

SIEC Alert #58, June 2005

Media Influences on Suicide

Introduction

The influence of the media on suicidal behaviour is a topic that has long been discussed in the suicide prevention arena. The concern arises from research evidence supporting the notion that suicide can be “contagious,” whereby exposure to suicidal behaviours can influence others to copy the behaviours (O’Carroll & Potter, 1994). In the case of media-related contagion, the key issue is the potentially harmful impact that suicide stories can have on vulnerable members of the mass public. Although the extent of media contagion is modest, the effect can play a crucial role in the final decision-making process of a vulnerable individual (Hawton & Williams, 2001).

Nature of the evidence

A recent systematic analysis of the international literature by Pirkis & Blood (2001) clearly demonstrated a causal association between media portrayal of suicide and a subsequent rise in suicide deaths, especially in the case of non-fictional presentations of suicide in newspapers, on television, and in books.

Media-related suicide contagion is more likely to occur when there is a feeling of identification of audience members with the victim; for example, by age, gender or nationality. Generally, young people and elderly people appear to be more vulnerable than those in their middle years (Stack, 2003; Hawton & Williams, 2001 & 2002; Turley, 1998).

Research has demonstrated that it is not media coverage of suicide itself, but rather certain characteristics of the coverage, that increase the risk of contagion (CDC, 2000). The impact on suicidal behaviour seems to be more likely when a method of suicide is specified in the story, when the story is reported or portrayed dramatically and prominently, and when suicides of celebrities are reported (Stack, 2005; Gould, Jamieson, & Romer, 2003; Stack, 2003; Hawton & Williams, 2002).

Roles of the media

With respect to media coverage of suicide, the aim should be both to decrease harmful portrayal and reporting of suicide and to increase the use of positive prevention strategies (Hawton, 2001).

Unlike other suicide risk factors that may be more difficult to change, media-related suicide contagion is relatively easily modified (Hawton & Williams, 2001). One approach has been to develop guidelines that provide practical advice and information to educate and support the work of media professionals. Numerous sets of guidelines have been produced by international, national, and professional organizations, often in collaboration with media professionals. There is evidence from a few studies that modification of suicide reporting by the media is both feasible and effective (Hawton & Williams, 2001; Hawton, 2001; Turley, 1998).

In addition to reducing the risk of contagion, the media can also be called on to play an active suicide prevention role. For example, awareness-building stories could facilitate self-detection of mental health problems and encourage the use of community services for gaining help (Hawton, 2001). Community efforts to address the problem of suicide can also be strengthened by positive news coverage (O’Carroll & Potter, 1994). Although research on the impact of such measures has been modest, there would appear to be considerable opportunity for creative collaborative work between researchers and media producers (Hawton & Williams, 2001).

Quote

“Reporting of suicide in an appropriate, accurate and potentially helpful manner by enlightened media can prevent tragic loss of lives by suicide” (World Health Organization, 2000, p.6)

Our thanks to Nadine Jodoin for compiling this edition of SIEC Alert

**Centre for Suicide Prevention
#320 1202 Centre St. S.E.
Calgary, Alberta
Canada T2G 5A5
phone: (403) 245-3900
fax: (403) 245-0299
web: www.suicideinfo.ca**

*Media Influences on Suicide
continued...*

Key points: Responsible media reporting guidelines

(ResponseABILITY, 2003; Centers for Disease Control, 2002; National Media and Mental Health Group; 2002; World Health Organization, 2000; O'Carroll & Potter, 1994)

- **Avoid presenting simplistic explanations for suicide.**
Suicide usually results from a complex set of circumstances and is seldom the result of a single event such as the loss of a job or the end of a relationship.
- **Do not engage in repetitive, prominent, or excessive reporting of suicide.**
This may promote and maintain a preoccupation with suicide among at-risk individuals. For example, suicide reports should be located on an inside page of a newspaper, never as a front page headline.
- **Be careful not to sensationalize coverage.**
Sensational news coverage of a suicide tends to heighten the general public's preoccupation with suicide, particularly when a celebrity is involved. For example, sensational coverage can be minimized by avoiding the use of dramatic photographs.
- **Avoid "how-to" descriptions of suicide.**
It is also thought that technical details about the method of suicide used in a particular incidence may provide a vulnerable person with the knowledge they need to imitate the actions of the victim.
- **Do not position a suicide as a means to solve problems.**
Presenting suicide as a means of dealing with personal problems may suggest that suicide is an acceptable coping strategy.
- **Avoid glorifying the incident or the victim.**
Prominent coverage of community expressions of grief (e.g. eulogies, memorials, flags at half-mast) may suggest that society is honouring the suicidal behaviour of the victim, rather than mourning the person's death.
- **Avoid overemphasizing the victim's positive characteristics.**
It is important to note the victim's problems in addition to the positive aspects of his or her life in order to decrease the attractiveness of the suicidal behaviour, especially for individuals who rarely receive positive reinforcement.
- **Treat survivors with sensitivity and respect their privacy.**
Immediately following a death by suicide, grieving family members and friends are in shock, have difficulty understanding what happened, and may be at heightened risk of suicide themselves. Care and consideration should always be shown when interviewing close family and friends of the victim.
- **Provide information that increases public awareness.**
Enhancing general public awareness about suicide risk factors, warning signs, and possible actions to assist a suicidal person can help friends and family members recognize suicidal risk in a vulnerable person.
- **List available community resources.**
Information on available resources (help lines, crisis services, and clinical services) with up-to-date contact information should always be included in media stories dealing with suicide.
- **Feature stories about people who adopted life-affirming options.**
Stories that present positive ways of coping and positive roles models can help prevent further suicide attempts.

Media Influences on Suicide
continued...

Resources

SIEC# 031254

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention et al. (2002). Reporting on suicide: Recommendations for the media. *Suicide & Life Threatening Behavior*, 32(2), vii-xiii.

SIEC #031191

Gould, M., Jamieson, P., & Romer, D. (2003). Media contagion and suicide among the young. *American Behavioral Scientist*, 46(9), 1269-1284.

SIEC #041406

Hawton, K. (2001). Media influences on suicidal behaviour: Contributory factors and preventive strategies. In O.T. Grad (Ed.) *Suicide Risk and Protective Factors in the New Millennium* (pp.27-32). Ljubljana: Cankarjev dom.

SIEC #030907

Hawton, K. & Williams, K. (2002). Influences of the media on suicide: Researchers, policy makers, and media personnel need to collaborate on guidelines, *BMJ*, 325, 1374-1375.

SIEC #020186

Hawton, K. & Williams, K. (2001). The connection between media and suicidal behaviour warrants serious attention. *Crisis*, 22(4), 137-140.

SIEC #021226

National Media and Mental Health Group (2002). *Reporting suicide and mental illness: A resource for media professionals*. Canberra: Commonwealth of Australia. Retrieved May 2, 2005 from http://www.mindframe-media.info/downloads/full_resource_bw.pdf

SIEC #940337

O'Carroll, P.W. & Potter, L.B. (1994). *Suicide contagion and the reporting of suicide: Recommendations from a national workshop (Vol.43/No.RR-6)*. Atlanta: US Department of Health and Human Services, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Retrieved May 2, 2005 from <http://www.cdc.gov/epo/mmwr/preview/mmwrhtml/00031539.htm>

Pirkis J. & Blood R.W. (2001) *Suicide and the Media: A Critical Review*. Canberra: Commonwealth Department of Health and Aged Care. Retrieved May 2, 2005 from http://www.auseinet.com/resources/other/med_suicide.pdf

SIEC #031232

ResponseABILITY: Resources for Journalism Education (2003). *Fact or fiction? Reporting mental illness and suicide*.

Stack, S. (2005). Suicide in the media: A quantitative review of studies based on nonfictional stories. *Suicide and Life-Threatening Behavior*, 35(2), 121-133.

SIEC #040500

Stack, S. (2003). Suicide influences and factors: Media effects. In R. Kastenbaum (Ed.) *MacMillan encyclopedia of death and dying* (pp.821-824). New York: Macmillan Reference USA.

SIEC # 030619

Turley, B. (1998) Featuring suicide in the media: Avoiding contagion - Promoting help. *AAS Newslink*, 24(3), 16-17.

SIEC # 000395

World Health Organization (2000). *Preventing suicide: A resource for media professionals*. Geneva: Department of Mental Health, World Health Organization.

Media reporting guidelines available online:

Canadian Association for Suicide Prevention

Media guidelines
<http://www.suicideprevention.ca/>

American Association of Suicidology

Reporting on suicide: Recommendations for the media
<http://www.afsp.org/education/recommendations/5/1.htm>

Commonwealth of Australia

Reporting suicide and mental illness: A resource for media professional
http://www.mindframe-media.info/downloads/full_resource_bw.pdf

Hong Kong

Suicide and the media: Recommendations on suicide reporting for media professionals
http://csrp.hku.hk/files/70_1894_345.pdf

Irish Association of Suicidology

Portrayal of suicide and suicide behaviour: IAS & Samaritan booklet
<http://www.ias.ie/content.cfm?page=126&parent=125&CFID=67490&CFTOKEN=48497677>

New Zealand

Suicide and the media
<http://www.moh.govt.nz/wwwsandm.nsf/ff5391172ea3b3d3072563b3006bcdad?OpenView>

Samaritans (UK)

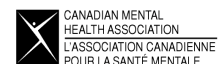
Media guidelines: Portrayals of suicide
<http://www.samaritans.org/know/pdf/media.pdf>

Sri Lanka

Suicide sensitive journalism handbook
http://www.cpalanka.org/research_papers/suicide_report.pdf

World Health Organization

Preventing suicide: A resource for media professionals
http://www.who.int/mental_health/media/en/426.pdf



Pricing Information

You can order copies of these articles from the Centre for Suicide Prevention Library. Simply contact us by phone or e-mail.
Alberta: \$6.00 per document (subsidized by Alberta Health and Wellness)
Outside Alberta: \$10.00 per document
Please order by SIEC Number.

E-mail / Download Instructions

If you have WEB access, you can download this and future issues. Go to: <http://www.suicideinfo.ca/csp/go.aspx?tabid=23>
Would you prefer to receive future editions by e-mail? Please send your name and e-mail address to gayle@suicideinfo.ca