

Preparing for and Responding to a Death by Suicide

Responding to and Working with the Media

Suicide is often newsworthy, especially in smaller, more rural areas. After a suicide occurs, it is extremely likely that the event will be reported. Research has shown that media coverage has an influence on whether, following a suicide, copycat or imitation suicides will occur (1,2,3). Evidence suggests that exposure to suicide through the media can lead others to take their life or attempt suicide (4), an effect sometimes referred to as suicide contagion or suicide imitation/modeling (5).

Given the fact that this imitation effect is most prominent among adolescents (3,6,7) and that the school is the first place that the media will go for information following a suicide, it seems only prudent that schools be prepared and willing to assist reporters in reporting the appropriate information in order to avoid potentially harming other students.

Preliminary research has shown that following the implementation of media guidelines in Austria, suicide rates declined by 7% in the first year, nearly 20% in the 4-year follow-up. These studies also found that subway suicides (a focus of the media campaign) decreased by approximately 75% (8,9,10).

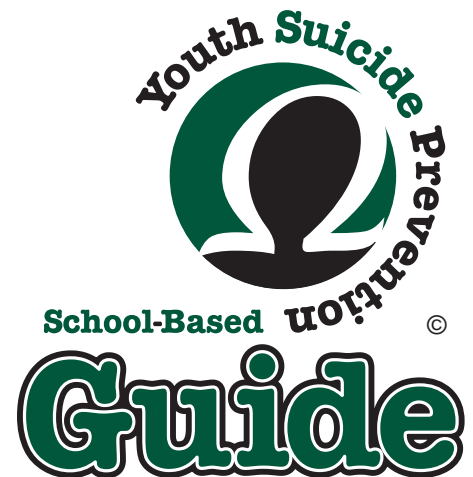
The following guidelines can assist schools in effectively responding to and working with the media. These guidelines are based upon those formulated by the Annenberg Public Policy Center of the University of Pennsylvania, the American Association of Suicidology (AAS), the American Foundations for Suicide Prevention (AFSP), and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). More examples of media education programs and information include: The Canadian Association for Suicide Prevention (CASP) and the Suicide Attempt Follow-up Education and Research (SAFER) from Vancouver, BC.

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Issue Brief



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Responding to and Working with the Media

What to DO

When Responding to and Working with the Media

Recommendations for dealing with the media include:

- Have an established set of procedures in place for dealing with the media.
- Before approaching a reporter write down key points that you want to get across.
- Have an established person that will act as the media spokesperson and who will act as a liaison between the school and the media.
- The media spokesperson should try to ascertain what questions the media will ask. Common questions include:
 - How many students attend the school?
 - What prevention tools does the school currently have in place?
 - What does the school plan to do following the suicide?
 - What feedback has there been from families, friends, other students, and community agencies?
- State appropriate concern for the victim and his or her family.
- Provide the appropriate factual information about the student such as age and grade.
- The suicide of the student should be honestly acknowledged, but do so very succinctly and avoid discussing the method (firearm, overdose).
- Encourage news reporters to provide information that increases public awareness of risk factors and warning signs.
- Always provide information on state, local, and school resources available for suicide prevention and crisis intervention.
- “No comment” is not an appropriate response to media representatives who are covering a story about suicide. Use a media request for information as an opportunity to influence the contents of the story.
- Assist news professionals in providing accurate and responsible information.

What NOT to DO

When Responding to and Working with the Media

Caveats when dealing with the media include (these guidelines should be communicated to the media and should probably be done by a crisis response member through the designated media spokesperson):

- Avoid presenting simplistic explanations for suicide. Suicide is never the result of a single factor or event, but rather from a complex interaction between many factors. There is no research evidence that will corroborate a simple attribution of responsibility.
- Avoid sensationalizing, romanticizing, or glorifying the suicide. Do not report or show pictures of flags at half-mast or a permanent public memorial such as planting a tree, establishing a scholarship fund, or presenting a plaque. Such displays have been found to increase the likelihood of imitation suicides.
- Avoid dramatizing the impact of suicide through descriptions and pictures of grieving friends, family, teachers, or classmates. This could lead other adolescents to see suicide as a way of getting attention or, as a form of retaliation against others.
- Avoid using adolescents on TV or in print media to tell their suicide attempt story. Other students may identify with these students and imitate their behavior.
- Avoid engaging in repetitive, prominent, or excessive reporting of the suicide. Repetitive or prominent coverage of a suicide tends to promote and maintain preoccupation among at-risk persons. This preoccupation has been linked to imitation suicides.
- Avoid placing the story on the front page and using large headlines.
- Avoid reporting “how-to” descriptions of the suicide. Do not describe the technical details about the suicide, such as detailed descriptions or pictures of the location where the suicide took place and the “weapon” used.

Responding to and Working with the Media

What to DO

When Responding to and Working with the Media

- Communicate to news professionals the dangers of suicide imitation and how inappropriate reporting may contribute to more suicidal behavior.
- Acknowledge the deceased person's problems and struggles, as well as the positive aspects of his or her life, which will contribute to a more balanced picture and will decrease the chance for imitation.

What NOT to DO

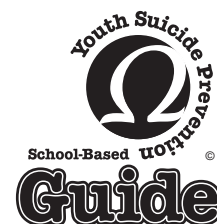
When Responding to and Working with the Media

- Do not present suicide as a tool for accomplishing certain ends. Do not present suicide as a means of coping with personal problems. Although such factors may precipitate a suicidal act, other psychological predispositions are almost always involved.
- Avoid focusing only on the positive characteristics of the youth that attempted or died by suicide. News professionals should acknowledge that the person had problems and struggles along with the positive aspects of his/her life. This will contribute to a more balanced picture and may make suicide appear less attractive to other students at risk.
- Avoid using language that may contribute to more suicides.
 - Avoid referring to suicide in the headline. The cause of death should be reported in the body of the story, not the headline.
 - In the body of the story, describe the deceased as having “died by suicide” rather than as “a suicide” or having “committed suicide”. The latter two expressions connote criminal or sinful behavior.
 - Contrasting “suicidal deaths” with “non-fatal attempts” is preferable to using terms such as “successful”, “unsuccessful”, or “failed”.

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