

If You're a Member of the Media

It's important for editors and reporters to be aware that the way a suicide is covered can have repercussions, particularly among vulnerable people. Many national and international studies over the past 30 years show that the likelihood of copycat suicides is increased by certain types of reporting.

The increase in suicidal behavior, especially among young people, following prominent news coverage of a suicide occurs because of problems with the way the news is covered. Seemingly harmless phrases like "successful suicides" and "failed attempts" give the message that to kill oneself is a "success" and to try, but not die, is a "failure." In addition, publicizing graphic and repetitive representations of suicides (including the method used and how the lethal means were obtained) and glorifying the suicide victim appear to increase the actual numbers of suicide through the copycat effect.

Reporting practices linked to increased suicidal behavior

- Providing sensational coverage of suicide. Graphic news coverage of a suicide can heighten a vulnerable person's preoccupation with suicide. Reports that employ dramatic photographs related to the suicide — photographs of the funeral, the deceased person's bedroom and the site of the suicide — and detailed verbal imagery of the suicide scene become exacting models for other at-risk persons.
- Details about the method of suicide may also encourage imitation among vulnerable people.
- Reports that idealize or romanticize someone who dies by suicide may encourage others to identify with the person.
- Exaggerated community expressions of grief — large public eulogies, flying flags at half-mast and erecting permanent public memorials — cause inflated reinforcement of the suicide. Such actions may suggest to susceptible persons that society is honoring the suicidal behavior of the deceased person, rather than mourning the person's death.
- Focusing only on the suicide victim's positive characteristics. While statements praising the deceased as "a great kid" or "someone with a bright future" are important, acknowledgement that the deceased was experiencing problems or struggles can help give a more accurate picture of the individual's situation. When the deceased person's problems are not acknowledged, suicidal behavior may be attractive to other at-risk people, especially those who rarely receive positive reinforcement.
- Presenting simple explanations for suicide. Suicide is seldom the result of a single event. Rather, it is the rare act of a troubled person struggling with complex circumstances. During the period immediately after a death by suicide, grieving family members and friends are stunned and may find a loved one's death by suicide unexplainable. They may deny that there were warning signs or may place blame on one person or event. Presentation of suicide as a way of coping with personal problems (e.g., the breakup of a relationship or retaliation against parental discipline) may suggest suicide as a possible coping mechanism to other at-risk persons.
- Engaging in repetitive or prominent reporting of suicide. Excessive coverage of a suicide tends to promote and maintain a preoccupation with suicide among at-risk

persons, especially young people. Front-page coverage of a suicide and use of the word “suicide” in a headline has been shown to increase copycat suicidal behaviors.

- For more comprehensive media guidelines, visit The American Association of Suicidology website at <https://suicidology.org/media/>.