Using the Recommendations for Reporting on Suicide

Statewide Coordinating Workgroup
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Why have recommendations?

• Sensitivity to survivors
• Confidentiality of decedent and families
• Contagion
  – process by which a vulnerable person is influenced towards suicidal behavior through knowledge of another person’s suicidal act.
  – What makes suicide unique in reporting
Suicide by Readers or Viewers May Increase When:

- The number of stories about individual suicides increases.
- A particular death is reported at length or in many stories.
- The story of an individual death by suicide is on the front page or at the beginning of a broadcast.
- The headlines about specific suicide deaths are dramatic. A real example: "Boy, 10, Kills Himself Over Poor Grades".

Know the Signs >> Find the Words >> Reach Out
How the Recommendations were developed

History

– 1987: Suicide cluster in New Jersey
– 1988: MMWR article and CDC plan for clusters
– 2001: AFSP “black version”
– 2005: SPRC 2-page “at-a-glance version”
– 2006: SPRC safe messaging guidelines
– 2011: New consensus version of recommendations for the media
2011 Consensus Recommendations

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR REPORTING ON SUICIDE

Developed in collaboration with: American Association of Suicidology, American Foundation for Suicide Prevention, Annenberg Public Policy Center, Associated Press Managing Editors, Canterbury Suicide Project - University of Otago, Christchurch, New Zealand, Columbia University Department of Psychiatry, ConnectSafety.org, Emotion Technology, International Association for Suicide Prevention Task Force on Media and Suicide, Medical University of Vienna, National Alliance on Mental Illness, National Institute of Mental Health, National Press Photographers Association, New York State Psychiatric Institute, Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, Suicide Awareness Voices of Education, Suicide Prevention Resource Center, The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) and UCLA School of Public Health, Community Health Sciences.

IMPORTANT POINTS FOR COVERING SUICIDE

• More than 50 research studies worldwide have found that certain types of news coverage can increase the likelihood of suicide in vulnerable individuals. The magnitude of the increase is related to the amount, duration and prominence of coverage.

• Risk of additional suicides increases when the story explicitly describes the suicide method, uses dramatic/graphic headlines or images, and repeated/extensive coverage sensationalizes or glamorizes a death.

• Covering suicide carefully, even briefly, can change public misperceptions and correct myths, which can encourage those who are vulnerable or at risk to seek help.

Suicide is a public health issue. Media and online coverage of suicide should be informed by using best practices. Some suicide deaths may be newsworthy. However, the way media cover suicide can influence behavior negatively by contributing to contagion or positively by encouraging help-seeking.

Suicide Contagion or “Copycat Suicide” occurs when one or more suicides are reported in a way that contributes to another suicide.

Know the Signs >> Find the Words >> Reach Out
Sensational Media Coverage

- Media icon
- Highly glamorized
- Sensational death
- Massive coverage
- 12% increase in suicides across US in 30 days after death
- Equivalent of approximately 200 people*

*American Psychiatric Association on September 21, 2001 (Volume 36 Number 18).
DO inform without using sensational terms

– Examples: “skyrocketing rates” of suicide or “suicide epidemic”
– Misleading depiction of suicide in the community

What can you do in an interview and in messaging?

• Use objective language
• Maintain a hopeful tone
• Use reliable data to describe suicide
DO communicate that suicide is complex

• Linking suicide with a single cause or event oversimplifies the complexity of suicide
  – E.g. Imagine the headline: “Job loss causes man to die of heart attack”

What can you do in an interview and in messaging?
• Avoid mentioning only one preceding event, if that is the only piece of information available
• Make a broad statement of the complexity of suicide
Promote prevention

• DO offer information on warnings signs
  – Helps the reporter frame suicide appropriately
  – Educates the audience on signs to look for

What can you do in an interview and in messaging?
• Discuss more than one warning sign or risk factor for suicide
• Discuss how many risks contribute to suicide
• Include information on protective factors
DO promote a resource

– Reach people with suicide prevention
– Alerts reporters to resources they may not be aware of

What can you do in an interview and in your messaging?
• Always have information handy – provide materials for reporters to take home or link to
• Provide a description of the resource
How are we doing?

California baseline media analysis

– Most news items avoided sensational language
– Most newspaper articles and ½ of the broadcasts did not link suicide to a single event or cause
– ½ of newspaper articles and ¼ of broadcasts indicated any warning sign or risk factor
– ½ of news items provided graphic details about suicide; ¼ gave information about the weapon
– Fewer than 10% of news items provided a resource
Challenges in using the Recommendations

• We need to first adopt them into our own messaging
• They may be seen as having too many “don’ts” and not enough “do’s”
• Reporting policies and styles might pose barriers to their implementation
• Need for an ongoing relationship with the media to encourage their use
Let’s keep our messages clear...
Using the message triangle

Define the Problem
Suicide is among the leading causes of death in California, taking more than 3,700 lives a year

Position Your Organization as a Leader in Suicide Prevention
Your organization is a leader in raising awareness of suicide prevention

Offer Solutions
Suicide is a preventable public health problem that can be reduced by:
• Raising awareness of the problem
• Eliminating stigma for seeking help
• Establishing mental health parity
• Implementing the California Strategic Plan on Suicide Prevention

Know the Signs >> Find the Words >> Reach Out
Media outreach and advocacy

• Establish ongoing, mutual relationship with media – be a “go to” resource
• Develop key messages for your target audiences
• Engage as partners the people the media go to for information
• Be ready: Develop news angles, story ideas, and “proactive responses”
Available for free download from

Know the Signs >> Find the Words >> Reach Out
Handling Memorial Services and Public Observances

Recommendations for Religious Services & Other Public Memorial Observances

After a Suicide

Know the Signs >> Find the Words >> Reach Out
Reaching seniors
Peer support for survivors of suicide loss
All-inclusive School Toolkit

After a Suicide: A Toolkit for Schools

Know the Signs >> Find the Words >> Reach Out
Website for crisis preparation and response

Know the Signs >> Find the Words >> Reach Out
THANK YOU!

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