

It is your choice whether or not you talk to journalists about your personal experiences. The following notes may help you to reach this decision.

Types of publication

Specialists and broadsheets

Different newspapers, magazines and television programmes have different audiences, so they have different news agendas.

A journalist from a specialist social work magazine or broadsheet newspapers (that's the larger newspapers like 'The Guardian' or 'The Independent') is more likely to write a detailed, in-depth article. They may want to use some of your words as part of this article. Or they may want to write about your personal experiences to go alongside the article. They may be prepared to use first names only or to disguise your identity.

Tabloids and popular magazines

Tabloid newspapers (that's the smaller newspapers like 'The Sun' or 'The Mirror') tend to write shorter, more sensational stories. They reach many people, so can be a good way to get a message across. Tabloid newspapers, women's magazines and certain types of television programmes are very keen on 'human interest' stories where individuals speak about their own experiences.

They usually want this person to use their full name and agree to be photographed. (Some magazines have a policy of only allowing real names to be used, to ensure that the journalist isn't making up the story.) But there are exceptions and some may be happy to disguise your identity. It's always worth asking.

Broadcast media

Radio

Radio can be very powerful because as listeners hear you speaking they tend to focus on your words and your feelings – and it encourages them to use their imagination to put themselves in your situation.

Radio programmes are often prepared to let people disguise their identities or change their names. Radio can feel safer and more anonymous than television – for the obvious reason that they can't see you. (But be aware that people who know you are still likely to recognise your voice unless it is altered in some way.)

Television

Television is also very powerful but for slightly different reasons. It's easier for the viewer to understand you and your experiences because they can see and hear you. But remember there are lots of different programmes. You could be asked to give a comment for a news piece (which might be just 15 seconds long), to appear on a chat show like 'Trisha', or to take part in a documentary which is made over many months.

Most TV programmes want to identify you, but if you have something very personal to say they may consider letting you be anonymous (for example, people speaking about rape often have their identities disguised on television). For this they may film just the outline of your shadow or get an actor to speak your words.

Live or pre-recorded?

Some radio and television interviews are live (happening as you speak) and some interviews are pre-recorded (perhaps days or even months before they are broadcast). People often prefer pre-records because they say live interviews will make them nervous. But remember when you are speaking live you have full control over what you are saying. In a pre-record the journalist will have to edit your words down to make them fit the length of the programme.

Programmes are often very short – a journalist may have to fit the opinions of ten or twelve different people into a 25-minute programme. This is a good reason to try and keep your main messages short and to the point.

Deciding whether to give an interview

You should bear the following points in mind when deciding whether to give an interview:

- Find out from the journalist what sort of information they want from you. Will you have to use your first name or full name or will it be OK to use a made-up name to disguise your identity? Will they expect you to be photographed? What is the article going to be about? Are they planning to use your contribution in any particular way – for example, if they are arguing in favour of a change in the law, do they want to use your experiences to support this?
- Why are you giving this interview? What will you get out of it? Will it achieve your aims? Will it help to support the aims of the organisation/cause you are involved with? Answer these questions for yourself before you agree to do the interview.
- Think about the impact of giving an interview on yourself, your family and friends. This may help you to decide whether there are any areas you don't want to talk about.
- Remember most journalists are not trying to catch you out! They want an interesting story for their readers or an interesting interview for their audience. They want something which has 'human interest' so their audience/readers can relate to it. They know that the best way to get this is to make you feel relaxed and confident. Many people become journalists because they are genuinely interested in what makes other people tick. And they are all human (well almost all!) and will often take a personal interest in an issue.

When giving an interview

Being clear about your boundaries

- Tell the journalist right from the start if you don't want your name to be used. They need to know this in case they work for a publication which doesn't allow names to be changed.
- Tell the journalist before the interview if there are things you don't wish to talk about – for example, 'I'm not prepared to talk about my brothers and sisters'.
- Journalists will be interested in the details of things that happened to you and how they made you feel. But this does not mean you have to use names or details of other people involved or talk about anything you find too painful. Think about ways you can talk about incidents without using other people's names. Instead of saying 'my friend Sarah felt very angry...' you could say 'there were other young people like me who were angry ...'
- If someone asks you a question you would rather not answer – tell them. Just say 'I'd rather not talk about that.'
- Be careful about using 'off the record'. Sometimes people use this expression to explain why they won't talk about something, such as: 'I don't want to talk about my famous family because my mother is very ill at the moment', and most journalists will respect this. Say to the journalist 'this is off the record' before you tell them this piece of information. But it's only common sense not to tell journalists a fascinating piece of information and then expect them to forget they've heard it. Saying 'Did you know that I'm actually the Prime Minister's long-lost daughter – but please don't print that!' would be too good a story for any journalist to resist! As a general rule, don't tell a journalist anything you don't want them to publish, or give them any photos or documents you don't want them to use.

Staying in control during the interview

- Be clear of your agenda for giving this interview: what do you want to get out of it?
- Identify one or two key messages you want to get across.
- Don't wait for the right question to come up during an interview but be prepared to put across your key message as soon as possible.

- Use the ABC technique to help you 'steer' the interview in the direction you want it to go. ABC stands for Acknowledge, Bridge and Control. You acknowledge the interviewer's question: 'That's an interesting issue ...'. You then create a bridge to where you really want to go –the word 'but' is often the best way to do this. You then take control by talking about your agenda/key message: '... what I really want to get across is that young people in care should be treated just the same as other teenagers.'
- Don't be afraid to ask the journalist whether they have understood what you are saying. Explain something again if you are unsure whether you have got your point across.
- It's only human to make mistakes! You're not a robot so you're allowed to make mistakes – even on radio and TV. Correct it naturally, as you would in a normal conversation.

General points about interviews

- By all means ask the journalist if it is possible to see the article before it is printed or to see/hear the programme before it is broadcast. But be aware that often this is not possible because the journalist may have to write the article/prepare the feature for immediate publication/broadcast that same day. Also, some publications do not allow journalists to show the article to the people they have interviewed because they reserve the right to make last-minute changes, such as cutting out a paragraph to make it fit the page. This may seem hard, but it is the price we pay for living in a country which allows freedom of the press.
- You can change your mind about giving an interview. But it is best to do so before the interview. After the interview may be too late as the material has then become the property of the journalist.
- Don't expect to be paid for giving interviews. (Most journalist earn much less than people believe, and very few newspapers, magazines or programmes make payments.) If you have to travel or have other expenses such as childcare, then they should be prepared to pay this for you. But explain to the journalist from the start so they can try and sort this out for you. They may also be prepared to make a donation to the organisation your represent.