



# Writing About **DIFFICULT** **HEALTHCARE TOPICS**

What we talk about when we talk about healthcare is hard.  
Here's how we can do it better.



One of the biggest challenges of writing healthcare content is finding the right words, the precise phrasing that will fill people with hope, inform and empower them. Often, we need to communicate information they wish they didn't have to read at all.

In this eBook, we take 5 difficult healthcare topics and share how we approach them with sensitivity and compassion. You'll also find quotes from our writers and editors offering their perspective and tips.

We hope this guide helps you when you're staring at the screen, trying to find the perfect way to communicate with a tender audience.

---

# CONTENTS



## **ADDICTION**

**3**

Share information about substance use disorders with sensitivity and care. Find the correct terminology and get tips for ensuring your content is empathetic and up-to-date.



## **MENTAL HEALTH**

**5**

Create compelling, user-centric content that speaks to the millions of people who experience mental illness or who care for someone who does.



## **PALLIATIVE CARE**

**7**

How can you write about palliative care without scaring anyone? Dispel myths. Focus on patient benefits. And tread lightly on the h-word (hospice).



## **SENIOR CARE**

**9**

Marketing senior living services can be tricky. Your audience may be baby boomers, their adult children or both. These 7 tips can help your content resonate with your audience, no matter who they are.



## **VACCINES**

**11**

Use these tips to address why vaccines matter and how health communicators can help turn the tide on vaccine hesitancy.

# ADDICTION:

## 5 WAYS TO WRITE ABOUT THE TOPIC WITH CARE



If you're still writing about "drug addicts," "alcoholics" and "substance abuse problems," it's time for a refresh.

Healthcare writers need to write about substance use disorders with the same support, empathy and sensitivity we use for those with cancer or heart disease. We've learned a lot about the disease in the last 60 years, but the way we write about it hasn't evolved much.

### Why Writing About Addiction Needs an Update

Addiction is a widespread disease: According to [the Surgeon General's Report on Alcohol, Drugs, and Health](#), nearly 21 million Americans are living with substance addictions. That number is more than the amount of Americans with all forms of cancer combined.

These millions of Americans — and their loved ones — need accurate and quality information about substance use.

In 1956, the American Medical Association (AMA) first recognized alcoholism as a disease. It wasn't until 1987 that the AMA finally recognized all forms of addiction as a disease as well. Before that time, having an addiction was considered a moral or personal failing, not a medical diagnosis.

### Challenges to Writing About Substance Use Disorder

#### The stigma around addiction

While other medical conditions inspire sympathy, society still regards a substance use disorder as a personal shortcoming, often due to an individual's lack of willpower. And while a person may initially make a conscious decision to use a substance (whether legal or not), becoming dependent on it and developing a substance use disorder is not in their control.

#### The media's portrayal of addiction

Another challenge is fighting the Hollywood portrayal of drug and alcohol use, where addiction is often glamorized. Television and movies frequently use addiction as a plot point — many times inaccurately.

“

The language we use to talk about substance use disorders is evolving. Using the right terminology isn't about being politically correct. It's about addressing people's experiences. Behavioral situations are challenging and painful for people and their loved ones. Don't be coy and avoid the subject. Think about what you would want and need to hear, and write from there.

— SUSANNA DONATO,  
SENIOR WRITER AND EDITOR

They tend to gloss over the experience of living with a substance use disorder — or portray it as entertaining and exciting. Rarely does the entertainment industry depict the shame, embarrassment and stress a person experiences when living with or recovering from this disorder.

#### The need for new language

[Harvard Health](#) reports that the words "abuse" and "abuser" contribute to stigma around the disease. The DSM—5 removed references to "substance abuse" and renamed the disease "substance use disorder."

This change was made in 2013, yet 6 years later, the United States government still hasn't caught up. The U.S. Department of Health & Human Services has a Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA), and most states have their own "substance abuse agency." Even a diligent, well-meaning writer can get tripped up with their language by visiting these websites.



## So How Can We Write About Substance Use Disorder With Care?

#1

### Interview experts

Don't only rely on information from websites and publications. Talk to subject matter experts who can guide you to find the right resources and terminology.

Let them know to correct you if you use an outdated or inappropriate term during your interview. They can guide you on the proper terms to use in your content.

#2

### Understand that Alcoholics Anonymous' (AA) language is not universal

Most of us are familiar with the AA introduction: "Hello. My name is Jane, and I'm an alcoholic." AA and Narcotics Anonymous (NA) have helped millions of people recover from substance use disorders.

Many members find it empowering to label themselves as "alcoholics" or "addicts." However, psychiatrists speculate that eventually, the language may change to, "Hello. My name is Jane, and I have an alcohol use disorder."

#3

### Separate the person from the disease

Physicians don't refer to people as "asthmatics" or "diabetics," because those people are not defined by their disease. So it's time to abolish the use of "addict."

"These words perpetuate the stigma that addiction is, in some way, the fault of the person. Calling someone a 'substance abuser' evokes much more judgment than saying they have a 'substance use disorder.' These are people — people with a family and loved ones, who are dealing with a disease they did not ask for," says Melanie Haber, senior vice president of brand & communications for [American Addiction Centers](#).

#4

### Be mindful with terminology

The [National Press Foundation](#) offers guidelines to use when writing about addiction, including:

- Change "abuse" to "misuse."
- Avoid the word "clean" to describe someone who is recovering. It implies someone with a substance use disorder is "dirty." Similarly, don't refer to drug tests as "clean" or "dirty." Instead, opt for "positive" or "negative."
- Never use the word "junkie."
- Don't use the phrase "fell off the wagon," which implies that the person brought a relapse on themselves.

#5

### Don't forget about SEO

"Severe substance use disorder" is the proper way to refer to "addiction." But people are unlikely to be searching that term. Because you want people to find your content — especially the people who need it most — use the alternative words occasionally (even if it's to explain why the terminology isn't correct).

There's enough shame and stigma surrounding substance use disorders, which can prevent people from getting the treatment they need. Use your words and content to give people and their loved ones information and support.



# MENTAL HEALTH:

## 5 TIPS TO ENGAGE YOUR AUDIENCE



Your audience goes beyond the nearly 44 million adults who experience mental health problems each year — it includes their caregivers as well. In 2015, there were 8.4 million caregivers of people with mental health concerns.

As you prioritize your content, consider these 5 tips for creating and curating behavioral and mental health content so it reaches those who need it most.

### #1

#### To overcome the mental health stigma, choose your words carefully

Nearly half of the caregivers of adults with mental health issues feel that the stigma of mental illness makes it difficult to talk about their concerns. So make your content warm, supportive, relevant and personal.

Whenever possible:

- **Use “you and your loved one”:** This phrase addresses both people with mental health concerns and their caregivers.
- **Choose second-person language:** Talking directly to the audience legitimizes their feelings and concerns.
- **Talk about people, not conditions:** Just as you wouldn't write “Jack is cancer,” a person isn't synonymous with mental illness. Rewrite content such as “Jane is bipolar” to “Jane has bipolar disease.”
- **Avoid pejorative terms:** Instead of describing someone as “an addict,” choose “a person with a substance use disorder.”



Good writing can chip away at stigma. Turn to organizations like the National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI), the American Psychological Association or the American Foundation for Suicide Prevention for guidance on language, tone and the proper terms for these conditions.

– KIRSTEN WEIR,  
SENIOR WRITER

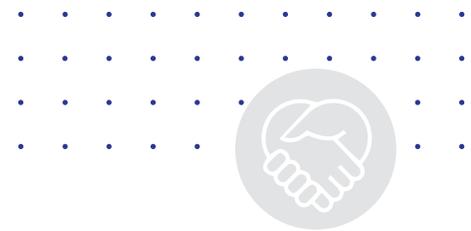
### #2

#### Use blogs and other formats to feature stories of recovery

Reach your audience through a patient (or caregiver) story. This personalized approach:

- **Offers comfort:** Reading the perspective of others can help make your readers feel less isolated.
- **Provides meaning and hope:** Featuring someone who is working on or who has successfully improved their health can be meaningful to readers who are in a similar situation.
- **May be cathartic:** Writing about emotions is beneficial for someone experiencing a mental illness, according to the American Psychological Association. Consider providing opportunities for those who have experience with mental illness to offer guest posts.
- **Builds a relationship with your organization:** When you supply a vehicle for people to share their stories, you are creating meaningful content that, once optimized for SEO, brings people to your site. And allowing people to comment on web content offers increased interaction with your brand and services.





### #3

#### **Offer resources and mental health support to help overcome barriers to treatment**

Many people with a mental illness and their caregivers express difficulty identifying a health professional with behavioral health knowledge. It can be even more challenging to locate additional services — such as day-program treatment and inpatient treatment.

Invest in up-to-date resources on your website, such as:

- Your institutional resources
- Local nonprofit agency listings and offerings
- Government services

Feature your behavioral health providers to legitimize your content and increase brand presence. Don't just feature physicians. Position your counselors, social workers and advanced practice providers using formats such as:

- Posts highlighting promising research or successful programs
- Day-in-the-life posts that highlight the patient-provider relationship

### #4

#### **Use social media to reach tweens, teens and young adults**

Mental illness among young adults is ubiquitous.

According to the National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI):

- 75% of all lifetime cases of mental illness begin by age 24.
- 20% of youth ages 13 to 18 live with a mental health condition.

This same group of people routinely uses social media: 95% of teens have a smartphone and most often use Snapchat, Instagram or YouTube. Use all of your social channels — don't focus exclusively on Facebook or Twitter — to reach an audience in need of the services you offer.

### #5

#### **Make it timely by latching onto behavioral health news stories**

Capitalize on current mental health news stories. For example, if there's buzz around foods or new medications that help with depression, run with that.

You don't have to wait for a news outlet to request an interview with your experts. Instead, hijack the news cycle and use SEO to your advantage:

1. Create and upload a blog post related to the trending news topic.
2. As people search for the news story, your optimized content will reach an audience who is seeking the very information and services you offer.
3. Craft the content in a manner that speaks to the specific needs of your audience.

# PALLIATIVE CARE:

## 3 TIPS FOR WRITING WITH SENSITIVITY



Not everyone in your audience wants to “live their best life” or “get back to an active lifestyle.” Some simply wish to feel better.

It’s time to turn the spotlight on a health topic that can help them: palliative care. This crash course in palliative care content discusses what this service is (and isn’t), why it’s so tricky to write about — and why you need to.

### Stop Ignoring Palliative Care Content

Palliative care services — also called supportive care — impacts patients, helping them have less pain and fewer symptoms. But people may not find enough information about it in your content.

That’s because writing about health topics like this one is wrought with challenges. It’s not a service that provides concrete, positive outcomes, like repairing a heart problem or addressing fertility issues. And people (wrongly) associate palliative care with death and dying, not understanding the full scope of what it offers.

Creating compelling, sensitive palliative care content is worth the effort. Highlighting these crucial services lets patients and caregivers know your organization can provide the appropriate care for them at the right time. Plus, palliative care services are for patients with a variety of serious illnesses, allowing you to impact large segments of your audience.

### Dispelling Palliative Care Myths

The first step to writing successful digital content about palliative care is understanding what it does and who it’s for.

#### **Palliative care eases the burden of a serious illness.**

Providers can:

- Treat nagging symptoms, such as pain, nausea and difficulty sleeping
- Address emotional challenges including anxiety
- Help patients and their loved ones plan the next steps of care



Education can ease a person’s fear. It gives them something to focus on and a road forward. I take that to heart and work to make my message as clean, simple and compassionate as possible. You want your words to take them gently by the hand and lead them to the next step.

– STEPHANY WILSON,  
EDITOR

#### **Palliative care is for patients:**

- Of all ages, read: including children
- With any life-limiting illness, which may include diabetes, heart problems or liver disease
- Who need additional support to address challenges that are making their lives difficult

#### **Palliative care is NOT:**

- Only available to older adults
- A service dedicated to cancer patients
- Synonymous with hospice care (more on this in a moment)

### Tips for Writing Palliative Care Digital Content

Now you’re one step closer to writing successful content. The next step is to address people’s concerns and let them know what to expect.

This approach builds a compelling case in support of palliative care and your hospital’s services.





## Here are 3 tips to get you started:

### #1

#### Providing a definition is good; focusing on patient benefits is better

Include a solid definition of palliative care, which is easier said than done. Trying to summarize a broad range of services that benefit people in a variety of scenarios is tricky. You may end up with a vague definition such as “specialized support for people with a serious illness.”

This language is a good start, but you also need to connect the dots. Patients aren’t going to pursue services if they don’t understand the benefit. They want to know, “How can palliative care services make my life better?” Your content should answer this question by offering specific examples of how services relieve what’s going on in their minds and bodies.

Benefits may include:

- **Doctors** who explain your diagnosis and answer questions about your future healthcare needs
- **Emotional support** to help you cope with depression or other unpleasant feelings you’re experiencing
- **A team of specialists**, including social workers, nurses and members of the clergy to help you navigate care decisions

### #2

#### Name changes are important: Call it supportive care

The notion that palliative care is for people who are dying is deep-seated, and it’s time for a makeover.

- **Decades ago**, palliative care services were born out of the need to relieve suffering in people who were in advanced stages of a terminal illness.
- **Today**, palliative care includes a broad range of services and highly skilled specialists to help improve people’s lives.

The term “supportive care” reflects this evolution, and many hospitals are adopting it. Bear in mind, though, that supportive care does not yet perform as well in search as palliative care. So, you’ll want to use “palliative care” to help your pages perform well and also infuse your digital content with mentions of “supportive care.”

### #3

#### Tread lightly on the h-word (hospice)

Many people immediately think of hospice when they hear about palliative care services. Hospice services are for people who have less than 6 months to live. Make the distinction clear on your site:

- **Palliative care** helps people live well despite having a serious illness.
- **Hospice services** help people receive good end-of-life care.

Don’t dwell too long on hospice care, or it will negatively impact SEO. Allow users to learn more by linking to hospice services on a separate page.

Having the services on discrete pages clearly distinguishes them from each other. And it will help your content perform well for two strong keywords: “palliative care” and “hospice.”

# SENIOR CARE:

## 7 STRATEGIES FOR IMPROVING YOUR WEB CONTENT



Baby boomers have a lifetime of experience figuring out what they want and how to get it — and that's not stopping now. This generation is aging (heard of the gray wave?), and they're starting to look for senior living options. They want to know what types of independent living and assisted living housing will meet their needs.

But will these baby boomers find you online? And if they do, will your content make an impact?

### Reaching Seniors With Effective Content Marketing

As a senior living marketer, you've got a tricky job. Because you don't have just one demanding audience — you have two.

On the one hand, you're marketing to retirees. On the other, you're marketing to their caregivers. You've got to resonate with two distinct audiences through one content marketing strategy.

Not exactly easy to do.

### Consider these content tips for marketing to seniors and caregivers:

#1

#### Be empathetic to their life situations

Don't assume all retirees are living it up with luxurious brunches and world travel. Pew Research found that only [51% of current retirees](#) retired because they wanted to. Retirement can be a touchy subject, so approach it with care in your content.

However, many retirees report that their retirement turned out to be "very satisfying." Could moving to a senior living facility be one reason? Connect the dots and show this to your audience.

“

It's crucial to approach the topic of senior living with dignity and respect. We're reaching people who are experiencing major life transitions — or helping a loved one who is. Emotions are high, so we need to meet our audience where they are, through helpful content that's kind without being condescending. We should avoid stereotypes about aging and choose our words thoughtfully, keeping empathy and connection top of mind.

— MARY TINDALL,  
WRITER

#2

#### Use plain language and avoid hashtags

Trendy terms, popular acronyms and slang could turn off older adults. Ditch the #TBT, #IMO and #SMH and stick to clear, concise language. You can still be clever and memorable without using #jargon.

#3

#### Convenience is key

First, [is your content findable](#)? You invest plenty of time and effort in creating compelling content. Make sure it reaches its audience.

Next, ask yourself:

- Is your content cluttered and buried deep within your site?
- Can your audience quickly skim a page to understand your message?



- Is your website easy to navigate with a clear path to your goal?

Older adults deserve a streamlined web experience. (As do we all!) If your pages have high bounce rates and website goals are down, take a deeper look through a [content audit](#).

#4

#### Focus on life stage marketing

Baby boomers are experiencing big life changes. We're talking retirement, the birth of grandchildren, health changes or moving to a retirement community. And often, their children may be helping them navigate these waters.

Your job as a senior living marketer is to reach your audience where they are in life. For example, create content that helps seniors adjust to retirement life — and helps their children understand what they're going through.

Offer empathy, support and advice through your content marketing. This approach will not only increase brand awareness, but build a trusting relationship with your market.

#5

#### Spotlight your benefits and differentiators

Your market is competitive. Show why seniors should turn to your organization. Answer the WIIFM question: What's in it for me?

For example, don't just brag about your quality wellness center. Explain how the wellness center improves the lives of residents. Even better: Provide a quote from a resident on the benefits.

#6

#### Don't sound like a salesperson

Ads are everywhere. In 1984, a person saw an average of 2,000 ads per day. By 2014, they saw around 5,000.

Seniors are used to being sold to. But they're savvy. More than 615 million devices now have ad-blocking software.

Content marketing should provide value without being intrusive. Make your site a breath of fresh air in an ad-overloaded world. Don't turn your content into a sales pitch, because they'll tune you out. Learn the [difference between content marketing and straight-up sales](#).

#7

#### Follow a fact-checking review process

It's scary [how much "fake news" is out there](#), especially surrounding health topics. The last thing you want is to mislead your audience. The consequences can rip apart your reputation and crush brand loyalty.

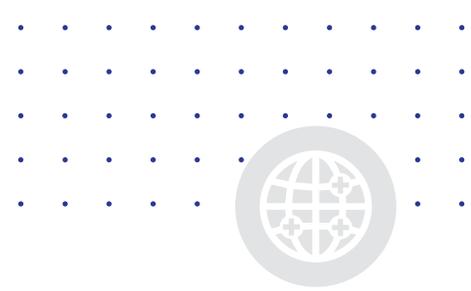
Instead, take steps to [ensure your content is accurate](#). Fact check and review every piece of content before publication. Even better — consider partnering with a content agency that takes fact-checking seriously.

Seniors and their adult children need content that's findable, that resonates and that improves their lives.



# VACCINES:

## 5 WAYS TO USE SENSITIVITY TO EDUCATE



We need to meet the anti-vax population where they are. Shouting “You’re wrong!” may make people dig in even harder.

Let this sink in: Diseases we’ve already eradicated may now be our biggest threats. That’s right: The World Health Organization lists vaccine hesitancy as one of the top health threats of 2019.

### Knowledge Management: An Effective Tool to Stem Vaccine Hesitancy

And here’s where health communicators come in: [Knowledge management](#) is the process of collecting and curating knowledge and connecting people to it so they can act effectively. It is key to improving global health, according to [K4Health](#), part of the Johns Hopkins Center for Communication Programs.

#1

#### Contain vaccination misinformation

People who choose not to vaccinate their kids, sometimes called anti-vaxxers, are not malicious. Instead, their decision likely stems from misinformation and concern for their kids.

Misinformation about vaccine safety spreads like wildfire and morphs into gibberish, much like the phrase “I’ll take a banana” becomes “Mom loves hyenas” after a child’s game of “Telephone.”

Craft communications that speak to the underlying reasons people hesitate to vaccinate:

- **Acknowledge the fear:** Don’t linger on the emotional aspect of this debate, but do acknowledge feelings like worry, nervousness and fear. Then respond with fact-based information.
- **Research the other side:** Explore the anti-vax arguments. Then prepare evidence to refute it using plain language.

“

When we understand the motivations behind vaccine hesitancy, we can do a more effective job of crafting communications that truly resonate with the reader.

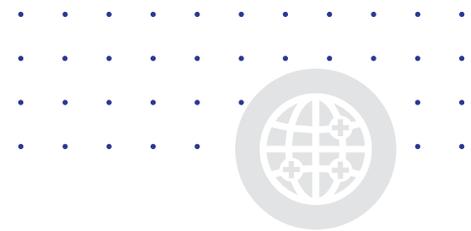
– MARTI HARRIS,  
SENIOR WRITER AND EDITOR

#2

#### Anticipate immunization-related questions

Predict what questions or concerns may exist in your community if or when there is an outbreak or a proposed vaccine-related policy. Prepare and share meaningful answers to questions such as:

- Am I still safe if I was vaccinated 20 to 30 years ago?
- Can my vaccinated child be in a public place?
- My family is vaccinated, but should we wear masks to be safe?
- If almost everyone I know was vaccinated, are we really vulnerable? Isn’t it just the unvaccinated who are at risk?
- Does a policy that prevents unvaccinated children from entering a public place make health sense?
- Why are religious or political exemptions from vaccinations a bad idea?



### #3

#### Find a new way to tell the “vaccines-are-important” story

CNN recently created a video that used a simple graph to show that the vaccine load (the amount of vaccine we give kids in each shot) has decreased significantly since the 1960s. The incidence of autism, however, continues to increase.

For many people, it was an “Aha!” moment because it was a compelling argument they hadn’t heard before.

Ask your experts if they have new ways of presenting pro-vax information. Make it your mission to tell a story differently than it’s been told before.

### #4

#### Use your platform to educate about the benefits of vaccines

Don’t be afraid to take a stand. Physicians take the Hippocratic Oath, part of which says: “I will prevent disease whenever I can, for prevention is preferable to cure.”

Your institution is armed with indisputable evidence. Share the importance of immunization on your institution’s many channels. For example:

- **Jump on news stories:** Capitalize on news stories about outbreaks by publishing a relevant article or hanging a poster in waiting areas.
- **Present fact vs. fiction:** Use mythbuster blog posts to refute false information.
- **Ask experts:** Feature specialists and new research findings on podcasts and videos.
- **Dive into social channels:** Post stories and data on your channels so followers will share them far and wide. Your pro-vaccination community will appreciate having clear, fact-based information they can easily share.
- **Use your publications:** Write a feature article in your quarterly magazine about the importance of vaccinations.

### #5

#### Identify pro-immunization spokespeople

One of the best ways to engage a weary audience is to speak their language, so find people fluent in anti-vax talking points.

- **Talk to your experts:** Seek out the specialists who are relatable and eloquent, then feature them on your channels.
- **Find a former anti-vax parent or child who wasn’t vaccinated:** Ask your team of primary care providers to identify parents or children who were once anti-vaxxers but have since become advocates. Then get permission to feature their story.
- **Encourage discussion:** Help your pro-vaccine followers share fact-based arguments on social media. The more people talk about the health benefits of vaccines, the more likely vaccine hesitancy will become “taboo,” and behaviors will change.

**What not to do:** Do not give air time to personal stories of people who are anti-vaccination. There aren’t two “sides” to this debate. When you share an anti-vax story, you lend it credibility. That’s why [Pinterest restricted anti-vaccine search results](#), and other social channels are trying to find ways to curb the spread of misinformation related to vaccines.

# 5 STRATEGIES

## FOR WRITING ABOUT SENSITIVE SUBJECTS



#1

### Remember that the person is not the illness

The disease is part of their life, not all of it. Avoid calling someone “anorexic.” Instead, refer to them as “a person with anorexia nervosa.”

#2

### Incorporate patient stories

A patient’s experience offers crucial firsthand perspective. Including profiles of people who have lived with the condition you’re writing about can provide comfort and hope.

#3

### Meet your audience where they are

Senior citizens researching assisted living options are probably not scrolling on Instagram. But teens with mental illness may be crying out for help on that channel. Determine where your audience is and produce empathetic content there.

#4

### Consult the experts

Writing about difficult topics is not a one-person job. Interview an expert in the field before writing and ask them to review the final copy. Terminology changes, and information can become outdated quickly. Including a specialist helps ensure your content is correct and won’t offend the people you’re trying to reach.

#5

### Be mindful of SEO

For your content to make an impact, people have to find it. Empathy for your reader should be top of mind, but SEO is definitely something to keep in mind. Always use the correct vocabulary, but if incorporating some informal language will help people find your content, then it’s OK to use sparingly.

Do you need help creating content for a sensitive healthcare subject?

GET IN TOUCH TODAY



Thanks to the Aha Media writers and editors who contributed to this eBook, including Laura Bloom, Marti Harris, Haley Hite, Gila Rose and Jessica Wozinsky.

