

Guidance for reporting on self-harm and suicide content online

Background

The internet can be an invaluable source of support for individuals experiencing self-harm and suicidal feelings. It provides opportunities to access information, find options for support, and provides a platform to speak openly about difficult feelings that can be challenging to discuss face-to-face. However, some areas online carry risk by exposing people to graphic content, including methods of harm.

When covering online content, journalists should aim to balance reporting on a sensitive issue, which is in the public interest, while minimising any potential harmful effects on audiences, for example by signposting vulnerable people to websites or forums which contain dangerous content.

Research has shown clear links between certain types of media coverage of suicide and increases in suicide rates. The risk is increased significantly if details of suicide methods are included in reports – particularly new and emerging suicide methods, if stories are placed prominently and if the coverage is sensationalised and/or extensive.

Access to such content can be distressing, triggering and may act to encourage, maintain or exacerbate self-harm and suicidal behaviours. Information can be found here on [understanding self-harm and suicidal content online](#).

Best practice for reporting online content

- Stories covering the online environment can create opportunities to encourage people to post about suicide and self-harm in a safe way online. It can be helpful to signpost audiences to [guidance on how to post online safely](#) and Samaritans' helpful [online safety resources](#). Please also use these opportunities to remind people to report any concerns to the individual platforms.
- If reporting a suicide with links made to online content, please take care to avoid unintentionally promoting the online environment as a useful source for researching and purchasing lethal suicide methods, by highlighting easy access to cheap drugs and paraphernalia. It is not safe to name websites, forums and so-called suicide-related challenges, which are known to contain harmful information and promote or glamorise self-harm or suicide.
- Extra care should always be applied in cases involving novel or unusual suicide methods, to avoid drawing vulnerable people to the online environment to access these. Studies have shown that naming novel methods in news reports leads to greater use of these methods, significantly increasing the likelihood of further deaths. Please also consider the use of alternative terms (eg, 'chemical substance') to avoid navigating people to harmful information online.
- A death by suicide should never be portrayed as quick, easy, effective or painless, or include comments that suggest suicide as a 'solution'.
- Aim for coverage that educates and informs, improving people's understanding of self-harm and suicide. Where possible refer to the wider issues associated with the behaviour, such as risk factors like mental health problems.

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- Please avoid dramatic headlines that may sensationalise or oversimplify the circumstances surrounding a death. This can increase the likelihood of others identifying with the deceased. Try to refer to the wider issues associated with suicidal behaviour. Suicide is extremely complex and seldom the result of a single factor, it is likely to have several inter-related causes – a combination of psychological, social and physical factors contribute to a person's risk. Suggesting a single suspected cause for a death, such as implying someone died only as a result of their online use, can significantly underplay this complexity.
- Consider the placement of suicide stories and avoid placing these on the front page or in a lead bulletin, this can give undue prominence and can sensationalise the issues.
- Please avoid reporting comments taken from social media, these can romanticise or glorify suicidal behaviour and may not reflect the accurate circumstances surrounding a death.
- Journalists should be aware that young people are a particularly vulnerable audience in relation to media coverage of suicide and self-harm. Young people are at greater risk of suicide contagion and are more likely to be influenced by what they see and hear in the media than other age groups.
- It is not advisable to open suicide stories for comments, as these may contain inappropriate or harmful details which could influence suicidal behaviour. If you do include comments, please moderate to ensure the content remains safe and appropriate.
- When covering suicide stories please remind people that suicide is preventable and encourage help seeking by including sources of support, such as Samaritans: **When life is difficult, Samaritans are here – day or night, 365 days a year. You can call them free on 116 123 or email them at jo@samaritans.org. Whoever you are and whatever you're facing, they won't judge you or tell you what to do. They're here to listen so you don't have to face it alone.**

- More information on best practice for covering suicide is available, please bear in mind our **Media Guidelines for reporting suicide.**

Benefits of sensitive reporting

Stories covering the online environment can create opportunities to remind people that there are both safe and unsafe spaces online and encourage people to reflect on which sites feel safe and right for them.

Responsible media coverage encourages important conversations about mental health – discussion of such issues can lead to greater understanding of suicide, including the signs that may indicate a person is struggling to cope and may need help. These include:

Signs to look out for

- feeling restless and agitated
- feeling angry and aggressive
- feeling tearful
- being tired or lacking in energy
- not wanting to talk to or be with people
- not wanting to do things they usually enjoy
- using alcohol or drugs to cope with difficult feelings
- finding it hard to cope with everyday things
- not replying to messages or being distant
- talking about feeling hopeless, helpless or worthless
- talking about feeling trapped by life circumstances they can't see a way out of, or feeling unable to escape their thoughts
- a change in routine, such as sleeping or eating more or less than normal
- engaging in risk-taking behaviour, like gambling or violence.

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Situations to look out for

- loss, including loss of a friend or a family member through bereavement
- suicide or attempted suicide of family member, friend or public figure
- relationship and family problems
- housing problems
- financial worries
- job-related stress, including job loss
- college or study-related pressures
- bullying, abuse or neglect
- loneliness and isolation
- challenging current events
- depression
- painful and/or disabling physical illness
- heavy use of or dependency on alcohol or other drugs.

People cope and react in their own way and these may not apply to everyone who is struggling, but they can be useful to look out for.

Media stories can create opportunities to remind people that suicide is preventable and encourage help seeking. Research shows that coverage describing a person seeking help and coming through a difficult time can serve as a powerful testimony to others that this is possible and can have a protective effect. This type of coverage can encourage people to seek help and has been linked to falls in suicide rates.



How Samaritans can help you

Samaritans' media advice team is available to support journalists and to answer questions relating to reporting suicide at: mediaadvice@samaritans.org

For information and guidance relating to online harms you can also contact Samaritans' online harms advisory service at: onlineharms@samaritans.org

For general advice and best practice please refer to Samaritans' [Media guidelines for reporting suicide](#) and additional resources for journalists on our website.

We also offer training for journalists and programme makers, covering all of the key issues relating to covering suicide and self-harm in the media. To arrange a free session for your team you can contact us at: mediaadvice@samaritans.org

When covering the topic of suicide or self-harm please encourage help-seeking by including sources of support, such as Samaritans' helpline:

When life is difficult, Samaritans are here – day or night, 365 days a year. You can call them for free on 116 123, email them at jo@samaritans.org, or visit [Samaritans.org](https://www.samaritans.org) to find your nearest branch.