

Information and advice on talking to the media

The media can play an important role in providing accurate information about suicide and its relationship to mental illness and other issues. The mental health sector can work with the media to raise awareness of the importance of suicide prevention, advising people where to seek help, and educating the community about the association between mental illness and suicide.

Media reporting of suicide

Research has found that responsible reporting can help to reduce suicide rates and that, in some cases, poor reporting of suicide has been linked to increased rates of suicide.

Responsible reporting involves providing essential advice and helplines, as well as focusing on positive aspects of the person's life rather than their death. It is also important to remind people of the harmful impact that suicide has on family, friends, and the community. Discussing the relationship between suicide and mental illness can help by providing facts and guidance to those who may be vulnerable, or to people concerned about someone they know.

Harmful reporting can include publishing details about methods and locations, as these can provide 'how-to' guides and may contribute to copycat deaths. The inclusion of photographs or video footage of the scene, location or method should always be avoided. Media coverage of celebrity suicide must also be managed carefully. Research indicates that vulnerable people can be triggered to act by learning of the death or self-injury of someone they identify with or admire. A succession of stories on suicide can normalise it as an acceptable option, and can place vulnerable people at further risk.

Word choice and placement with media articles is also important. Any language that sensationalises the act, or presents suicide as a means of solving a problem, can have a harmful impact. Media articles should also avoid normalising or glamorising suicide – for example, by not referring to suicide in headlines or by misusing the term in sentences such as 'political suicide', where more appropriate wording could be substituted.

Media enquiries about suicide

You may be contacted by the media seeking assistance in developing a story relating to suicide. Journalists may request background information or statistics, information about support services, or want to interview a mental health expert. Local and regional media, especially, need to give stories a strong local perspective, and this may be an additional reason for contacting you.

Issues to consider if asked to comment on a suicide

- ⌚ Will the media item improve community understanding of suicide? Stories that explore the underlying issues and provide context to a suicide, including the impact on the bereaved, rather than focus on the act of a specific death can have a positive effect.
- ⌚ Consider whether assisting the journalist will play a role in whether the story runs. Sometimes saying no will mean an inappropriate or unnecessary story won't go ahead. Research has shown a succession of stories on suicide can normalise it as an acceptable option, and can place vulnerable people at further risk.
- ⌚ Is your organisation best placed to respond to the story? If another organisation has more appropriate services, resources or expertise, consider referring the media enquiry on.

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- ④ Who is the most appropriate spokesperson? Sometimes someone with first-hand experience of mental illness can put a personal face on an issue and give the audience someone to relate to. If providing a spokesperson with first-hand experience of mental illness, see Factsheet *Supporting spokespeople with a mental illness*.
- ④ Review the Australian Government's Mindframe *Guidelines for reporting mental illness and suicide*. See www.mindframe-media.info.

If commenting to the media about suicide

- ④ Use the word 'suicide' sparingly. Consider alternatives such as 'took their own life' or 'ended their own life'.
- ④ Avoid using the terms '*unsuccessful* suicide' or '*failed* suicide attempt' as this places a value on the act. Use alternatives such as 'tried to end their life' or 'non-fatal'.
- ④ Avoid language which – intentionally or not – glamorises suicide or presents it as normal or as an option for dealing with problems.
- ④ If appropriate, comment on the person's life and successes. Emphasise the harmful long term impact that suicide has on family, friends, and the community.
- ④ Avoid providing simple explanations which suggest a suicide might be the result of a single factor or event – for example, a job loss or relationship breakdown.
- ④ Provide general information about suicide and its relationship to known risk factors, such as mental illness. Also consider providing information about warning signs. For further information about warning signs, see factsheet *SANE Steps: How to help when someone is suicidal*.

Giving advice to journalists

- ④ Advise the journalist not to describe the method used. As this may unintentionally provide a 'how-to' guide, contributing to 'copycat' deaths.
- ④ Advise the journalist not to mention, display or photograph exact locations or methods used. Explicit details may encourage vulnerable people to copy the act.
- ④ Encourage the journalist to tell the full story. Explaining the underlying causes of suicide in general can help put the incident into context.
- ④ Encourage the journalist to avoid normalising or glamorising suicide by using the term sparingly. Advise the journalist not to use 'suicide' in headlines or sentences such as 'political suicide', if more appropriate wording could be used.
- ④ Encourage the journalist to highlight negative effects of suicidal behaviour, such as the impact on those bereaved or the risk of long-term disability if the person does not die.
- ④ If a death or attempt is reported, it's important that helplines and support services are published or broadcast, such as SANE Helpline on 1800 18 SANE (7263) and Lifeline on 13 11 14.
- ④ Ensure journalists are familiar with the Australian Government's Mindframe *Guidelines for reporting mental illness and suicide*. See www.mindframe-media.info.
- ④ Provide the journalist with SANE Media Factsheet: *Summary of Mindframe guidelines for reporting of suicide*.