name—and organization's name if you work for one—will be published online and indexed by Google. This means anyone who searches your name or the organization on the internet may find the story. Once a story is published, it remains online indefinitely (unless the outlet takes it down) and is difficult to remove. Ask yourself: is this something I still want online five years from now? Where you are in life—and therefore your views and values—may shift significantly during that time.
- **Reward:** First-person storytelling is a very powerful vehicle for change. It can inspire others, change perceptions, and reduce stigma. It is the most effective way to share information.

“When you speak from your heart, people can feel it in their heart.”

~ Matthew Bonn, Canadian Association of People Who Use Drugs

Signs that you are ready to share¹

- You are *passionate*. You want to share your message so others can benefit.
- You can *articulate* your story. You feel/are ready to talk about your experiences.
- You are *reflective* and in a good place emotionally; you may have already dealt with the topic you are sharing about.
- You take the *initiative*. You are ready to approach individuals and indicate that you want to speak.
- You are *confident*, but you know that it is natural to be nervous.
- You want to *heal*. You want to move on, and you know that by sharing your story, it may help someone else.
- You are *resilient*. You can bounce back from difficulties or challenges.
- You are *motivated*. You have heard others speak, and you want to do the same thing.
- You stay *connected*. You keep in touch with those who support you.

Signs that you are not ready to share²

- You have a lot of *anger*. You feel angry about what you have gone through, the system, or yourself.
- You feel *extreme* or *negative emotions*. You are disturbed by the topic you plan to share.
- You are easily *triggered* into emotional reactions.
- You do not feel *grounded* nor have a sense of stability.

As a person with lived/living experience of drug use, journalists will be interested in your personal experience and how a policy or development in the news affects or affected you.

- If a journalist asks a question that you are uncomfortable answering, it is okay to let them know and ask them to move on to the next question.
- If you find yourself becoming overly emotional and retraumatized while answering a question, it is okay to ask the reporter to stop the interview to give you a few moments to take a break.
- It is good to have someone you trust nearby to support you afterwards if you need it. Many harm reduction activists frequently share their stories; reaching out to them and asking for some tips can help.
- Once you start doing more interviews, you will build relationships with local journalists. It is always best to stick with the people you are most comfortable with. They may even show you the story before it is published.

Helpful Advice

With social media, information spreads in real-time. In this environment, you don't want to engage with someone on Twitter, Facebook, or provide them with an interview if they are acting in bad faith. There are dubious content creators resembling media producing online content, so you want to confirm the credibility of the person you are talking to and where they work. There are a few ways to do this:

- Check out the website of the company they represent. Does it have a long history of content? Is the content fair and balanced?
- Does the person engaging with you have a Twitter account, and is it verified? Nearly all journalists will have a blue check "verified" badge on their Twitter profiles.
- Read a few stories they have recently published and check for language and framing within them. Are they problematic?
- Ask journalists you trust and have good relationships with if they know the individual and whether they work for a reputable news organization.

Opinion Editorials

As you are featured and quoted in more media stories, you may want to start writing your own content for media outlets. Most (from the *Globe and Mail* to CBC) accept either **letters to the editor** or **opinion pieces**. These can give you greater exposure and more room to articulate your views with depth and context. In general, these submissions should be around 600 words, include a headline, and contain accurate information that can be verified. If you include a statistic or fact, make sure to mention where it is from or the source.

Each news outlet will have a different submission process and contact person for opinion pieces (op-eds). This can be found online by Googling the media outlet + "op-ed submissions"; for example, "CBC op-ed submissions" will return this [result](#).



Getting to Tomorrow

Ending the Overdose Crisis

Beyond
COVID-19

[1] Adapted from the Centre for Addiction and Mental Health: <https://bit.ly/3auT1uT>

[2] Adapted from the Centre for Addiction and Mental Health: <https://bit.ly/3auT1uT>