



ROUNDUP

Coverage of mental health gets personal

BY DAVID WARD

THE U.S. HAS come a long way in its understanding and acceptance of mental-health issues. But when it comes to media coverage, it often still takes more than just a new breakthrough drug or study to drive interest.

"In many cases, it's when a celebrity like Margot Kidder or Ted Turner starts talking about mental health that the media gets interested," says Rhoda Weiss, current chair and CEO of the PRSA, who spent more than 30 years working on healthcare issues, including mental health. "But the fact that the media is getting on top of this is important because more than half the population has consulted a family therapist or psychiatrist for themselves or their families."

Heather Cobb, senior director of media relations for Mental Health

America, adds: "As things like depression or seasonal affective disorder—a mild form of depression—impact more people, you are starting to see more coverage. The other area where there's a lot of mental-health coverage is when it relates to something tragic."

For the most part, mental-health stories tend to be pitched to general health reporters, but many of those journalists now have a good foundation of knowledge for common mental-health issues.

"They have become a lot more educated along with the rest of the populace," says Lisa Starnes, PR coordinator for Denton, TX-based Harris Methodist HEB Hospital. "With mental-health topics like alcoholism or drug addiction, they now understand it's a medical condition."

But even with that knowledge,

mental health can still be a challenging pitch because of the lingering stigma attached to many afflictions. "That's why it's important to convey stories with great human interest and enough per-

sonal detail to help put the human face on people with schizophrenia and other mental illness," explains Betsy Storm, principal with Chicago-based Top Drawer Communications.

Stanton Communications SAE Shareese DeLeaver also stresses looking beyond the health sections for coverage. DeLeaver works with Walden University professor Savitri Dixon-Saxon, an expert on the stress and depression that can affect African-American women, and says, "I have a lot more success when it's a diversity-focused pitch rather than health story."

Echo Media Group AE Kaerie Ray works with LifeSTARS of California, which has a program that helps youth 12 to 18 years old deal with sexual addictions linked to Internet pornography. "Our initial thought was go straight [to] health [reporters] because this is a mental-health issue," Ray says. "But we've had the most success with family and parenting writers by focusing on how this mental-health issue affects families." ■

PITCHING... MENTAL HEALTH



■ Look for coverage beyond the health pages, by positioning mental-health issues as a family or community story

■ Get personal. Most reporters will want to humanize a mental-health problem by speaking to someone grappling with that affliction, so work with clients to have those people in place before your pitch

■ Leverage breaking news. Most follow-up stories are going to examine the "whys" behind certain behavior, so position your mental-health clients as experts who provide medical or psychological explanations