

Guidance for reporting suicides involving novel methods

Background

Deaths by the use of novel suicide methods are extremely rare in this country when compared with some parts of the world. Evidence suggests that responsible media coverage by UK press has been a significant contributor to maintaining these low numbers.

International research has consistently linked some types of media coverage of suicide with increases in suicide rates. The risks increase significantly if details of suicide methods are published (particularly new and emerging suicide methods), if stories are placed prominently and if the coverage is sensationalised and/or extensive.

Due to the increased level of risk, reporting of suicides involving novel or unusual methods requires extra care and consideration. This guidance explains how journalists and programme makers can manage the risk when covering these deaths and the related issues.

Suicide contagion

All reporting of suicide can influence people's behaviour, potentially increasing the likelihood of imitation and further deaths.

Studies into the effects of news coverage of novel methods have shown that references to the method can have extremely harmful effects. These reports have been linked with the introduction and accelerated growth of these methods in some parts of the world.

For example, following widespread reporting of the death of a woman in Hong Kong by the use of a previously unknown suicide method, use of this method grew from 0 per cent to 25 per cent of suicides within a three-year period. This method went from being completely unheard of to becoming the second most commonly used method within

the three-year timeframe. Its use also spread to neighbouring countries. There are multiple other instances that have seen an increase in a novel method following media reporting of it, with no corresponding decrease across other suicide methods recorded in the same time period. What is evident is an overall increase in suicide deaths.

This has not happened in the UK so far and it is important that we continue to prevent this type of increase here.

The evidence is very clear – novel methods should not be named in news reports and programmes, to minimise the risk of raising awareness of these and the potential catastrophic impact on suicide rates.

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Best practice for reporting suicides by use of novel methods

- Do not name novel or unusual suicide methods.
- Be mindful of using alternative terms to describe a method – choose a term which does not point to harmful details online if used in searches such as 'product' or 'substance'.
- Do not report where or how a person obtained a suicide method online by naming sites or forums – this increases awareness and can drive people to these sites, increasing the likelihood of imitational deaths.
- A death should never be described as quick, easy, effective or painless – use of terms such as 'died instantly' can promote death by suicide. Similarly comments that suggest suicide as a 'solution' should not be included.
- Bear in mind that suicide is extremely complex and seldom the result of a single factor, it is likely to have several inter-related causes.
- Avoid dramatic headlines and placing stories on the front page or in a lead bulletin – this gives undue prominence and can sensationalise a suicide story.
- Reporting the content of suicide notes and comments from social media should be avoided - these can romanticise or glorify suicidal behaviour, thereby promoting it to people who are vulnerable.
- It is advisable not to open the comments section for suicide stories. If you do, please moderate these to ensure the content remains appropriate and safe.
- Please contact Samaritans' media advice team for further guidance and refer to **Samaritans' Media Guidelines for Reporting Suicide** in addition to this specific guidance.

We know from research that when media guidelines are adhered to this has a positive effect on reporting of suicide. Research also shows that reports which cover hope and recovery, focusing on a person overcoming a crisis, can have a protective influence and increase help-seeking. This is known as the Papageno effect - stories describing people seeking help and coming through difficult times can serve as powerful testimonies to others that this is possible. These stories encourage people to seek help and have been linked to falls in suicide rates.

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How Samaritans can help you

Samaritans' media advice team is available to support journalists and answer questions relating to reporting suicide. If you are covering a death or inquest involving a novel or unusual suicide method we can help with advice on how to cover this as safely as possible, the team can be contacted at: mediaadvice@samaritans.org

For general advice and best practice please refer to Samaritans' Media Guidelines for Reporting Suicide

When covering the topic of suicide it is important to remind people that suicide can be prevented and encourage those who may be struggling to cope to reach out and seek help 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 www.samaritans.org to find your nearest branch.