



Guidelines for Journalists Covering COVID-19

Professional Standards and Tips for
Physical and Psychological Well-Being

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1. Introduction

Journalists are among the frontliners and first responders in the COVID-19 pandemic. In this health emergency, information saves lives.

Enabling journalists to work professionally, and maintain their own health and wellness at the same time, is an objective many of us share. Our journalists need support during the health crisis so that they may continue writing news stories and keep the public informed.

The UNESCO Myanmar Office and Myanmar Press Council have partnered to produce the Guidelines for Journalists Covering COVID-19: Professional Standards and Tips for Physical and Psychological Well-being. Perhaps the first comprehensive toolkit of its kind in the country, it compiles practical tips on how Myanmar journalists can adhere to professional and ethical standards and engage in practices that will preserve and promote their physical and psychological well-being.

UNESCO, as the lead UN agency in the promotion and protection of freedom of expression, freedom of the press, and media development, is committed to work with various stakeholders from government, nongovernment sectors, and news media agencies in creating a free, independent, and safe media environment in Myanmar.

Most of the tips are from resources recently produced by the World Health Organization, Pan American Health Organization, and various international media NGOs including BBC Media Action, Ethical Journalism Network, First Draft, Global Investigative Journalism Network, International Center for Journalists, International Journalists' Network, and Poynter Institute. All references are listed for proper citation, and for users to have easy access to additional readings, if desired.

To make sure that the recommended actions fit the local context, some journalists have reviewed the manuscript in terms of appropriateness to local conditions. Additional tips were provided based on their experience in COVID-19 coverage.

The publication is divided into four parts: (1) How journalists covering the COVID-19 pandemic can build their physical and mental resilience, (2) How journalists can deal with trauma while reporting on COVID-19, (3) Professional standards for journalists, and (4) Suggested content for journalists covering COVID-19.

The UNESCO Myanmar Office and Myanmar Press Council invite Myanmar journalists and editors to build on the content in this publication. Media agencies and journalists are encouraged to discuss the guidelines in their newsrooms and news beats, and add relevant lessons and experiences, clarify issues, and contextualize proposed actions.

We must emphasize that the lessons in the coverage of the COVID-19 pandemic provide important insights on how journalism will evolve in the years to come—how journalism will be practiced in this “new normal.”

The UNESCO Myanmar Office and Myanmar Press Council acknowledge the support of the Multi Donor Programme on Freedom of Expression and Safety of Journalists in the development of this publication.

2. How journalists covering the COVID-19 pandemic can build their physical and mental resilience

In the face of the COVID-19 pandemic, the role of journalists is crucial in keeping the public informed. As journalists need to carry out their responsibilities in a timely manner while protecting themselves from the disease, this may affect their physical and mental health. The following guidelines have been developed to support the physical and psychological well-being of journalists covering COVID-19.

- ❖ **Keep work and life separate.** Have a marker for the end of your work day and limit the news alerts you see outside of work.¹
- ❖ **Be kind to yourself.** It is okay not to be okay in these tough times. Treat yourself with compassion.²
- ❖ **Create a self-care plan** such as getting enough sleep, going offline before bed, meditating, exercising, and practicing hobbies. During work, break assignments down into individual, attainable tasks.³
- ❖ **Pursue attainable victories** — both personal and professional.⁴

¹ Lydia Morrish, “How to stay mentally well while reporting on the coronavirus,” *First Draft*, published March 17, 2020, <https://firstdraftnews.org/latest/how-to-stay-sane-while-reporting-on-the-coronavirus/>

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Olga Simanovych, “How Journalists Can Deal With Trauma While Reporting on COVID-19,” *Global Investigative Journalism Network*, published March 24, 2020,

- ❖ **Keep a list or journal of what you've accomplished throughout the day**, to give you some level of control at a time when we have so little control over what's going on in the world. Such small steps can help you overcome feelings of helplessness.⁵
- ❖ **Flatten your stress curve by taking downtime.** Plan something enjoyable to look forward to at the end of the day to help alleviate stress. Make time for short breaks throughout the day, including unplanned 10- to 15-minute breaks, to allow yourself to relax.⁶
- ❖ **Step away from technology.** Apps like Twitter and Facebook deliver a constant stream of information, and although scrolling endlessly could feel mindless, creating assertive boundaries with social media and technology is critical. Disengage from them an hour before bedtime so that your brain can calm down, or plan device-free blocks in your day.⁷
- ❖ **Be aware of your alcohol and food consumption.** Know your tendencies. If they are destructive, you may decide to remove them. Confront your discomfort; don't medicate it with alcohol or other substances.⁸

<https://gijn.org/2020/03/24/how-journalists-can-deal-with-trauma-while-reporting-on-covid-19/>

⁵ Katya Podkovyroff Lewis, "Mental health tips and resources for journalists," *International Journalists' Network*, published April 3, 2020,

<https://ijnet.org/en/story/mental-health-tips-and-resources-journalists>

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Al Tompkins and Sidney Tompkins, "How journalists can fight stress from covering the coronavirus," *Poynter*, published March 15, 2020,

<https://www.poynter.org/reporting-editing/2020/how-journalists-can-fight-stress-from-covering-the-coronavirus/>

- ❖ **Give peer support to coworkers.** If you see a coworker covering days upon days of tough stories, give them a call to show you care about them.⁹ You may opt to create a support group with colleagues as well.¹⁰
- ❖ **Check in with friends.** Catch up when you can. Talk to them when you're feeling stressed, and make sure to ask how they're feeling.¹¹
- ❖ **Have a conversation with your family members.** Family members may react negatively if you plan to cover (or are already covering) the COVID-19 pandemic. This can give you more stress. One way of dealing with this situation is by talking to them about their concerns¹² and reassuring them about the precautionary measures you are taking.
- ❖ **Recognize that it's normal to feel affected** by difficult images or stories.¹³
- ❖ **Be aware of the stigma around mental health.** Some workers in the media industry pretend to be unaffected by distressing stories. Don't buy into this denial or pretense.¹⁴

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Jervis Manahan, email message, April 27, 2020.

¹¹ Morrish, "How to stay mentally well while reporting on the coronavirus."

¹² "CPJ Safety Advisory: Covering the coronavirus outbreak," *Committee to Protect Journalists*, last updated April 6, 2020, <https://cpj.org/2020/02/cpj-safety-advisory-covering-the-coronavirus-outbr.php>

¹³ Hannah Storm, "Media ethics, safety and mental health: reporting in the time of Covid-19," *Ethical Journalism Network*, published March 18, 2020, <https://ethicaljournalismnetwork.org/media-ethics-safety-and-mental-health-reporting-in-the-time-of-covid-19>

¹⁴ Morrish, "How to stay mentally well while reporting on the coronavirus."

- ❖ **Know your triggers and don't be afraid to ask for help.** Reflect on your causes and signs of stress and talk about it with someone. Seek professional help if necessary.¹⁵
- ❖ **Don't hesitate to ask if you need time off work** when you are unwell, mentally or physically. Unless we do this, our condition may worsen, and we might not be able to return to work.¹⁶

Before the coverage

- ❖ **Talk to your newsdesk editors or superiors.** Understand the work situation: Can you work from home? Some newsrooms have already adjusted their workflows, and some organizations do not require reporters to be in the field anymore. If you can get timely, relevant, and important information and stories from home, and if your newsroom permits, you may do so. Journalists are not immune from the virus, so you must also lessen your exposure to the outside world.¹⁷
- ❖ **Protect yourself.** Ask your news organization about your health benefits. Do you have health insurance? Will your newsroom shoulder the hospitalization expenses in case you get sick from the virus? Are they providing personal protective equipment (PPE)?¹⁸
- ❖ **Have your tools ready.** Always wear a mask and gloves, and bring alcohol during coverage. Fieldwork in high-risk areas

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Storm, "Media ethics, safety and mental health."

¹⁷ Jervis Manahan, email message, April 27, 2020.

¹⁸ Ibid.

such as hospitals may require you to wear a hazmat suit or PPE.¹⁹

- ❖ **Study thoroughly the area you're covering.** Identify the places where there are a lot of positive COVID-19 cases. If you don't have PPE, don't risk your health in dangerous areas.²⁰
- ❖ **Know your limitations.** If possible, always consult with a company doctor so you can be monitored for any symptoms.²¹

During coverage

- ❖ **Practice physical distancing when interviewing people.** Reporters tend to position themselves too close to subjects or fellow reporters. Always stand at a safe distance.²²
- ❖ **Make sure to disinfect all your equipment** (microphones, cameras, recorders, and all tools you use, even tripods).²³
- ❖ **List down all the people you meet and interact with closely during coverage.** Include details of meetups. This will significantly help you in case you need to perform contact tracing.²⁴

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Ibid.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Ibid.

- ❖ **Be empathetic with the people you are covering.** Most of them are in distress. Do not burden them further.²⁵
- ❖ **If you are reporting data, make an effort to provide proper context.** The source may not always report the full picture, so you need to carefully verify trends, patterns, and sudden changes in numbers.²⁶
- ❖ **If you are working from home (if not physically present at site/in the field), you need to put extra effort in verifying your story.** It's easier to verify and validate your information if you're in the field and can see things first hand. You'll need to triple- or quadruple-check information when you're working from home. You have to make sure that every line in your story is factual, properly contextualized, and relevant. There should be no weak points in your story.²⁷

After coverage

- ❖ **Always disinfect.** Disinfect whenever you can, as often as you can. Wash your hands and take a bath after coverage.²⁸
- ❖ **Disinfect your equipment, too.** They should be kept clean and ready for the next coverage.²⁹
- ❖ **Monitor feedback on your story.** Usually, comments from people are very helpful to give you a wider perspective in COVID-19 reporting.³⁰

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Jervis Manahan, email message, April 27, 2020.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Ibid.

- ❖ **Rest, because your health is equally important.** Monitor yourself if you have developed symptoms. If you notice symptoms, consult your doctor.³¹
- ❖ **Evaluate your workday.** Make sure you have listed the people you have interacted with.³²
- ❖ **Try to self-isolate to help protect others.** If you can, do not interact closely with family/housemates, given your frequent outdoor exposure. You may opt to stay in a different room.³³

³¹ Ibid.

³² Ibid.

³³ Ibid.

3. How journalists can deal with trauma while reporting on COVID-19

(a) Preparation before dealing with difficult stories or situations

- ❖ **Know your signs.** Make a list of things like old bad habits and preexisting vulnerabilities, and plan how to cope with these.³⁴
- ❖ **Understand your triggers:** You need to be aware of the topics that could provoke memories or powerful emotions in you.³⁵
- ❖ **Plan your reporting schedule.** Decide when you will do your toughest work (for example, you may opt to do this in the morning, when you have more energy). If possible, do as much of this emotionally intense work as early as you can, when you are less tired. Update your schedule if circumstances require so that you won't miss a deadline, avoiding additional stress.³⁶
- ❖ **Make it a point to evaluate your psychological and physical risks** before starting an emotionally demanding assignment. Ask yourself the following: 1) Do I feel ready to survive other people's high anxiety and distress? 2) Have I recently had any emotional or psychological problems? 3) Have I recently had personal losses? 4) Do my relatives have health issues? 5) Have any family difficulties, arguments, or

³⁴ Lewis, "Mental health tips and resources for journalists."

³⁵ Simanovych, "How Journalists Can Deal with Trauma While Reporting on COVID-19."

³⁶ Ibid.

illnesses forced me to change my plans? 6) Do I feel more vulnerable than usual? 7) Do I feel physically healthy?³⁷

(b) Coping after dealing with difficult stories or situations

- ❖ **Remember that you are not immune to the emotional impact.** Staying attuned to your own emotional health, and not ignoring signs that you need support, will allow you to catch any issues that arise and manage them appropriately.³⁸
- ❖ **Reset. Keep things near you that will remind you of what “normal” looks like.** For example, it can be your family photo or anything that reminds you of life pre-COVID-19. After covering unpleasant situations, reset your mind to remember that this situation is not normal.³⁹
- ❖ **Talk to your loved ones.** If you covered something awful today, or if you are overwhelmed at work, have a conversation with your loved ones—people who understand you.⁴⁰
- ❖ **Don’t consume traumatic content** before you go to bed.⁴¹
- ❖ **After reporting on a difficult story, ask yourself whether you have signs of psychological distress,** which include anxiety, confusion, feeling of isolation, shame, guilt, passivity, desperation, self-condemnation, feeling of

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Lewis, “Mental health tips and resources for journalists.”

³⁹ Al Tompkins and Sidney Tompkins, “How journalists can fight stress from covering the coronavirus.”

⁴⁰ Ibid., Poynter.

⁴¹ Simanovych, “How Journalists Can Deal with Trauma While Reporting on COVID-19.”

demoralization, and feeling of betrayal. If you feel any of these, vary your schedules and the content of your work.⁴²

- ❖ **Look for opportunities for positive coping**, such as through humor or social solidarity. Some helpful responses after reporting on a traumatic story include meditation, a session with a therapist, and exercise.⁴³
- ❖ **Seek help from a mental health professional.** Find an expert you can readily consult whenever you need assistance.⁴⁴

⁴² Ibid., Global Investigative Journalism Network

⁴³ Ibid., Global Investigative Journalism Network

⁴⁴ Jervis Manahan, email message, April 27, 2020.

4. Professional Standards for Journalists

(a) General guidelines in covering the COVID-19 pandemic

- ❖ Be ethical and socially responsible.⁴⁵
- ❖ Refrain from being sensationalist or alarmist.⁴⁶
- ❖ Communicate facts and truthful information on the disease.⁴⁷ Report and interpret the news fairly and honestly, and take care not to publish or broadcast content that is inaccurate or distorted, or information that may mislead or confuse the audience.⁴⁸
- ❖ Use reliable, scientific, truthful, and verified sources.⁴⁹
- ❖ Quote scientists, researchers, public health professionals, academics, and specialists in other disciplines who can clarify public concerns about the situation.⁵⁰ Always quote experts. Quotes lend credibility and information to news reporting.⁵¹
- ❖ Write in layperson's terms and simplify or explain technical/scientific terms to help the public understand

⁴⁵ PAHO and WHO (Regional Offices for the Americas), "*Covid-19 An Informative Guide Advice for Journalists: Covid-19 Journalistic Coverage Should,*" (Washington DC: April 2020) 3. PDF Ebook.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Myanmar Press Council (Interim), "*Media Code of Conduct,*" 9.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ PAHO and WHO (Regional Offices for the Americas), "*Covid-19 An Informative Guide,*" 4.

stories better, but exercise care in doing so. Consult experts.⁵²

- ❖ Truthfully report on measures that help contain and/or mitigate the spread of the disease.⁵³
- ❖ Report on the jobs performed by health workers and their situation, given their critical role in responding to the pandemic.⁵⁴
- ❖ Report on patients recovering, communities taking measures to tackle the disease, or countries taking exemplary approaches.⁵⁵
- ❖ Provide reporting that contributes to solutions.⁵⁶
- ❖ Follow official recommendations on protecting your own health and that of interviewees.⁵⁷
- ❖ Practice the recommended physical distancing measures while covering the pandemic.⁵⁸

⁵² Jervis Manahan, email message, April 27, 2020.

⁵³ PAHO and WHO (Regional Offices for the Americas), *"Covid-19 An Informative Guide,"* 3.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ PAHO and WHO (Regional Offices for the Americas), *"Covid-19 An Informative Guide,"* 4.

⁵⁸ Ibid.

- ❖ Respect the work of health professionals.⁵⁹
- ❖ Be familiar with the basics of epidemiology.⁶⁰
- ❖ Seek innovative ways to cover the news and conduct interviews that avoid direct contact with patients, people with symptoms, those in quarantine, and their relatives.⁶¹
- ❖ Avoid congregating outside health centers or residences, and stay out of restricted access areas.⁶²
- ❖ Be realistic and non-sensationalist; stick to the facts.⁶³
- ❖ In the COVID-19 pandemic, those who are affected or impacted are likely to be traumatized. They should not be identified and their privacy and anonymity should be respected. Pinpointing the location of people who have COVID-19 may cause unnecessary panic in their community. Below are some tips for interviewing patients or individuals who have already recovered from COVID-19:
 - Treat the people who have recovered from COVID-19 with dignity. Let them “invite” you into their story.
 - Allow the people who have recovered from COVID-19 to dictate the timing and setting of interviews; allow the presence of counselors.

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ PAHO and WHO (Regional Offices for the Americas), “*Covid-19 An Informative Guide*,” 8.

- Be transparent. Take informed consent on how the individual wishes to be identified.
 - Put humanity before the story. Prioritize the victim’s well-being first.
 - Do not overwhelm the interviewee. Start with easy questions before asking the more difficult ones. Empathize and listen actively.⁶⁴
- ❖ Approach people with sensitivity and discretion especially when they are in extreme distress or suffering from personal grief or shock. This is without prejudice to the right of media outlets to report on legal proceedings, including investigations into crimes and procedures taking place before courts and other bodies with the power to impose legally binding remedies.⁶⁵
- ❖ If inaccurate, misleading or distorted information is published or broadcast by mistake, it should be corrected promptly through an erratum. If appropriate, a right of reply should be given to the individual or organization directly affected by the inaccuracy.⁶⁶

(b) How to avoid provoking anxiety and fear

- ❖ Acknowledge public fears. It is normal for people to worry. Acknowledge their concerns and offer information on what

⁶⁴ Miraj Ahmed Chowdhury, “Tips for Journalists Covering COVID-19,” *Global Investigative Journalism Network*, published March 10, 2020, <https://gijn.org/2020/03/10/tips-for-journalists-covering-covid-19/>

⁶⁵ Myanmar Press Council (Interim), “*Media Code of Conduct*,” 12.

⁶⁶ Myanmar Press Council (Interim), “*Media Code of Conduct*,” 9.

people can do to protect themselves while caring for their own mental health and that of their loved ones.⁶⁷

- ❖ Avoid the use of background music that generates anxiety and fear.⁶⁸

- ❖ Refrain from using headlines describing the disease as “fatal.” Any disease can be fatal. In the context of a new emergency, this term could cause some people to panic, and they may fail to react appropriately.⁶⁹

- ❖ Limit the use of subjective adjectives such as “deadly” to describe COVID-19 when reporting. Stick to the cold hard facts.⁷⁰

- ❖ Make sure the images in your story accurately portray what’s happening on the ground. Try to understand the mood on the ground first, and then translate it into your

⁶⁷ PAHO and WHO (Regional Offices for the Americas), “*Covid-19 An Informative Guide*,” 7.

⁶⁸ PAHO and WHO (Regional Offices for the Americas), “*Covid-19 An Informative Guide*,” 4.

⁶⁹ PAHO and WHO (Regional Offices for the Americas), “*Covid-19 An Informative Guide*,” 8.

⁷⁰ Al Tompkins, “How newsrooms can tone down their coronavirus coverage while still reporting responsibly,” *Poynter*, published March 4 2020, <https://www.poynter.org/reporting-editing/2020/how-newsrooms-can-tone-down-their-coronavirus-coverage-while-still-reporting-responsibly/>

reporting.⁷¹ Do not use images that feed stereotypes or cause more panic.⁷²

- ❖ Avoid clickbait headlines and scary generic images. Be creative in presenting the coverage⁷³ while avoiding sensationalist language that could cause panic or fear.⁷⁴
- ❖ Go beyond the numbers of cases and deaths. Explain the context, visualize data through charts⁷⁵ and infographics, and give health advice to the population.⁷⁶
- ❖ When you do anecdotal stories about sickness and death from coronavirus, include the data that explains the wider context of the issue. Remember that statistical stories are less scary than anecdotal stories.⁷⁷
- ❖ Report important controversies but avoid adding drama to an already stressful pandemic situation. Become a source of information and knowledge on all aspects of the situation. Do not exaggerate the crisis; instead, provide

⁷¹ Taylor Mulcahey, "Ten Tips for Journalists Covering COVID-19 Around the World," *International Center for Journalists*, published March 6, 2020, <https://www.icfi.org/news/ten-tips-journalists-covering-covid-19-around-world>

⁷² First Draft, "Tips for reporting on Covid-19 and slowing spread misinformation."

⁷³ Tompkins, "How newsrooms can tone down their coronavirus coverage while still reporting responsibly."

⁷⁴ Victoria Kwan, Claire Wardle and Madelyn Webb, "Tips for reporting on Covid-19 and slowing the spread of misinformation," *first Draft*, published March 10, 2020, <https://firstdraftnews.org/latest/tips-for-reporting-on-covid-19-coronavirus-and-slowing-the-spread-of-misinformation/>

⁷⁵ Jervis Manahan, email message, April 27, 2020.

⁷⁶ PAHO and WHO (Regional Offices for the Americas), "*Covid-19 An Informative Guide*," 5.

⁷⁷ Tompkins, "How newsrooms can tone down their coronavirus coverage while still reporting responsibly."

practical advice on how the audience can handle it. Do not distort the facts. Listen to the voices that provide evidence-based information.⁷⁸

- ❖ During the crisis, it is normal for people to feel afraid. Thus, it is important to engage them with facts and suggestions. For example, when writing about people clearing stock from grocery stores, add facts about how hoarding is unnecessary, and suggest where, when and how to shop.⁷⁹ Another tip is to write stories that explain COVID-19 prevention.⁸⁰

(c) How to avoid stigmatizing and perpetuating discrimination related to COVID-19

- ❖ Respect the privacy of patients and avoid revealing their identities or providing detailed information on them without their consent.⁸¹
- ❖ The subjects of your reporting have a right to privacy and confidentiality. If their identity is revealed, they may be stigmatized. To the extent possible, obtain written consent if you want to tell the stories of people who have COVID-19, particularly if you show photos or videos of them.⁸²The

⁷⁸ PAHO and WHO (Regional Offices for the Americas), “*Covid-19 An Informative Guide*,” 8.

⁷⁹ Ezra Del Rosario, “Do’s and don’ts of reporting on COVID-19 — from a non-science background,” International Journalists’ Network, published March 20, 2020, <https://ijnet.org/en/story/dos-and-donts-reporting-covid-19---non-science-background>

⁸⁰ Tompkins, “How newsrooms can tone down their coronavirus coverage while still reporting responsibly.”

⁸¹ PAHO and WHO (Regional Offices for the Americas), “*Covid-19 An Informative Guide*,” 4.

⁸² PAHO and WHO (Regional Offices for the Americas), “*Covid-19 An Informative Guide*,” 10.

publication or broadcasting of information about the private lives of individuals without their consent is acceptable only when this is justified in the public interest.⁸³

- ❖ Avoid the use of photographs or videos that stigmatize or induce fear, such as only showing people wearing face masks, or images of health workers with personal protective equipment meant for Ebola in Africa, something that does not apply to COVID-19.⁸⁴
- ❖ Normally, consent should be obtained before a recording or photo is taken of an individual in a private place, defined as a place where the individual has a reasonable expectation of privacy. This is without prejudice to the dissemination in the public interest, of images of individuals where it is impractical to obtain consent—for example, in a crowded location. When such content is used to illustrate a specific point, care should be taken not to associate an identifiable individual with a potentially damaging implication (such as a medical statistics or an extreme political opinion).⁸⁵
- ❖ Avoid reporting that focuses on patient zero (first case in the country) and that person’s behavior or “responsibility” for spreading the disease. Such reporting encourages stigmatization.
- ❖ Do no harm. It’s not enough to just make sure your information is accurate. Consider how your reporting might be interpreted, and whether it might be feeding stigma or discrimination – for instance, by appearing to link a particular group with the spread of a health problem. Be

⁸³ Myanmar Press Council (Interim), “*Media Code of Conduct*,” 12.

⁸⁴ PAHO and WHO (Regional Offices for the Americas), “*Covid-19 An Informative Guide*,” 4.

⁸⁵ Myanmar Press Council (Interim), “*Media Code of Conduct*,” 12.

empathetic and sensitive. The needs of someone affected by a disease are always more important than the needs of the interviewer.⁸⁶

- ❖ Avoid stigmatizing individuals or populations. Generally, avoid labeling, stereotypes, and discriminatory treatment, particularly toward those who contract the disease, and their loved ones. Such treatment can harm them and lead people to conceal their illness to avoid discrimination, preventing them from seeking treatment. Build trust and show empathy towards those with the disease.⁸⁷
- ❖ Be careful not to encourage stereotypes or inadvertently promote racist interpretations. Pandemics have a history of spreading racism and xenophobia, and COVID-19 is no different.⁸⁸
- ❖ Avoid telling the “other side of the story” when it is not based on science or is ridiculous and not credible.⁸⁹
- ❖ Do not focus only on high-risk groups. People of all ages have been affected by COVID-19. Focusing on only some age groups can encourage others to let down their guard and neglect the measures needed to protect themselves and others.⁹⁰

⁸⁶ Genevieve Hutchinson, “Our top 10 tips for media in the COVID-19 Info-demic,” BBC Media Action, published March 5, 2020, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/blogs/bbcmediaaction/entries/1f096f1c-88d1-4084-9806-ae5125b983fc>

⁸⁷ PAHO and WHO (Regional Offices for the Americas), “*Covid-19 An Informative Guide*,” 7.

⁸⁸ Mulcahey, “Ten Tips for Journalists Covering COVID-19 Around the World.”

⁸⁹ PAHO and WHO (Regional Offices for the Americas), “*Covid-19 An Informative Guide*,” 9.

⁹⁰ Ibid.

- ❖ Choose your words carefully. Certain words can have a negative connotation and fuel stigmatizing attitudes toward people who have the disease as well as their families and communities. “Social Stigma Associated with COVID-19,” a guide prepared by the WHO, UNICEF, and the Red Cross, recommends saying “people who have COVID-19” instead of “cases” or “victims.” It is better to refer to “people contracting the virus” rather than those “spreading the virus.” Positive language that stresses the efficacy of preventive measures and treatment is recommended.⁹¹
- ❖ Be sure to use the correct name of the disease (COVID-19) and the virus (SARS-CoV-2), rather than nicknames such as “the Wuhan coronavirus.” Naming a pandemic after a country leads to stigmatization and can harm trade and the economy.⁹²
- ❖ Disseminate messages that counter the stigmatization of people affected by the disease.⁹³
- ❖ Give recognition to the caregivers of those who become ill and stay home. Most people will recover and remain quarantined at home during their illness. Family members and friends will be key to their recovery.⁹⁴
- ❖ Think of the impact your reporting will have. Avoid fueling fear and stigmatization. Facilitate an atmosphere in which

⁹¹ PAHO and WHO (Regional Offices for the Americas), “*Covid-19 An Informative Guide*,” 8.

⁹² Ibid.

⁹³ PAHO and WHO (Regional Offices for the Americas), “*Covid-19 An Informative Guide*,” 4.

⁹⁴ PAHO and WHO (Regional Offices for the Americas), “*Covid-19 An Informative Guide*,” 10.

people can discuss the disease and its repercussions openly, honestly, and constructively.⁹⁵

(d) How to avoid inadvertently spreading misinformation and how to counter mis/disinformation, rumors, and false information among the public

- ❖ Disseminate factual information. Be sure to verify information.⁹⁶
- ❖ Use reputable and official sources. Misinformation, rumors, and conspiracy theories abound, making it essential to cite reliable sources such as the Ministry of Health of the country or WHO. Avoid non-experts expressing their personal opinions.⁹⁷
- ❖ Direct readers to official sources of information. Build the readers' confidence in health organizations and health professionals (after you have verified their trustworthiness), so your audience knows whom to turn to for future recommendations.⁹⁸
- ❖ Provide clear information on what is known and not known about risks based on the best available evidence. This helps combat false information. Be transparent, and distinguish between knowns, maybes, known unknowns, and speculation.⁹⁹

⁹⁵ PAHO and WHO (Regional Offices for the Americas), "*Covid-19 An Informative Guide*," 7.

⁹⁶ PAHO and WHO (Regional Offices for the Americas), "*Covid-19 An Informative Guide*," 7.

⁹⁷ PAHO and WHO (Regional Offices for the Americas), "*Covid-19 An Informative Guide*," 9.

⁹⁸ First Draft, "Tips for reporting on Covid-19 and slowing spread misinformation."

⁹⁹ Anita Makri, "Don't just debunk misinformation: 4 tips for navigating the COVID-19 Infodemic," International Journalists' Network, published April 2, 2020,

- ❖ Debunk a falsehood by replacing it with facts. Explain why the falsehood has spread.¹⁰⁰
- ❖ Refrain from spreading rumors and false/unverified information.¹⁰¹
- ❖ Investigate rumors and suspicious information. For rumors, assess how serious they are, the source, and how widespread they are, before denying them or repeating the erroneous information. Sometimes, denying a rumor that has not spread gives it unnecessary notoriety. If it is a minor matter, ignore it or just provide the correct information without mentioning the rumor.¹⁰²
- ❖ Avoid drawing attention to rumors if they are circulating only in niche communities or have received little engagement. The following questions can help you determine if a rumor has reached the tipping point:
 - 1) How much engagement has the rumor received, and how do these numbers compare to similar content on the platform?
 - 2) Is the discussion around the rumor limited to one community online?
 - 3) Has the rumor jumped platforms?
 - 4) Did an influencer or verified account share the rumor?
 - 5) Have large media outlets covered the rumor?¹⁰³

<https://ijnet.org/en/story/don%E2%80%99t-just-debunk-misinformation-4-tips-navigating-covid-19-infodemic>

¹⁰⁰ Makri, “Don’t just debunk misinformation: 4 tips for navigating the COVID-19 Infodemic.”

¹⁰¹ PAHO and WHO (Regional Offices for the Americas), “*Covid-19 An Informative Guide*,” 4.

¹⁰² PAHO and WHO (Regional Offices for the Americas), “*Covid-19 An Informative Guide*,” 9.

¹⁰³ First Draft, “Tips for reporting on Covid-19 and slowing spread misinformation.”

- ❖ Avoid including myths or local remedies when reporting on treatments. Use scientific, evidence-based sources in your coverage.¹⁰⁴
- ❖ Watch your headlines. Don't mislead readers with your headlines especially in the midst of a crisis. Given the high volume of information, and the fast pace of social media, many people get their news from headlines alone. Make sure your headlines are reflective of the situation and not sensational.¹⁰⁵
- ❖ Include visual material in your coverage. Infographics and other graphic materials improve understanding by simplifying complex subjects.
- ❖ If you use photographs, be careful with the images you choose and always think of the impact they may have on an audience that will not necessarily read the caption.¹⁰⁶
- ❖ Provide readers with specific actions they can take. Uncertainty makes people uncomfortable, which in turn makes them more vulnerable to confident-sounding misinformation. Concrete information related to COVID-19 prevention is helpful because it gives readers a sense of control.¹⁰⁷

¹⁰⁴ PAHO and WHO (Regional Offices for the Americas), *"Covid-19 An Informative Guide,"* 9.

¹⁰⁵ Mulcahey, "Ten Tips for Journalists Covering COVID-19 Around the World."

¹⁰⁶ PAHO and WHO (Regional Offices for the Americas), *"Covid-19 An Informative Guide,"* 9.

¹⁰⁷ First Draft, "Tips for reporting on Covid-19 and slowing spread misinformation."

5. Suggested content for journalists covering COVID-19

- ❖ Encourage personal and community protection measures.¹⁰⁸
- ❖ Suggest activities to do during isolation, social or physical distancing, and lockdowns.¹⁰⁹
- ❖ Promote stories of solidarity and goodwill.¹¹⁰
- ❖ Explain complex public health concepts in a way the general public can understand.¹¹¹
- ❖ Highlight the role of health workers.¹¹²
- ❖ Provide truthful information on where to find help and when to seek medical care.¹¹³
- ❖ Report on progress towards new vaccines and treatments.¹¹⁴

¹⁰⁸ PAHO and WHO (Regional Offices for the Americas), “*Covid-19 An Informative Guide*,” 5.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid.

¹¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹¹ Ibid.

¹¹² Ibid.

¹¹³ Ibid.

¹¹⁴ Ibid.

- ❖ Provide advice for the most vulnerable and at-risk population.¹¹⁵
- ❖ Focus on basic prevention measures, the symptoms of COVID-19, and when and how to seek medical care.¹¹⁶
- ❖ Give up-to-date reports. The numbers are continuously changing and will vary at different times by region or country. The pandemic will evolve over time, meaning the methods and protocols to address it may also change. Be sure to find and report the latest numbers and measures taken, explain why they were taken, and always include public health recommendations.¹¹⁷
- ❖ Emphasize protective measures. As the pandemic progresses, more people will follow your coverage and may have concerns about certain protective measures. Remind them whenever you can. Be clear, though it may seem repetitive.¹¹⁸
- ❖ Explain the context around the facts. Most members of the public do not know how a virus works in the body, how vaccines are produced, or how the immune system works. At times like this, people are more willing to listen and learn.¹¹⁹

¹¹⁵ Ibid.

¹¹⁶ PAHO and WHO (Regional Offices for the Americas), *“Covid-19 An Informative Guide,”* 7.

¹¹⁷ PAHO and WHO (Regional Offices for the Americas), *“Covid-19 An Informative Guide,”* 8.

¹¹⁸ PAHO and WHO (Regional Offices for the Americas), *“Covid-19 An Informative Guide,”* 7.

¹¹⁹ Ibid.

- ❖ Give advice and information that is useful to different population groups—including persons with disabilities—so that they can prepare for different scenarios. This includes, for example, having two weeks of food and their regular medications on hand in the event they are required to stay home.¹²⁰
- ❖ Tell stories of recovery and social achievements. Stories about people working together for the common good rather than their own interests can give hope, raise spirits, and motivate people to carry on, e.g., preventing the spread of the virus or helping vulnerable people such as older adults buy groceries.¹²¹
- ❖ Monitor social media for stories. In times of social distancing and lockdown, social media can be a good place to find inspiring stories. Publicize uplifting stories and tell your own. But be sure to check their authenticity before sharing.¹²²
- ❖ Don't neglect stories that aren't exciting. A full-page story on hand washing, for example, is okay. Focus efforts on answering your audience's questions. Try to better understand people's concerns and the type of information they are looking for, and help find answers.¹²³

¹²⁰ PAHO and WHO (Regional Offices for the Americas), *"Covid-19 An Informative Guide,"* 8.

¹²¹ PAHO and WHO (Regional Offices for the Americas), *"Covid-19 An Informative Guide,"* 9.

¹²² PAHO and WHO (Regional Offices for the Americas), *"Covid-19 An Informative Guide,"* 10.

¹²³ Mulcahey, "Ten Tips for Journalists Covering COVID-19 Around the World."

- ❖ Your job is not over when things wind down. Evaluate the way politicians and health officials handled the crisis, identify lessons learned, determine whether survivors still live with the stigma of infection, explore what it means to return to “normal,” and pursue the story.¹²⁴
- ❖ Find new stories by asking the question, “What population do I care about that’s being neglected?”¹²⁵
- ❖ Civil monitoring mechanisms and the media play very important roles to monitor the transparency, integrity and accountability of COVID-19 measures related to decision making during the pandemic. Procurement and its procedures, distribution of relief measures, oversight mechanisms are among some of the issues that can be investigated and reported.
- ❖ COVID-19 pandemic is having a devastating impact on women and girls across the world. Pitch stories on domestic violence and its prevention, on women’s livelihood programmes, and on social protection mechanisms they can access.
- ❖ Around the world, schools have been closed in more than 100 countries due to the pandemic since March 2020 and 1.57 billion children and youth are affected by school closures. In Myanmar, reopening of schools has been also delayed by several weeks. When and how to reopen schools is one of the toughest and most sensitive decisions

¹²⁴ Ibid.

¹²⁵ Del Rosario, “Do’s and don’ts of reporting on COVID-19 — from a non-science background.”

on political agendas today.¹²⁶ Write about the impact of school closures.

- ❖ COVID-19 is said to be the example of human impact on biodiversity and ecosystem. The importance of protecting the nature, conservation of biological diversity, and the sustainable use of its components in order to reduce the occurrence of pandemics can be highlighted. Also, the socio-economic impact, response and recovery of COVID-19 is worth covering continuously.

- ❖ Keep your audience's interest. Over time, coverage can feel more like a continuous update than a new story. Look for new and interesting events. If you find something inspiring, report it. Move from a pessimistic approach to an optimistic one.¹²⁷

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¹²⁶ <https://en.unesco.org/news/reopening-schools-when-where-and-how>

¹²⁷ Ibid.

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