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Guidance for working with people bereaved by suicide

If reporting on a death by suicide is considered to be in the public interest, journalists may wish to speak with family members and friends. Working with people in the midst of intense grief clearly requires a great deal of sensitivity.

It is important to bear in mind that people who have been bereaved by suicide, particularly those close to the person who has died, will be profoundly affected by losing a loved one in traumatic circumstances. It is also important to be aware that people who are bereaved by suicide are at increased risk of attempting to take their own lives, reinforcing the need for extra care and consideration with interviews and how stories are published.

Approaching those who have lost a loved one can be difficult for journalists. This guidance offers helpful advice on sensitive and appropriate ways to approach and work with people who have been bereaved by suicide.

Background

The loss of a loved one brings about intense grief, but when the death is by suicide the emotions experienced can differ considerably from those following other types of bereavement. Shock and questioning can be especially acute. For example, a suicide can appear to come 'out of the blue' and unlike a sudden accident, those left behind have to contend with it having been a deliberate act. People bereaved by suicide are coping with loss, but also with extremely painful questions as to why the suicide occurred. Many people experience guilt about whether the death could have been prevented.

Most grief is experienced privately, but when a death is of interest to the media it can suddenly become public and generate unwelcome consequences for bereaved individuals at an already extremely difficult time. For people bereaved by suicide the negative effect of media scrutiny can create additional distress, which can worsen or lengthen the grieving process.

Sometimes a person in a state of grief and shock may be unaware that their loved one's story could be made public. They may have an expectation of privacy. This means it's all the more important for journalists to think carefully about how they approach bereaved family members.

Some bereaved individuals are comfortable talking about their experience and may find it cathartic to share this, to support understanding of suicide to help others. However, it's better to wait until a reasonable amount of time has passed before approaching relatives for such stories, to allow them time to process what has happened.

Social attitudes to suicide have changed in many ways, but it is important to remember that feelings of shame, guilt and isolation are common. In some cases, members of a family, such as children, may not be aware of the full circumstances. For this reason, family members may wish to avoid any interaction with the media.

Approaching a bereaved family member in the aftermath of a death by suicide

It is good to question whoever has commissioned the story if approaching or 'door-stepping' family members is really appropriate – weighing up if it is absolutely necessary given the impact reporting can have on the bereaved.

If you have considered the distress that contact may cause the family, and still decide it is necessary to reach out to them for the piece, please:

- Identify yourself as a member of the press immediately, including the organisation you represent so that the bereaved family is aware.
- Be aware that this may be their first encounter with the media. It can be very daunting, particularly at such a difficult time.
- If you are approaching a family member, consider asking them if they have an agreed family spokesperson. If the answer is no, ask them if they would like to appoint one. It is fine to proceed if a family member has made it clear that they are happy to talk to you, but as a matter of courtesy it's good to let them know they have options and you will honour these.
- Bear in mind that contacting those who are bereaved via social media can have a similar impact as approaching them face to face. Please make sure any approaches are made with sensitivity and remember to identify yourself online as you would in person.
- Take care to use appropriate language that is non-stigmatising, for example don't say 'commit suicide'. You may wish to ask the family how they would like you to describe the death of their loved one, for example 'took their own life'.
- Ask the person you are speaking to if they have a support network available to them. Signpost them whenever possible to further sources of help, particularly if they appear vulnerable or traumatised, or if they have found the interview difficult. If you are concerned, please make family members aware that support groups are available. There is also a helpful resource booklet available, **Help is at Hand.**
- It is advisable to explain to bereaved family members that there are industry guidelines and regulations that cover suicide reporting and that this may mean the story won't include everything that is shared during an interview. Journalists have a duty of care to interviewees and their audience to not publish certain details about a death – the person being interviewed may not be aware that what they say may carry a risk to others if published.
- It is better to seek permission from the next of kin before using photographs of a deceased person. Please be especially careful if the person who has died is a young person – see Samaritans' **Guidance on reporting youth suicides.**
- Always set expectations for the people you speak to. Whenever possible, make sure the family spokesperson or interviewee understands the parameters of the story. It's important to prepare people who have been bereaved by suicide for media coverage and what form this may take.

For example:

- If it will be a news story or feature, if it is due to appear online and/or in print, how prominent it is likely to be, and when you expect it to run.
- If it is a broadcast news item or documentary, where and when it will appear.
- How long it will be.
- If you will be broadcasting audio or video of the person being interviewed.
- If online profiles, footage, or other publicly available material about the deceased will be used.
- If you intend to use photographs of the deceased or any members of the family, and where you have sourced these from.
- That other news outlets may get in touch or may pick up, edit, and distribute the original story and any accompanying images or footage.

- Verify if something is off the record.
- When possible, do an additional cross-check of material with those you have spoken to before broadcast or publication. A sudden bereavement can affect people's short-term memory and they may have difficulty recalling some facts, such as dates. A common complaint from families about reporting relates to accuracy, so it is worth additional checks.
- Be patient. A person in shock may take longer to process questions or to fully understand their meaning. Also, be prepared to change the dates and times of interviews according to how the bereaved individual feels on the day.
- If a family declines to speak to the media, please respect their wishes. What in normal circumstances would constitute persistence by a reporter may be interpreted as harassment by people who are grieving and could add to their trauma from losing a loved one.
- It's impossible to know the mind of someone who has taken their own life. Even if a family member attributes the suicide to something specific, remember not to over-simplify the causes as this can be misleading and detract from the complex reality of suicide. It's safer to leave the determination of cause of death to a coroner. It's also important not to attribute blame for suicidal behaviour in your reporting.

What to avoid when interacting with bereaved family members

While showing sensitivity, it is important to be clear about your role and involvement as a journalist and ensure the relationship is formed on this basis.

Steer clear of inadvertently adding to a person's distress by developing a relationship that might give the impression that you are part of their support network. In the midst of grief, people may be vulnerable and develop an emotional attachment to an overly sympathetic journalist – especially if the contact is prolonged. Instead make sure that you are able to signpost them to local and national support and are clear about where they can receive help.

If no one from the family wishes to be interviewed, bear in mind that 'second hand' comments and opinions, for example from neighbours, may be speculation and could be extremely upsetting for families if reported. If you speak to someone who is not next of kin, check with the family before publishing any comments to avoid reporting any inaccuracies.

Important things to consider

- Journalists should familiarise themselves with Samaritans' Media Guidelines for Reporting Suicide and industry regulations on 'intrusion into grief and shock'. The codes of practice can be found on **our website.**
- The way suicides are reported, such as explicitly describing a method, sensational and excessive coverage, can lead to imitational suicidal behaviour among vulnerable people. People who are bereaved by suicide are at increased risk of attempting to take their own lives.
- Including a suicide method in reports can have a significant and distressing impact on the bereaved. Please question if the inclusion of a suicide method is absolutely necessary and be mindful that there is a risk of imitational behaviour if details are published.
- While speculation may be made about a person having taken their own life, only a coroner can officially conclude the death was a suicide. Please bear in mind:
  - It may be unclear at first if the death is a suicide.
  - In the immediate aftermath of a death, family members may not believe that it was a suicide, or opinions within families could differ.
  - After an inquest, a coroner may return a verdict of suicide. However, family members may reject that conclusion and be unable to accept that their loved one chose to end their life.
- Grief is a very personal experience and people respond to this in many different ways. When the bereavement is a result of suicide this can complicate the grieving process. While some family members might be open to talking to the media, others may not and they may contact regulatory bodies to express concern or make a complaint.

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- Initial stages of grief may manifest in a number of ways. One of these is that shock might lead an individual to show no visible signs of grief, giving the impression that they are emotionally detached or unaffected by the death. Interpreting this lack of outward emotion as a sign that the individual is not seriously impacted by their loss would be wrong.
- Some people may be, or become, visibly upset and this may mean pausing or even stopping an interview. However, the person being interviewed may wish to continue despite their distress. Be guided by them but do give them the opportunity to consider what they would prefer to do, without any pressure.
- Bereavement by suicide can be prolonged. There is no standard 'mourning period' or 'mourning pattern' and the impact of isolation and guilt following a suicide can last for years. All of this should be considered when reporting on inquests which may not take place for months, or even longer, after a death but for people bereaved by suicide the emotions can still be extremely raw.
- One individual agreeing to talk to the media does not necessarily mean they are speaking for the whole family and this can cause added difficulties between family members.
- In the aftermath of a suicide, those who have been bereaved can be extremely vulnerable and in a great deal of turmoil. During this time they may say things that they later regret. They could also unwittingly reveal things to a journalist that are not suitable for an interview or for the public domain. Therefore, extra care should be taken during interviews to avoid unintentionally exploiting a person's grief.



How Samaritans can help you

Samaritans' media advice team is available to support journalists and to answer questions relating to working with people bereaved by suicide at mediaadvice@samaritans.org

For general advice and best practice consult Samaritans' Media Guidelines for Reporting Suicide on our website.

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 www.samaritans.org to find your nearest branch.

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