

Guidance on reporting suicide for broadcast media

➤ Background

Suicide is a major public health issue and therefore a topic of public interest. However, broadcasters face some unique challenges when covering the issue. For instance, producing high quality, live reports to camera when the subject matter is clearly very sensitive and carries a risk of influencing suicide contagion.

Research evidence shows that certain types of media coverage, such as explicitly describing a suicide method, and sensational or excessive reporting, can lead to increases in suicide rates.

The wide reach of broadcast material, including online, as well as the diverse audience it attracts, makes responsible approaches to covering suicide particularly important.

Best practice for broadcast reporting of suicide

Story placement and content

- Details of suicide methods should not be included in any broadcast piece, to reduce the risk of influencing suicidal behaviour. Studies show that explicit references to suicide methods can have particularly harmful effects, increasing awareness of the method and potentially leading to further deaths.
- Avoid prominent placement of suicide stories within bulletins as this can sensationalise the issue and unduly influence vulnerable people. This is particularly important with a young audience in mind. Young people are more susceptible to suicide contagion and more influenced by media coverage. Instead, try to run stories further down the order of reports.
- Avoid repeating suicide stories, as this can increase the risk of suicide contagion. Extra consideration should be given to how often a story needs to be re-run or updated within the news cycle.
- Be extra vigilant with the use of language when reporting suicide, especially when preparing for a live broadcast. Inappropriate use of language such as 'epidemic' or 'cluster' where a number of suicides are being reported can sensationalise a suicide or attempted suicide.

Story presentation

- Carefully consider the visuals used for a broadcast piece. Pictures, stills or video content of the scene of a suicide are advised against. For example, avoid 'to camera' reports from a location where a suicide has taken place, such as a bridge or a stretch of railway track. Reporting on visible or identifiable locations will draw attention to these as suicide methods. This significantly increases the risk of imitational incidents by strengthening people's perception of their effectiveness and lethality. It can also contribute to a place becoming an 'iconic' location to take your life.
- Don't show images of an incident or the immediate aftermath of a suicide or suicide attempt. For example, don't show emergency services or crowds gathered at the scene and avoid any reconstruction of a suicidal event. These can draw attention to the method and location and can sensationalise suicidal behaviour.
- Think carefully about cut-aways and other background footage used to illustrate a news piece or documentary feature, to ensure all content is safe and appropriate.

Guidance on reporting suicide for broadcast media

- Video, stills or pictures of a person who has taken their own life should be used with caution. Question if it is absolutely necessary to use an image, especially if it is of a young person, as this can increase the likelihood of others identifying with the deceased. If images are to be used, it is better to seek permission from relatives. Avoid using images prominently or repeatedly.
- Repeated use of photographs of the deceased should be avoided as this increases the risk of contagion. Similarly, avoid using images of others who have previously died by suicide to illustrate subsequent stories about them, or someone else. This can suggest unsubstantiated links between the deaths and overstate the prevalence of suicide. It is also extremely distressing for bereaved families.
- If using music with a radio or television broadcast featuring suicide, please give careful consideration to its choice. Emotive music can over-dramatise, romanticise or glorify suicidal behaviour.
- If approaching people who are bereaved for interview, or people who have attempted suicide in the past, bear in mind that they may be vulnerable. People who have tried to take their own life in the past are more likely to make an attempt again in the future. People who have been bereaved are also at increased risk of suicide and contagion through media coverage. To protect the wellbeing of interviewees, please make sure they are adequately prepared for sharing their story publicly and let them know other vulnerable people may contact them as a result. The people you speak to may not be aware of industry regulation or the risk of contagion from media coverage, advise them that you may not publish all that is shared, for example details of how a person took their life. For more information on approaching people who are bereaved see Samaritans' guidance **Working with people bereaved by suicide**.

Points to consider

- A smaller body of evidence has shown that sensitive portrayals of suicide, focusing on someone overcoming a crisis, can have a protective influence. This is known as the Papageno effect. Coverage describing a person or character seeking help and coming through a difficult time can serve as a powerful testimony to others that this is indeed possible. This type of coverage can encourage people to seek help and has been linked to falls in suicide rates.
- Please direct viewers and listeners to sources of support such as Samaritans. Providing practical information on where to find help following a broadcast featuring suicide is always advisable. This can encourage people experiencing emotional problems or suicidal thoughts to seek help, which could save lives.
- Apply careful consideration to how documentaries or special news reports are promoted. Promotional material should be approached with the same consideration as the primary output. To prevent inappropriate promotion of suicide content, please ensure that all departments or agencies involved in designing or distributing promotional material are aware of the risks associated with media coverage of suicide and have sight of **Samaritans' Media Guidelines for Reporting Suicide**, including specific guidance for broadcast.
- Video and audio content online should be treated with the same consideration applied to other forms of programming. The proliferation of 24-hour news, repeat access to content, and potentially very large audiences online, including vulnerable groups such as young people, makes this particularly important. If a previously broadcast programme is being repeated, on any platform, please make sure it complies with **Samaritans' Media Guidelines for Reporting Suicide**.



How Samaritans can help you

Samaritans' media advice team is available to support journalists and to answer questions relating to coverage of 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.ie, or visit www.samaritans.ie to find your nearest branch.*