

Guidance for reporting on celebrity suicides and suicide attempts

Background

Celebrity deaths by suicide often attract increased media attention compared to non-celebrity deaths. This can present challenges for journalists due to high levels of public interest and an expectation of extensive coverage.

It is important for journalists to be aware of how coverage of celebrity deaths can affect suicidal behaviour. Research has identified a significantly higher risk of imitative suicidal behaviour when celebrity deaths are reported. There is a likelihood that some individuals may over-identify with a celebrity as a result of being exposed to details about their personal lives in the media. Some people may even feel like they know them personally.

Celebrities and the contagion effect

The risk of suicide contagion increases significantly following stories that feature the suicide or attempted suicide of a high-profile person.

A summary of the research evidence, published in 2020, has shown that media reporting about celebrity suicides is associated with a 13% increase in suicides over the following 1–2 months. The study also showed that when the media reported the specific suicide methods used by celebrities, the number of deaths in the population using the same method increased by 30%.

Emotive or dramatic language and images, including public tributes and memorials, can romanticise or glamorise suicidal behaviour. Sensationalist reporting is more common with reports of celebrity suicides, which can also influence an increase in suicide deaths.

One example of contagion in the aftermath of a celebrity suicide was the death of the actor and comedian Robin Williams. Coverage of Williams' death included explicit details of the suicide method and many stories romanticised his death, for example publishing the statement made by the US Film Academy, "Genie you're free". There was also a significant amount of speculation around the cause of his death, while very few stories contained suicide prevention messages.

Following widespread reporting of Williams' death there was a 9.85% increase in suicides in the US in the months after he died, with a large proportion of these suicides by men of a similar demographic. This equated to 1,841 more suicide deaths in the country compared to the same period the previous year.

Young people are particularly vulnerable to suicide contagion through media coverage, including following the suicide of a celebrity.

Best practice reporting

- Avoid mentioning the method of suicide used, especially in the headline. Providing details of suicide methods has been shown to influence vulnerable people to imitate suicidal behaviour and has been linked to increases in suicide rates. This risk is further increased with celebrity reporting.
- Avoid headlines that sensationalise or oversimplify the circumstances surrounding a death by suicide, particularly in the case of a celebrity, as this significantly increases the risk of suicidal behaviour among vulnerable groups. The same advice applies to push notifications, where no context can be given.
- Do not oversimplify the causes or perceived 'triggers' for a suicide as this increases the risk of imitational behaviour. Vulnerable people experiencing similar issues are more likely to over-identify with the deceased when a single reason is given for their death, this over-identification may be amplified if that person is a celebrity.
- Try to refer to the wider issues associated with suicidal behaviour. Suicide is extremely complex and most of the time there isn't one event or factor that leads someone to take their own life. A combination of individual, community, and societal factors contribute to the risk of suicide. Suggesting a single suspected cause for a death, particularly in a headline, can significantly underplay this complexity and increase the likelihood of imitational behaviour.
- Research has identified an increased risk of imitational suicidal behaviour when coverage of a suicide is prominent and extensive. It is safer to avoid placing stories on the front page or homepage of a news site, or presented as the lead bulletin.
- Avoid overemphasising public outpourings of grief or using sensationalist or glamorised terms. Focusing on expressions of grief can unintentionally suggest that people are glorifying suicidal behaviour, rather than mourning a death. This includes avoiding the repeated use of photographs.
- Wherever possible, focus on the life achievements of the person who has died and aim to portray their death as an avoidable, tragic waste of life.
- Remind your audience that suicide is preventable and signpost to sources of support, including Samaritans.
- Run stories about celebrities who have managed to overcome their struggles. Another smaller body of research evidence, known as the Papageno effect, has shown that sensitive stories describing a person coming through a difficult time and focusing on their recovery can have a protective effect. These stories can serve as a powerful testimony to others that recovery is possible, including when the person is a celebrity. 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 Advisory team works closely with researchers, producers and directors, providing expert advice on covering the topics of suicide and self-harm in factual programmes. The team can be reached 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.ie, or visit www.samaritans.ie to find your nearest branch.