



The Jed Foundation



Mental Health Storytelling Tips for Writers

in collaboration with The Jed Foundation
and The Black List



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Introduction

Your words have the power to impact your readers' mental health—how they feel about themselves, their place in the world, and their connection to others. Mental health encompasses our thoughts, feelings, behaviors, and the challenges that affect them, as well as the ways we seek resilience, connection, and growth.

For some, fiction is the most powerful way to help them feel seen, open up about their struggles, and inspire meaningful action. Stories with mental health themes can explore conditions like anxiety or depression, life experiences like grief or trauma, or positive actions like therapy and self-care.

Stories have immense potential to:

- **Foster understanding**
Build empathy and challenge stereotypes by humanizing mental health experiences.
- **Inspire hope**
Show that recovery, resilience, and connection are possible through thoughtful portrayals.
- **Encourage action**
Motivate readers to seek help, support others, or engage with mental health topics more deeply.



The potential to help also comes with the risk of harm. Without care, stories can:

- **Reinforce judgment or fear**
Portrayals that misrepresent conditions or experiences can perpetuate harmful myths.
- **Share inaccurate or harmful information**
Including incorrect or potentially dangerous content can lead to the spread of misinformation, as well as contribute to unintended consequences like exacerbating emotional challenges for readers.
- **Intensify pain for those struggling**
Stigmatizing portrayals can contribute to prejudice and alienation.



Whether you are starting a new work or revisiting a long-term project, more thoughtful storytelling, no matter the genre, can validate experiences, offer hope, and contribute to a more compassionate and informed world. Together, we can create narratives that entertain, inform, and empower readers to support themselves and others.



Things to Avoid

Reinforcing Harmful Stereotypes

Avoid portraying characters with mental health challenges as inherently dangerous, broken, or defined solely by their conditions. Steer clear of [stereotypes and tropes](#), focusing on authentic, nuanced portrayals.

Simplifying Mental Health Experiences

Don't oversimplify the causes or solutions to mental health challenges. Represent the complexity of these experiences, including biological, social, and environmental factors, to foster empathy and understanding. [Learn more about factors that impact our mental health.](#)

Providing Dangerous or Inappropriate Details

Be careful about inadvertently teaching dangerous behaviors or unsafe DIY treatments. If your story includes negative outcomes like overdoses, self-injury, or suicide, avoid romanticizing these actions or including overly graphic or triggering details that could negatively affect vulnerable readers. [Learn more.](#)



Using Harmful Language

Avoid outdated terms like “crazy” or “psycho.” Use respectful, person-first language, such as “a person experiencing anxiety” instead of “an anxious person.” [Get more examples of language to use and avoid.](#)

Ignoring Cultural Nuances

Acknowledge cultural differences in how mental health is perceived and addressed. Avoid stereotyping or generalizing across cultures.



Opportunities To Embrace

Depict a Range of Experiences

Show the full mental health continuum, from struggling to thriving, while highlighting less-discussed challenges and conditions. Highlight how mental health evolves over time and varies uniquely across individuals.

Amplify Underrepresented Voices

Portray individuals from underrepresented backgrounds navigating emotional journeys rarely depicted in storytelling. Help readers feel seen and less alone, while showing the potential for hope and healing.



Show Realistic Therapy and Treatment Journeys

Depict characters in therapy or exploring treatment options with the same depth given to their struggles. Show both challenges and rewards to reduce misconceptions and encourage help-seeking.

Highlight Coping Skills and Self-Care

Feature characters using proven coping skills, from mindfulness to movement to journaling, as just a few examples. Present these practices as accessible and practical strategies for anyone.

Explore Meaningful Ways to Help

Portray thoughtful conversations with people who may be struggling. Illustrate what to say and what to avoid, while showing how friends and family can support and encourage help-seeking.

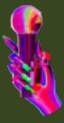
Provide Resources and Calls-to-Action

Include ways for readers to take positive action, whether in an author's note, interviews, promotion, social media, reader's guides, or partnerships with nonprofit organizations.

Set Reader Expectations Thoughtfully

While traditional trigger warnings aren't always used in fiction, one can find thoughtful ways to help readers engage with sensitive topics in a way that feels safe and informed. See tips later in this guide for more details.





Questions To Guide Your Storytelling

These questions are designed to help you assess and enhance the impact of your story:



1. Does my story foster understanding of complex mental health experiences?

Am I portraying the nuances of conditions and challenges in ways that break down stereotypes and build empathy? Would consulting with a mental health expert help me develop ideas and ensure accuracy?

2. Does my narrative humanize mental health?

Am I using a mental health condition or traumatic event as a catalyst for harmful actions or a character's negative transformation? If so, could I adjust that to focus on the humanity and individuality of the character instead?

3. Does my story explore help-seeking or help-giving?

Can I illustrate the process of finding the courage to speak up and the details of seeking help through therapy, community, or other avenues? Could I highlight characters offering meaningful support to others?

4. Am I representing effective coping mechanisms and treatments?

Does my story highlight realistic, evidence-based approaches to mental health care, such as therapy, mindfulness, self-care, community-building, or innovative treatments? Are these portrayed in a way that feels authentic and accessible?

5. Does my story balance realism with hope?

While authenticity about difficulties is crucial, am I also showing that recovery, resilience, and connection are possible?

6. Is there an opportunity to amplify underrepresented voices?

Can I integrate perspectives from marginalized communities or show readers a person like themselves navigating emotional challenges that aren't often depicted?



Thought Starters by Genre

Fantasy

Use allegory or metaphor to represent mental health challenges, creating real-world parallels for emotional struggles and triumphs. Avoid using common characteristics of real conditions to define evil forces, instead focusing on nuanced, empathetic portrayals of resilience, identity, healing and growth.

Romance

Explore how mental health challenges impact relationships, but avoid making romance a solution to personal struggles. Emphasize that taking care of oneself is essential to a healthy relationship, while offering examples of how partners can support a loved one through emotional difficulties.

Mystery/Thriller

Delve into the psychological complexities of characters under stress. Avoid sensationalizing mental health as a motive for violence. Focus on realistic portrayals of trauma, anxiety, and resilience in high-pressure scenarios, creating empathy without reinforcing harmful stereotypes.

Science Fiction

Focus on the opportunities and risks of advanced technology in addressing mental health. Highlight both the potential for innovation and the pitfalls to avoid, such as over-reliance on tech or dehumanizing approaches to care. Ensure that emotional challenges are portrayed with depth, regardless of technological context.

Historical Fiction

If the story includes harmful myths or misunderstandings about mental health, be mindful of how these are portrayed. While it's important to remain true to the historical period, avoid reopening old wounds or perpetuating outdated views that could hinder current understanding of mental health.

Young Adult (YA)

Show enough of the dark details of struggle to make readers feel seen, but be aware of their heightened vulnerability. Balance the portrayal of difficult situations with examples of ways young people their age can cope, seek help, and feel better. Be especially sensitive when addressing potentially triggering topics like suicide and self-harm.



Collaborating with Experts and People with Lived Experience

Collaborating with Subject Matter Experts

When writing about mental health experiences, it can be helpful to learn from mental health professionals. Mental health experts bring clinical knowledge, ensuring your storytelling is accurate, nuanced, and responsible. Collaborating with experts can help create portrayals that are both impactful and respectful.



- **Find Experts**

If you don't have an existing relationship with a mental health advisor, use [expert directories](#) or reach out to mental health nonprofits. Consider seeking a second opinion from another expert if necessary.

- **Consult Early**

Where possible, involve experts at the earliest stages of your writing process to ensure accuracy and avoid potential pitfalls.

- **Set Expectations**

Establish clear timelines for feedback and discuss how feedback will be provided—whether it's focused on critical issues, accuracy, or general suggestions. Be upfront about whether the collaboration is paid, and clarify any potential conflicts in advance.

- **Be Transparent**

Be clear about any aspects of your story that cannot be altered. If you have concerns about particular elements of your narrative, communicate them early.

- **Build Relationships**

Partner with nonprofits, advocacy organizations, or academic institutions to access experts, people with lived experience and resources. These connections can also provide opportunities for outreach and promotion.



Learning from People with Lived Experience

In addition to consulting professionals, speaking with individuals who have lived experience with mental health challenges can provide authentic insights into the emotional realities of these experiences. These personal accounts can add depth and relatability to your storytelling. However, keep the following in mind:

- **Purpose of Engagement**

Lived experiences offer valuable perspectives on the emotional realities and paths to healing, but the information shared may not always reflect the latest research or be universally applicable.

- **Verify Accuracy**

Collaborate with mental health experts to ensure details from lived experiences align with evidence-based practices and to understand how experiences can vary significantly between individuals.

- **Respect Individuality**

Recognize that each person's perspective is unique. Use these stories to bring authenticity and nuance to your characters without generalizing or oversimplifying.

By combining professional insights with personal narratives, you can create stories that are both accurate and deeply resonant, fostering greater understanding and empathy.





Content Warnings and Resources

Reframing Trigger Warnings as Content Guidance

Trigger warnings, while well-intentioned, can sometimes frame trauma as central to a person's identity or suggest avoidance as the only option. A more thoughtful approach involves empowering readers with clear, spoiler-free information about sensitive topics, along with resources to help them cope if topics feel overwhelming, without discouraging engagement.

Provide Clear Notes

Offer brief, descriptive guidance to set reader expectations. For example:

- “This story includes mentions of self-injury and addiction.”
- “Brief depictions of physical abuse appear in certain chapters.”

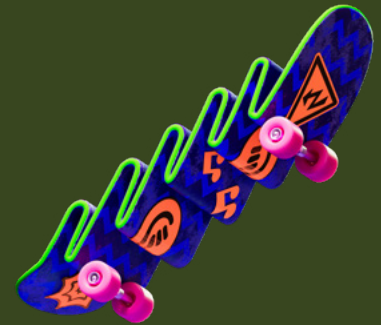
Consider Placement

- **Within the Book**

Use a foreword or content warning page to introduce sensitive themes, share care tips, and provide links to resources for support.

- **Beyond the Book**

Highlight themes in blurbs, promotional copy, or social media posts. Offer insights and direct readers to resources to navigate potentially sensitive content thoughtfully.



By reframing content warnings as supportive guidance, writers can empower readers to engage with challenging topics while ensuring they feel prepared and supported, fostering a deeper connection with the narrative.



Dig Deeper: Resources for Authors

- **Mental Health Media Guide**

Explore detailed guidance for storytellers, including specific tips for representing conditions, challenges, and themes responsibly. [Visit Mental Health Media Guide.](#)

- **Digital Storytelling Guide**

Access tips and do's and don'ts for a wide range of mental health topics to enhance your narrative. [Visit Digital Storytelling Guide.](#)

- **The Jed Foundation's Mental Health Resource Center**

Learn more about mental health conditions, help-seeking behaviors, and evidence-based treatment options. [Visit JED's Resource Center.](#)

By creating stories that thoughtfully and accurately represent mental health, you can help readers feel less alone, challenge misconceptions, and inspire action. Your work has the power to make a difference—thank you for using your voice to contribute to a more compassionate and informed world.

