

SHARE YOUR VOICE THROUGH OP-EDS AND ONLINE ARTICLES

Writing and placing an op-ed or bylined piece in an online media outlet can be critical to help raise awareness for **National Recovery Month (Recovery Month)**. An op-ed, short for “opposite the editorial pages” of a newspaper, is a way for you to express your opinion and perspective on a certain subject or initiative. With the popularity of the Internet, articles in online-only media outlets will also allow you to state your opinion for a larger readership. Writing about **Recovery Month** can help raise awareness for mental and/or substance use disorders in your community, town, city, or State.

Use this document to find helpful tips on how to write an op-ed or online article and how to submit it for publication.

Get Started...

This year's **Recovery Month** theme, **“Join the Voices for Recovery: It's Worth It,”** emphasizes that while the road to recovery may be difficult, the benefits of preventing and overcoming mental and/or substance use disorders are significant and valuable to individuals, families, and communities. The theme also highlights that people in recovery achieve healthy lifestyles, both physically and emotionally, and contribute in positive ways to their community. They also prove to others that prevention works, treatment is effective, and people recover.

Think about this theme when you brainstorm ideas for your op-ed or online article. To help you gain more attention, note that the **Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA)**, within the **U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS)**, sponsors the **Recovery Month** observance annually. Learn more about SAMHSA's support of recovery from mental and/or substance use disorders through its **Strategic Initiatives**.

To have the best shot at placing your op-ed or opinion piece – either in print or online – during **Recovery Month** in September, start writing early. Refer to the checklist below to stay on track during the first stages of planning.

- **Determine a clear and concise message:** A strong op-ed or online article makes a single point or argument persuasively in the beginning of the piece. Think about what you want to say and how to explain your topic through simple messaging, so readers can stay focused and walk away with the point you want to convey.
- **Think current:** Make the subject of your op-ed or article timely and relevant to the general public. Give the article a local angle to increase your chances that the print or online outlet will publish your piece. This will also bring your message home with the local community.
- **Personalize it:** Include a personal story of a resident in your area or a current event in your city or State to help readers easily connect with your message. Before sharing someone's personal story, be sure to ask for permission first.

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- **Locate statistics and facts:** Supplement all statements or opinions with hard facts that validate your thoughts. For example, if you say that mental and/or substance use disorders are common and more prevalent than one might think, follow that with statistics on the prevalence of mental and/or substance disorders in your local city or State. Conduct research so you have your facts in hand when you begin to write; some resources are provided for you later in this document.
- **Identify the publication(s):** Assess which publication is the best fit for your message. If your article focuses on community issues, a local newspaper might be ideal. If you are focusing on a broader, national issue or have a well-known author, try a top-tier newspaper. Most publications won't publish op-eds that were already published in another outlet. For this reason, prioritize each outlet and decide what your first choices are, followed by your backup options. Read examples of past op-eds, so you get a sense of what formats and topics appear to capture the publication's interest.
- **Keep it brief:** Your op-ed or online article should be between 400 to 750 words. Check with the publication or website where you plan to submit your piece to determine specific limitations on word count or other requirements, such as deadlines and how they prefer to receive submissions.
- **Create a relationship:** The best way to have your thoughts published or posted is to develop a relationship with the editor in advance. Always plan out what you want to say before you contact the publication. Provide background information about yourself, your organization, and **Recovery Month**, in addition to any local and State recovery issues.
- **Refer to the template:** At the end of this document, you can find a sample op-ed to tailor, which will help you get started in expressing your ideas.

To gain additional attention for your op-ed, reach out to well-known organizations in your community to offer to co-write an op-ed or online article with them. Having an established partner might catch the eye of an editor and increase the chances that your op-ed is published. Refer to the "**Prevention, Treatment, and Recovery**" document in this toolkit to see organizations that you could join forces with in your area.

Write...

Once you select a topic and compelling supporting statistics, flesh out your draft with information about **Recovery Month** and its mission, along with this year's theme. Avoid controversial statements or sounding like you are "preaching" your belief. Also, consider who your readers are when writing your op-ed or online article. Think about what would catch their attention and rouse their interest in **Recovery Month**.

Refer to the resources listed below for facts to make your op-ed or online article more compelling. Also, you might want to see if your publication has any interest in publishing the infographics provided in the "**Targeted Outreach**" section of this toolkit.

- Single-State Agency (SSA) Directory
- SAMHSA's *National Survey on Drug Use and Health*
- SAMHSA's *National Survey on Drug Use and Health: Mental Health Findings*
- SAMHSA's Recovery Statement
- SAMHSA's National Survey of Substance Abuse Treatment Services (N-SSATS)
- SAMHSA's Drug Abuse Warning Network
- SAMHSA's Treatment Episode Data Set
- SAMHSA's Store

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Refer to the below tips when writing your op-ed or online article:

- Don't be afraid to make it personal – include true stories to connect with readers;
- Include an eye-catching title that emphasizes your central message;
- Near the end of your op-ed or article, clearly restate your main points and issue a call to action;
- Avoid technical jargon and acronyms – most newspapers are written on a 5th grade level, so mimic that language; and
- Include your name, contact information, and a description of who you are and your qualifications.

Publish...

When submitting the op-ed or online article, include a brief introduction of yourself, along with your phone number, email address, and mailing address at the bottom. Also include a succinct cover letter to establish why you are qualified to write this piece and why it is timely, along with a brief explanation of why recovery from mental and/or substance use disorders is important to readers. When you are trying to place your piece in a publication or online, be sure to:

- **Place a follow-up call:** Follow up with the editor one week after you submitted the op-ed or article. If he or she has not had time to look at it yet, follow up again one week later. Remember to be polite and state that publishing your piece will help others who may not know where to turn.
- **Give it a time limit:** Since most publications will not notify you if your op-ed is rejected, set a deadline for your piece to be published. If you haven't heard back by that date, move on to the next outlet of your choice to gauge their interest in publishing the piece. Don't give up!

If your op-ed is rejected from the top publications on your list, consider alternatives to the traditional printed op-ed. Ask the publication's website editor if your op-ed can be posted on the online version of the newspaper. Online opinion pieces can be much easier to share with others through social media outlets such as **Twitter** and **Facebook**. Additionally, online outlets such as **Slate**, **iVillage**, **The Daily Beast**, and **The Huffington Post** are more and more popular, and many have a higher viewership than traditional print publications.

Many newspapers now have online bloggers who cover local philanthropic events. Some of these local bloggers may let you contribute a guest post to discuss mental and/or substance disorders or a **Recovery Month** event in your area. Use the sample op-ed at the end of this document as a guide for your guest post, but remember to write in a more casual, personal manner when blogging. If a blogger does not agree to have you contribute a guest post, offer information about **Recovery Month** and mental and/or substance use disorders, and encourage the blogger to write his or her own post on the topic or link to your event's website.

Keep in mind that **Recovery Month** celebrates individuals in long-term recovery, acknowledges those who provide recovery support services, and empowers those in need of help to seek treatment throughout the year. Even if your op-ed or online piece does not get published in September, keep trying throughout the rest of the year to help spread these crucial messages.

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Share...

SAMHSA is interested in your published op-ed and hearing about any successes you had in promoting **Recovery Month**. Be sure to check news sites such as [Google News](#) or [Yahoo News](#) to see if your op-ed is published or whether other outlets have picked it up. Your online social network is also a great way to share your op-ed. Please:

- Post your published op-ed on the **Recovery Month website**, and your **Facebook page**, and **Twitter account**. If you need help on how to use these online tools, visit the "[New Media Glossary](#)" and "[Develop Your Social Network](#)" documents in this toolkit.
- Distribute your event details, materials, and pictures to the social media channels above.
- Send a copy of your published op-ed and placement information electronically to recoverymonth@samhsa.hhs.gov or by mail to:

Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration
ATTN: Consumer Affairs/**Recovery Month**
Center for Substance Abuse Treatment
1 Choke Cherry Road
Rockville, MD 20857

- Also, please fill out the "[Customer Satisfaction Form](#)" to share your outreach efforts and give feedback.

Consult Resources...

For more information on **Recovery Month** and services available to those in need, please refer to the following resources:

- **SAMHSA's National Helpline, 1-800-662-HELP (4357) or 1-800-487-4889 (TDD)**, provides 24-hour, free and confidential information about mental and/or substance use disorders and prevention, treatment, and recovery referrals in English or Spanish.
- **National Suicide Prevention Lifeline, 1-800-273-TALK (8255)**, provides a free, 24-hour helpline available to anyone in suicidal crisis or emotional distress.
- **SAMHSA's "Find Substance Abuse and Mental Health Treatment" website**, <http://www.samhsa.gov/treatment>, contains information about treatment options and special services located in your area.
- The **Recovery Month website**, <http://www.recoverymonth.gov>, contains all the materials from this toolkit and a wide variety of relevant resources.
- **SAMHSA ADS Center's "Working with the Media to Support the Campaign for Mental Health Recovery" Webcast**, <http://www.stopstigma.samhsa.gov/teleconferences/archive/training/teleconference062408.aspx>, provides helpful tips for contacting the media and useful strategies for organizing outreach efforts.

Inclusion of websites and event examples in this document and on the [Recovery Month website](#) does not constitute official endorsement by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services or the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration.

SAMPLE OP-ED

Approximately 532 words

Op-ed Template

Recovery from Mental and/or Substance Use Disorders is Possible

All around us in **[Community]**, it is estimated that **XX** people are in recovery from mental and/or substance use disorders. They are contributing to our businesses, connecting with their families, and giving back to the community. But if we want more people to join them on a path of recovery, we need to take action – now. Too many people are still unaware that prevention works, and that these conditions can be treated, just like we can treat other health disorders such as diabetes and hypertension. We need to work together to make recovery the expectation.

Having **[been in recovery for XX years / worked in the recovery field for XX years / other statement of personal experience]**, I have seen firsthand the benefits of recovery. Individuals who embrace recovery achieve improved mental and physical health, as well as stronger relationships and a sense of self-worth. Mental and/or substance use disorders do not discriminate – they affect people of all ethnicities, ages, genders, geographic regions, and socioeconomic levels. An estimated **[number]** people needed treatment last year in **[Community/City/Town/State]**, and we need to address this real issue.

We can't get discouraged by the prevalence of these problems, because help is available. In fact, in 2010, 31.3 million adults aged 18 or older received services for mental health problems in the past year, and 2.6 million people aged 12 or older who needed treatment for an illicit drug or alcohol use problem received treatment at a specialty facility in the past year.

These individuals have achieved healthy lifestyles, both physically and emotionally, and contribute in positive ways to their communities. They need the support of a welcoming community to help them on their path of long-term recovery. Fortunately, most people say they would think no less of a friend or relative if they discovered that person is in recovery from a mental and/or substance use disorder.

To further educate communities about the pathways to recovery and to support people in recovery, every September, people throughout the Nation celebrate **National Recovery Month (Recovery Month)**, an initiative sponsored by the **Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA)**, within the **U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS)**.

[Name of organization] is celebrating **Recovery Month** by holding a variety of educational and entertaining events **[or name specific event]** to honor individuals and families who are in long-term recovery. A huge turn-out at these events will send a signal that **[Community]** embraces recovery and supports those working in the field to provide much-needed recovery services.

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I urge local businesses, community organizations, colleges, schools, administrators, and government agencies to get involved in these activities. Let people know that help is available 24 hours a day through SAMHSA's National Helpline, **1-800-662-HELP (4357)** or **1-800-487-4889 (TDD)**. Additionally, you can provide information about local treatment and recovery resources on your website and link to additional information available at <http://www.recoverymonth.gov>.

These are small and easy steps to take, and they can make a tremendous difference in the lives of many in our community. We shouldn't think twice about getting involved. As this year's **Recovery Month** theme says, **"Join the Voices of Recovery: It's Worth It."**

[Include author name, title, and brief summary of qualifications that make him or her an expert on this topic.]