Current evidence on the impact of media reporting about suicide

Research shows that the way in which suicide is reported can have an impact on vulnerable people.

Harmful reporting
There is evidence that, in some cases, reporting of suicide has been linked to increased rates of actual suicide:

1. A major 1995 study of coverage in Australian newspapers found that rates of male suicide increased following reports of suicide, with actual male suicides peaking on the third day after the story appeared.
2. A 2005 study showed higher rates of suicide by a particular method have been found to follow the appearance of newspaper stories on a suicide by these methods.
3. A 2010 German study conducted after media coverage of a fatal railway accident found that media reporting on rail-accidents provided vulnerable individuals with ideas about possible locations and methods for death or harm.
4. An Australian study from 2006 found evidence for a ‘dose response effect’, where the greater the coverage of a particular suicide the greater the risk of an increase in subsequent suicides.
5. An Australian study from 2006 found that suicide stories to which a local audience has the greatest exposure are likely to produce contagion and that, in particular, local television news is a potent influence.
6. An Austrian study conducted in 2004 after the suicide death of a celebrity found a correlation in suicide method in those areas with high newspaper distribution post suicide.

Reporting that can have a negative impact:

1. Includes descriptions about the method or location of the suicide
2. Places the story prominently (e.g. the front page of newspapers, a lead item in broadcast news)
3. Features as part of a series of stories, promoting a dose response factor normalising suicidal behaviour as an acceptable option
4. Sensationalises or normalises the act through gratuitous use of the word suicide and placing the word suicide prominently in headlines
5. Sensationalises the act or presents suicide as a means of solving a problem by referring to the suicide as ‘successful’.

Responsible reporting
There is evidence that the way suicide is reported can reduce suicide rates:

1. A 1997 Australian study of reporting of Kurt Cobain’s suicide in a range of media found that rates of suicide among 15 - 24 year olds fell during the month following reporting of Cobain’s death. Significantly, media coverage of Cobain’s death was highly critical of his decision to suicide.
2. A 1986 study showed rates of suicide and suicide attempts by young people fell following the broadcast of telemovies showing the impact of suicide.

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Reporting that can have a positive impact:

1. Positions suicide as a tragic waste and an avoidable loss
2. Focuses on the devastating impact of the act on others, such as family and friends
3. Provides context about the death and its relationship to mental illness and social issues
4. Includes contacts for further information and support, such as helpline numbers
5. Bases information on reliable sources such as recommended experts
6. Follows media codes of practice on privacy, grief and trauma.

Guidelines

Guidelines about reporting suicide and mental illness for media are available via the Mindframe National Media Initiative: Reporting Suicide and Mental Illness is a 56-page comprehensive resource providing practical advice and information about sensitive and appropriate reporting of suicide and mental illness. Information about the above case studies and research can be found in Chapter 2 of Reporting Suicide and Mental Illness (Impact of media reporting – the evidence: Suicide).

The SANE Media Centre

The SANE Media Centre is supported by Mindframe to work with, advise and support media professionals to portray mental illness and suicide accurately and responsibly. Contact 03 9682 5933 or visit SANE Media Centre.