

SUICIDE PREVENTION TOOLKIT for Media Journalists

Summary of Steps Taken by Media Journalists to Help Prevent Suicides

Talking about suicide will not cause suicide, however, studies show that there are better ways than others to report on suicide in order to minimize any potential for harm. When a suicide death has occurred, there can sometimes be a Werther effect - basically copycat attempts and even additional deaths by suicide. This is also referred to as "contagion." Studies show, media journalist can play an integral role in helping to stem this effect or "contagion." The Minnesota Department of Health and the American Foundation for Suicide Prevention indicate the following suggestions for media coverage, can help prevent further deaths:

1. **ALWAYS** offer local resource information or a crisis hotline (make sure it works) like 1-800-273-TALK for anyone who read/see your article and may need help themselves or for someone they care about.
2. **Omit or at least downplay the means** by which the person died - if possible do not refer to the method at all (such as gun shot to the head, hanging, carbon monoxide poisoning, etc.). If you absolutely must print a method, state it very simply.
3. **Avoid graphic details, locations and descriptions.**
4. **Do refer to the deceased as "having died by suicide"** rather than "committed suicide" or as "a suicide."
5. **Do not use "suicide" in the headline.** Do not refer to a suicide as "~~successful~~" or "~~failed attempt~~."
6. **Consider these angles for stories:**
 - a. Trends in suicide rates
 - b. Recent treatment advances
 - c. Individual stories of how treatment was life-saving
 - d. Stories of people who overcame despair without attempting suicide
 - e. Myths about suicide
 - f. Warning signs of suicide
 - g. Actions that individuals can take to prevent suicide by others
 - h. Focus articles on prevention and community resources people can use to get help
7. **Avoid simplistic explanations** of suicide - most suicide deaths do not happen simply because a person had a bad life experience - most often there is an underlying brain illness like clinical depression. Often people close the death did not recognize the symptoms or the warning signs. Be gentle.
8. **Create a supportive atmosphere** for the family and the community - suicide prevention is the responsibility of the entire community.

A full document of guidelines for media reporting is linked in this toolkit, or go online to the website of the American Foundation for Suicide Prevention www.afsp.org/index-1.htm

For more information about prevention, treatment and community resources in Minnesota, contact:
Yellow Ribbon Suicide Prevention Program in MN at 507-387-5020¹

