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# safe storytelling:

**a guide for the AFL industry  
to communicate sensitively  
about mental health**

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## Acknowledgement of Country

headspace and the AFL would like to acknowledge Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples as Australia's First People and Traditional Custodians of this land.

We pay our respects to their Elders past, present and emerging and value their continuous connection to their country, waterways, kinship and community.

We are committed to making a positive contribution to the wellbeing of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people.

## what is safe storytelling and why is it important?

Safe storytelling is an approach to communicating about mental health that prioritises:

1. Safety of the person sharing their story
2. Safety of people hearing their story
3. Reducing stigma about mental health

Safe storytelling supports people to talk about their lived experience of mental ill-health in a way that is safe and empowering. It also aims to protect the individual, their audience, the reputation of their organisation and the general community from harm.

As mental health stigma and negative community attitudes shift through public discourse, there are an increasing number of high-profile people looking to share their stories of mental health recovery with their followers and their community. The media reflects public attitudes and values and plays an equally important part in shaping them. Reporting about an individual's experience of mental ill-health in a responsible, accurate and sensitive manner can challenge common misconceptions of mental ill-health and promote positive community discussion. We know that the experience of mental ill-health is relatively common, with 1 in 3 young Australians reporting high or very high levels of psychological distress within the past 12 months ([headspace, 2020](#)).

The Australian Football League (AFL) and headspace have had a youth mental health partnership since 2020, which is committed to reducing stigma around mental ill-health for young people and safely preventing and responding to youth mental health issues in the football community. The AFL have commissioned headspace to develop this safe storytelling guide. Find more information on [headspace here](#) and [Mental Health and Wellbeing at the AFL here](#).

## who is this guide for?

This guide is for media professionals in AFL football clubs, communication teams, state league football administrators and anyone working with or supporting players who would like to share the story of their mental health journey and recovery. This guide aims to create a broad first-step framework, to support you to guide players and the organisations they represent to share their story safely.

## what this guide is not

This guide doesn't replace the provision of ongoing consultation with the player, which may occur over several sessions, to support self-ownership of their story, as well as informing the player about the potential risks and benefits of sharing their story. This guide is not intended to replace comprehensive training for media personnel or individuals wishing to tell their story with the community. We hope that this guide will serve as a reference point for consideration on a range of matters. This includes topics such as privacy, appropriate use of language, consent, working with individuals who have experienced mental ill-health, and balancing the wellbeing of the player and those that support them with news cycle pressures. This guide should be used in conjunction with existing media codes of practise, editorial policies, and individual football club codes of conduct.



# how to use this guide

This guide is split into six sections that should be read in order and then referred to as necessary.

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## part 1

# principles of safe storytelling

Part 1: Principles of safe storytelling

**Safe storytelling is one of many approaches that aims to reduce community stigma and promote ideas of hope and resilience for players and their supporters as they navigate challenging times in their life.**

Safe storytelling is also an advocacy tool designed to help players reflect on what they want to share, how they want to share and who they want to share their story with. Safe storytelling supports the individual to talk about their lived experience in a way that is safe and empowering. It serves to protect the individual, their audience, the reputation of their organisation and the general community from harm. The safe storytelling framework can be used when sharing a lived experience of a range of difficult or potentially traumatic experiences such as mental ill-health, sexual abuse, and harm from Alcohol and Other Drugs (AOD).

Considerations of safe storytelling includes things like:

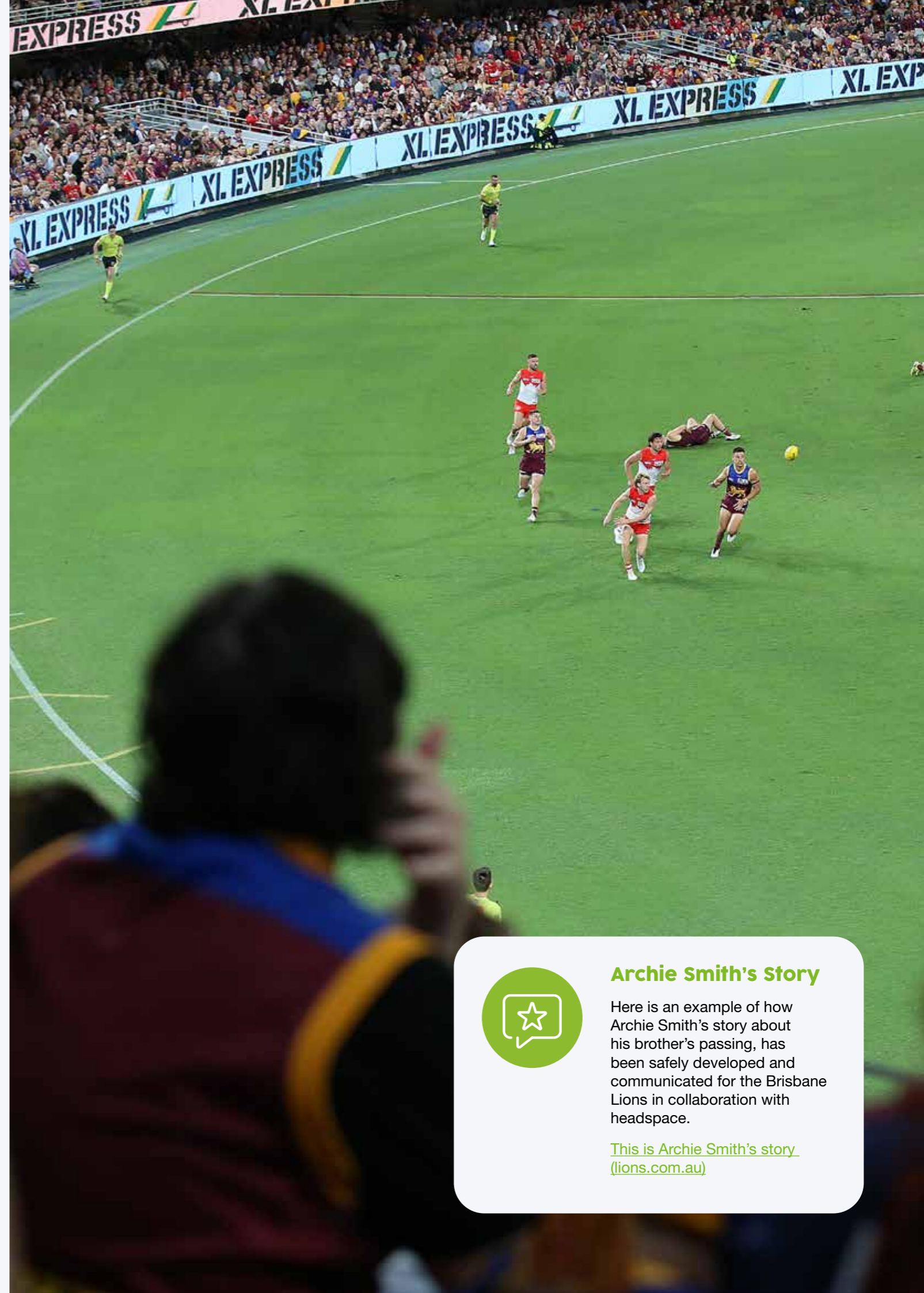
- the language the individual uses to describe their experience
- the details the individual does and doesn't include about their experience
- the overall messaging of the story
- purpose of the story being told in the context of the telling (and what a call to action may be)
- preparation for the process and consequences of stories being told.

**How does it work?**

Stories which explore social and emotional wellbeing themes can have a lasting impact. Effective story telling may increase understanding of risk factors and early warning signs and promote ways people can find support. Safe stories are framed by the following key features:

- Messages of hope
- Avoidance of blame
- Consideration of the effect on the audience
- Empowering

The term 'safety' is used broadly, with the view to protect the psychological, social and physical wellbeing of the player telling the story as well as anyone hearing it.



**Archie Smith's Story**

Here is an example of how Archie Smith's story about his brother's passing, has been safely developed and communicated for the Brisbane Lions in collaboration with headspace.

[This is Archie Smith's story \(lions.com.au\)](https://lions.com.au)

Part 1: Principles of safe storytelling

### Safe storytelling language

When describing young people who are experiencing a mental health difficulty, focus on the person first and, when it's relevant, their mental health difficulty second (e.g., 'a person living with mental illness/mental ill-health').

Using incorrect or negative terminology and language can reinforce stereotypes and further exacerbate myths and misinformation. We also know that negative terminology can increase the likelihood of a person experiencing stigma. To avoid this and protect individuals sharing their story, you might consider using person-centred language. Person-centred language aims to empower individuals by placing emphasis on them rather than their mental health difficulty e.g. 'a person who has experienced mental health difficulties' or 'a person who lives with mental ill-health'. This is a shift from the language of diagnosis which framed a person as synonymous with their mental illness (e.g., describing someone as 'schizophrenic' or 'a manic depressive' this has the effect of being pejorative and disempowering).

You can find out more information about using appropriate, and person-centred language when reporting on mental ill-health and mental illness in the [Mindframe 2020](#) guidelines. When talking from a specific persons point of view, that persons preference of naming / identification should take precedence (e.g. neurodivergent communities have many people who prefer to have 'ownership' of labels 'an autistic person').

### Why does safe storytelling work?

Personal narratives help us to create meaning about the world around us. Historically, narrative and storytelling interventions have been used as an effective public health tool to alter behaviours and reduce the risk of illness and accidents (Petragalia, 2007). Research shows that sharing stories of people who have experienced mental ill-health can increase public awareness, reduce stigma and promote a sense of hope for individuals affected by a similar experience (Mindframe, 2020).

Evidence suggests that young people's identification with sports player stories is a powerful tool for mental health stigma reduction. The University of Michigan has piloted a similar program for student athletes through [Athletes Connected](#). The results found that after engaging with help-seeking stories by other athletes, the students were more comfortable discussing mental ill-health with their teammates and were more likely to consider seeking help.

### What is my role in supporting the player?

As a media professional, setting clear personal boundaries for yourself about the scope and purpose of your role will be important to your own wellbeing as you support the player to tell their story. Personal boundaries are subtle limits that we negotiate in all our relationships, so we feel safe and empowered. The experience of mental ill-health is common, and it is likely that you or someone you care for has shared a similar experience in the past. If we have our own experience of mental ill-health or trauma, we can also feel affected if we are working closely with someone sharing emotionally impactful stories. Upholding boundaries helps us to remain compassionate and objective while we are fulfilling the scope and purpose of our role. You may consider the following questions when helping to navigate your own boundaries:

- What is the scope of my role?
- What are my responsibilities to the player, the club, and the community?
- How can I allow the player to control their narrative?
- Who is available to support me?
- Who else is supporting the player?



**You can find more information about challenging mental health stigma in sport, for an Australian context at [The Conversation](#):**

[Tackling the stigma: how sports can help change perceptions of mental illness \(theconversation.com\)](#)





## part 2

**sensitively working  
with people who have  
experienced mental  
ill-health and want to  
share their story for  
the first time**

## Part 2: Sensitively working with people who have experienced mental ill-health and want to share their story for the first time

## If takes tremendous courage, vulnerability, and strength to share a lived experience of mental ill-health with the public.

As media professionals, you may consider the following when working with a player who would like to share their story. If done sensitively, you can help the player to promote self-ownership of their story as well as informing the player about the potential risks and benefits of sharing.

### Explore the player's purpose of sharing their story

One part of your role as a media professional may be exploring the reasons and underpinning values behind why the player feels motivated to share their story. You may help them make sense of what they would like their story to do for their community, young supporters, and people they care about. Some motivations might include:

- To be an inspiration to young people
- Inspire others to reach out for the help they need
- Reduce stigma about mental health to change society's perceptions
- Raise awareness about the impacts of mental health challenges
- Normalise mental health management as an everyday part of life
- Create narratives of hope
- Advocate for a charity or initiative

It is considered a strength if a player feels clear in their purpose and connected to the values which underpin the motivation to tell their story. Players may feel moments of insecurity and doubt when telling their story to the public. In these moments, they can draw on their connection to personal values and associated motivations to share their story, to work through any difficult moments of vulnerability. Furthermore, delivering a clear message of advocacy might be useful when framing a call to action using storytelling.

### Explore how the story might be used

You may consider explaining how sharing the story may contribute to narratives of hope, or as an effective tool to challenge stigma about mental ill-health in sport. Other considerations include whether the story will be used on social media and providing an estimate on how long their experience will be used as a public example of recovery from mental ill-health. **Some players may not have considered or comprehended that this information will be available for the rest of their career if they choose to share their story of mental ill-health.**

### Consider how the story might be reshaped by news and social media outlets

Young footballers are likely to understand how their job makes them more vulnerable to public scrutiny and exposed to the media. However, you may consider explaining that news outlets may use this disclosure of mental ill-health to reinforce stigmatising messages or conflate the individual's experience of mental ill-health with other difficulties in their life, such as family violence and illicit drug use.

It is also important to acknowledge that a story may be taken out of context by media/social media, and the player may experience a loss of control of the narrative if this occurs. Examples of this may be the use of images by media outlets that are inconsistent with the safe storytelling messaging. An example might be the use of an image of a woman in a bikini being used for a story which contains themes of negative body image or disordered eating.

It may be helpful to reinforce that with careful consideration and safe story crafting, the player will be prepared to manage many challenges that could arise. You may consider emphasising that support will be available for the player from the media team, club officials and their teammates throughout the whole process. This can potentially help bolster confidence for the player amidst uncertainty.

### Sharing the control

A key aspect of safe storytelling is enabling the individual to feel and be in control of the details that they wish to share and how they wish to share. Some ways that you could encourage a sense of shared control for the person sharing include:

- Let the player decide some of the conditions, such as a preference for when and where they craft their story or speak to a media representative.
- Encourage the option for the player to have a friend/relative/support person present when crafting their story or for interviews with press.
- Include them in any decisions you can – for instance, read back their quotes or replay raw tape; allow them to suggest which should be used if relevant.
- Consider giving your copy or draft of a media release to the individual to read before you release to the press.
- Allow the player to tell you when they'd like to take a break from crafting their stories or speaking about their experience. Consider avoiding deadline opportunities to allow for a less pressured approach to the development of the story.
- Check whether it's OK to ask a tough question or to discuss specific aspects of their experience.
- Let the player choose the medium on which they share their story. This could be social media accounts where they are directly sharing with their followers, rather than the mainstream media.

(modified from Dart Centre, 2014)







## part 3

# risks and benefits of storytelling (organisational, individual, community)

## There are obvious benefits and potential risks for the player, their loved ones, teammates, the club, the industry, and the community that need be considered before the player chooses to make the decision to share their story.

This is not an exhaustive list, however it's important to consider the benefits of this important work and how to mitigate the potential risks.

### Individual

Sharing a story may be immensely rewarding for a player. People who engage in safe storytelling through headspace report that it has helped them stay protected, grounded and intentional with their messaging. It has also enabled them to be a role-model to others and be able to demonstrate their values in a public way.

However, if a player chooses to share their story, they may experience some difficult impacts such as:

- Online trolling and cyberbullying
- Commentary in the mainstream media
- Ongoing comments and speculation about their mental health in the future, even when there is no connection to their playing performance or off-field choices
- Being typecast as a mental health spokesperson or ambassador after they have recovered or when they no longer want to be a spokesperson
- Unintentionally causing harm to a vulnerable person (see 'general community below')
- Unwanted attention from people with similar experiences
- Unintentionally perpetuating stereotypes
- Revealing too much about themselves that they are later uncomfortable with
- Putting other people off help seeking or sharing details that could be harmful to the intended audience or the player themselves

*Has the player talked to their family and close friends about their decision to tell their story?*

The player may also need to consider how their disclosures of mental ill-health may impact on their family and friends. It may unintentionally open conversations for their family about mental-ill health that they are unprepared for and not appropriately trained to speak to. It is recommended that the player speaks to their family or friends who may feature as a part of their story or are impacted by their story.

### Managing disclosures from others

When a player publicly opens up about their own experience of mental ill-health, they may also experience a range of young people or their supporters disclosing their own experiences through social media or other means. It may be helpful to develop a 'script', that acknowledges the individual and directs them to an appropriate healthcare service. Continuous exposure to narratives about mental ill-health can be taxing and potentially traumatic. A plan should be in place to manage the safety of the player and those that are in contact with them.



### Organisational

Workplaces that create a psychologically safe environment and support the wellbeing of their staff, tend to experience increases in productivity, job engagement, attraction of top talent and lower staff turnover than less supportive workplaces (WorkSafe, 2021). Mentally healthy workplaces are organisations that are free from psychological hazards like stigma, bullying or discrimination. Creating opportunities for players to undertake activities like safe storytelling, through their football career, can be one of many approaches to promote a positive culture of wellbeing for the organisation.

Clubs should have mental health and wellbeing policies and procedures in place, which can be referred to when communicating about mental health and suicide. These policies may also include escalation procedures to mental health and wellbeing support services if an individual is at risk.

### General community

Safe storytelling can challenge common misconceptions of mental ill-health and promote positive general community discussion.

However, extra care and consideration must be taken if a player wants to include reference to certain topics like eating disorders, suicide and self harm in their story. Research suggests that poor reporting about suicide has been associated with increased rates of suicide and attempts in the general community following reporting (Mindframe 2020, p.10). Similarly, poor and unsafe reporting on eating disorders and self harm can be attributed to an increased risk of harm for the general community if they are exposed to unsafe messaging on these topics. (For more information related to reporting sensitive subjects see [mindframe.org.au](http://mindframe.org.au).)





### Part 3: Risks and benefits of storytelling (organisational, individual, community)

#### The player's community

As a media professional, you can guide the player to share their story in a manner that is safe for the player, the intended audience, and for the broader community that the player may belong to. A player may belong to a range of community groups such as the LGBTIQ+ community or a religious community. It is helpful to reflect on the cultural considerations that may impact how the story is told and perceived by the broader community. Being mindful that:

- The player is not representative of their entire cultural or community group. The player's connection to culture may be considered an important factor in their recovery. However, safe stories benefit from the presence of a range of protective and supportive factors that have assisted the individual to overcome challenges.
- When working with players from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander backgrounds, we encourage engaging with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander advisors. This is to make sure that the language and framing of the player's story is culturally safe and will not promote stigma or risk to the player's community. We acknowledge that there may be limitations in this process, such as lack of access to appropriately trained community Elders and timing constraints. Young Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander players should be encouraged and supported to engage with cultural supports from the beginning of the safe storytelling journey.
- The player's story and experience of mental ill-health may be similar to a range of other young people who share their cultural background. However, it's important to understand that mental ill-health exists as a result of complex biological, psychological and social factors. A player's background, culture or ethnicity is never a cause for mental ill-health.

#### Safeguarding

In the interests of the wellbeing of the player and the intended audience, some safeguarding measures should be considered. It may be helpful to do this in conjunction with the player, their professional supports and their family or friends.

Things to consider:

Has the player had some distance from their experience or are they still receiving acute treatment for their mental ill-health? We acknowledge that the experience of mental ill-health exists on a dynamic continuum, and some people may experience more than one period of mental ill-health throughout their life. We suggest that the player has taken appropriate time to recover from their most recent experience of mental ill-health, grief or loss.

- You may want to encourage the player to speak to their treating health professional about timing and whether it is safe for them to be sharing their story with the public at this stage in their recovery. Just like a physical injury, a player is unlikely to return to the field if they're in intensive physio or in acute pain. The same principles should be applied to mental health recovery.
- To what **purpose** is the player considering sharing their story. Clarity over the message is helpful in framing a **call to action** when using storytelling in an advocacy context.
- Has the individual received appropriate **training** on safe storytelling, in particular the appropriate use of language and framing?
- Has the player been **supported** to manage disclosures from others? Are they well enough to sustain this in the long term?
- Have you considered how pressures of the news cycle may not be beneficial for mental ill-health? It **takes time to create a safe** and dignified story for the player, this may conflict with pressures you are experiencing to have a story ready for the media or competitive news cycles.



## part 4

# responding to requests to share a player's story

**If a player decides to directly speak to you about their journey, your first response should acknowledge it can be a hard step to take and that the process may take some time.**

It is important that you acknowledge:

- *“That sounds like it was really stressful / difficult time.”*
- *“Thank you for telling me, I know it can be hard to open up.”*
- *“I’m so sorry to hear that this has happened to you”*
- *“It sounds like it’s really important that you’ve be able to get some support with all this.”*

Try and avoid rushing the conversation or the outcome and give the player a clear expectation that they will be supported, and there are several steps along the process of sharing safely, which may take some time.

**Responding appropriately if approached by somebody else inquiring on behalf of the player**

If you are approached by somebody else inquiring on behalf of the player such as a coach, club management or mental health supports it is important to consider the individual's privacy and sense of agency in their own story. A player may feel pressured to share their own experience for a range of reasons or as an explanation for a decline in recent performance on the field. Before you make contact, it should be established if the player has given consent for their details to be shared. We encourage the player to lead the process of engaging the club media and caution should be used if the idea appears to be coming from other parties.

**Privacy**

The player's privacy and right to share only certain parts of their journey with the public must always be respected. As discussed previously, there are likely to be other key people involved in the football club who will be assisting the player throughout the process of sharing their story. You may consider briefing the player and their supports on the following:

- Who else are media outlets likely to be contacting to make a comment on the player's story? For example, this could be the player's team members or other people at the club.
- What role will everyone play to support the player in sharing the key messages and preserving the person's confidentiality?
- If contacted by the media for comment, how will these supports reinforce the player's existing position, rather than give media outlets a new angle? How will clear boundaries be enforced?





## part 5

# summary and next steps

## summary

**Safe storytelling is an effective and engaging tool that can be used to advocate for a positive change in community mental health, challenge unhelpful attitudes and educate the AFL and sports community across Australia.**

As a media professional, you will likely be working alongside the player to help them shape and share their story with the public in a manner that is safe and respectful. There are a range of benefits and potential risks that come with engaging in this work. If implemented properly, safe storytelling manages the potential risks and strengthens the positive impacts of the player's story.

We hope that this guide has helped you engage with the preliminary considerations needed to begin your work with the player, and the people that support them.

## next steps

### **Connect to headspace Consultation and Training Program**

headspace offers fee-for service safe storytelling training for AFL players and the professionals who support them. For more information, please contact headspace Consultation and Training Program: [c3@headspace.org.au](mailto:c3@headspace.org.au)

This guide was designed as a complementary resource for media professionals who are looking to enhance their understanding of safe storytelling and is not a replacement for comprehensive training. It is expected that media professionals will undertake training with headspace to consolidate their learnings.





## part 6

**additional resources,  
relevant publications,  
language and reporting  
guidelines, support services  
and glossary**



# glossary

## Mental health

Mental health is a state of wellbeing in which a person can realise their potential, cope with the normal stresses of life, work productively and make a contribution to their community

## Mental ill-health

Mental ill-health refers to mental health problems and diagnosable mental health disorders that affect a person's thoughts, feelings, and behaviour with varying levels of severity and impact on a young person's ability to function.

## Safety

The term 'safety' is used broadly, with the view to protect the psychological, social and physical wellbeing of the player telling the story as well as the intended audience and other media consumers

## Safe storytelling

is an approach to communicating about mental health that prioritises:

1. Safety of the person sharing their story
2. Safety of young people hearing their story
3. Reducing stigma about mental health

## Self-ownership

The right of a person to have integrity and control over ones of life, personal narrative, and body.



# resources and support options for individuals, organisations and the community

## Publications for media reporting

Mind Frame 2020: [Reporting suicide and mental ill-health: a Mindframe resource for media professionals](#)

[Mental ill-health - Mindframe](#)

Dart Centre for Journalism and Trauma

[The Dart Center Style Guide for Trauma-Informed Journalism - Dart Center](#)

Petraglia, Joseph (2007). Narrative Intervention in Behavior and Public Health. *Journal of Health Communication*, 12(5), 493–505. doi:10.1080/10810730701441371

[Mental Health and Wellbeing - AFL.com.au \(https://www.afl.com.au/mental-health-wellbeing\)](https://www.afl.com.au/mental-health-wellbeing)

## Resources for reporting statistics for the media

### Beyond Blue

[Statistics - Beyond Blue \(https://www.beyondblue.org.au/media/statistics\)](https://www.beyondblue.org.au/media/statistics)

### Blackdog institute

[1-facts\\_figures.pdf \(blackdoginstitute.org.au\) \(https://www.blackdoginstitute.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/1-facts\\_figures.pdf?sfvrsn=8\)](https://www.blackdoginstitute.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/1-facts_figures.pdf)

### headspace National Youth Mental Health Foundation

[Insights-youth-mental health-and-wellbeing-over-time-headspace-National-Youth-Mental Health-Survey-2020.pdf \(https://headspace.org.au/assets/Uploads/Insights-youth-mental-health-and-wellbeing-over-time-headspace-National-Youth-Mental-Health-Survey-2020.pdf\)](https://headspace.org.au/assets/Uploads/Insights-youth-mental-health-and-wellbeing-over-time-headspace-National-Youth-Mental-Health-Survey-2020.pdf)

## Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander resources

[Thirrili: Contributing to the broader social wellbeing of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people](#)

[\(https://thirrili.com.au/\)](https://thirrili.com.au/)

[Wellmob - WellMob \(https://wellmob.org.au/\)](https://wellmob.org.au/)

[The Manual of Resources - CBPATSISP \(https://cbpatsisp.com.au/the-manual-of-resources/\)](https://cbpatsisp.com.au/the-manual-of-resources/)

## Mental health in the workplace resources

Your mental health ([headsup.org.au](https://www.headsup.org.au)) (<https://www.headsup.org.au/your-mental-health>)

Young workers: Safety basics - WorkSafe (<https://www.worksafe.vic.gov.au/young-workers-safety-basics>)

Resources for employers | headspace (<https://headspace.org.au/professionals-and-educators/for-employers/mental-health-at-work/>)

## Mental health service providers

Explore all service providers | Head to Health (<https://www.headtohealth.gov.au/service-providers/explore-all-service-providers>)

headspace National Youth Mental Health Foundation (<https://headspace.org.au/>)

Anxiety, depression and suicide prevention support - Beyond Blue ([www.beyondblue.org.au](http://www.beyondblue.org.au))

## Mental health phone helplines:

Kids Helpline: 1800 55 1800

Life line: 13 11 14

Qlife: 1800 184 527

Suicide Call Back Service: 1300 659 467

## Trauma training providers

Professional Development Training ([blueknot.org.au](http://blueknot.org.au))

## Document full URL links

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Insights: youth mental health and wellbeing over time - headspace National Youth Mental Health Survey 2020  
<https://headspace.org.au/assets/Uploads/Insights-youth-mental-health-and-wellbeing-over-time-headspace-National-Youth-Mental-Health-Survey-2020.pdf>

headspace National Youth Mental Health - <https://headspace.org.au/>

Mental Health and Wellbeing at the AFL - <https://www.afl.com.au/mental-health-wellbeing>

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Archie Smith's story - <https://www.lions.com.au/video/980053/this-is-archie-smiths-story>

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Mindframe 2020 guidelines - <https://mindframe.org.au/mental-health/communicating-about-mental-ill-health>

Athletes Connected - <https://athletesconnected.umich.edu/about/>

Challenging mental health stigma in sport, for an Australian context at The Conversation  
<https://theconversation.com/tackling-the-stigma-how-sports-can-help-change-perceptions-of-mental-illness-47261>





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