

# FACTSHEET WORKING WITH BEREAVED FAMILIES IN THE AFTERMATH OF A SUICIDE

## MEDIA GUIDELINES for Reporting Suicide

**SAMARITANS**

### A Guide for Journalists

Approaching the family of a person who has died by suicide can be difficult for journalists. If a death is deemed newsworthy reporters may wish to speak with family members and friends, but the particular sensitivities involved when working with people in the midst of intense grief and confusion can make it complicated. This short factsheet is intended to provide journalists with advice on the most appropriate ways to interact with bereaved family members.

Please remember you are able to refer bereaved family members to us for emotional support.

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### Bereavement by suicide: Background

- The loss of a loved one brings about intense mourning but when the death is by suicide the emotions experienced in the aftermath can differ considerably from those following other types of death. The shock can be especially acute. For example, a suicide can appear to come 'out of the blue' and, unlike a sudden accident, those left behind often have to grapple with it having been a deliberate act. People bereaved by suicide are coping with loss, but also with 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. This can worsen or lengthen the grieving process. For people bereaved by suicide the negative effects of media scrutiny are additionally distressing.
- Social attitudes to suicide have changed in many ways but it is important to remember that feelings of shame, embarrassment and isolation are common. This may mean family members resist any interaction with the media.

## Important things to consider

- Journalists should familiarise themselves with *Samaritans and IAS' Media Guidelines for Reporting Suicide* and industry regulations on 'intrusion into grief and shock'. A summary of the key guidance can be found at [www.samaritans.ie/mediaguidelines](http://www.samaritans.ie/mediaguidelines)
- A suicide is not 'official' until a coroner formally declares it as such. Bear in mind:
  - i/ It may be unclear at first if the death is a suicide.
  - ii/ In the immediate aftermath of a death, family members may not believe that it was a suicide or may disagree among themselves as to the cause of death.
  - iii/ Even after an official verdict of death by suicide family members may reject that conclusion.
- 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 emotional response as a sign that the individual is not seriously affected would be wrong.
- Some people may be, or become, visibly upset so be prepared. 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.
- People bereaved by suicide can be extremely vulnerable and in a great deal of turmoil and may say things in the throes of grief that they later regret.
- Some people reeling from the impact of the death of a loved one may feel an urge to talk to someone. They might unwittingly reveal things to a journalist that would be best said in confidence to a family member or to a professional therapist.
- People experience grief differently from one another, this also applies to individuals bereaved by suicide. While some family members might be open to talking to the media, others may not. They may even complain to media regulators.
- One individual agreeing to talk to the media does not necessarily mean they are speaking for the whole family, it can upset or cause discord between family members.
- Bereavement by suicide can be prolonged. The impact of isolation and guilt following a suicide can last for years so set aside any assumptions regarding 'mourning periods' or 'mourning patterns'. This should particularly be considered when reporting on an inquest. Inquests may not occur for months, or even longer, after a death but for people bereaved by suicide the emotions can still be extremely raw.
- The way suicides are reported can influence the risk of 'copycat' behaviour among vulnerable people in the general population. The risk of suicide among people bereaved by a loved one having taken their own life is greater than for the population as a whole.

## Approaching bereaved family members

First of all ask whoever has commissioned the story if approaching, or 'door-stepping', family members is really necessary for the story.

### **If it is deemed necessary to approach family members then:**

- 🕒 Identify yourself and the organisation you represent right away. Grieving people may think you are a concerned member of the public and say things they would not wish to hear repeated, so make it clear that you are a member of the press.
- 🕒 Be aware that this may be the first encounter a family has had with the media. It can be daunting.
- 🕒 Make contact whenever possible through a designated representative, sometimes this can be a family member, a close friend, or a neighbour.
  - If so, double check they have been approved by next of kin as an 'official' spokesperson.
  - Where no such person comes forward, you could try contacting a relevant organisation, such as the Police, or a local bereavement charity.
- 🕒 Bereavement organisations may not have the resources to deal with enquiries from journalists but, where they do, ask if a representative can approach the family in the first instance. For a list of support organisations go to: [www.samartians.ie/mediaguidelines](http://www.samartians.ie/mediaguidelines)
- 🕒 Check if the person you are speaking to is receiving appropriate support, particularly if they appear vulnerable or traumatised. If you are concerned, make family members aware that support groups are available.
- 🕒 Seek permission from next of kin before using photographs of a deceased person. Be especially careful if the person who has died is a young person.
- 🕒 Set expectations for the people you speak to. Whenever possible, make sure the designated family member or representative understands the parameters of the story.

### **For example:**

- If it will be a news story or feature. If the story is due to appear in print or online, how prominent it is likely to be.
- 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, or other publicly available material about the deceased, will be used.
- If you intend to use photographs of the deceased person or any members of the family.

- Make sure it is understood that there may be consequences to media coverage.  
**For example:**
  - That you may not use everything a person says during an interview in your final report.
  - That other media organisations may get in touch.
  - That social media sites or news outlets may pick up, edit, and distribute the original story and any accompanying images or footage.
- Verify if something is off the record.
- If 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 basic facts such as dates. A common complaint from families about reporting relate to accuracy, so additional checks can be well worth doing.
- Statements made in grief can be overstated or exaggerated. Try to take this into account when weighing up which quotes or interview extracts to use.
- Be patient. A person in shock may take longer to process questions or to fully assimilate 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 respect their wishes. What in normal circumstances would constitute persistence by a reporter may be interpreted as harassment by people immersed in grief. It could also be extremely upsetting.

## What to avoid when interacting with bereaved family members

- Steer clear of 'over-identifying' and showing extreme empathy with bereaved people, no matter how much you may empathise. It is important not to inadvertently add to a person's distress or give the impression that you understand what they are going through. For example, people may be extremely vulnerable and develop an unhealthy emotional attachment to an overly sympathetic reporter – especially if the contact is prolonged.
- Should no one from a family wish to be interviewed remember that 'second hand' comments or opinions, for example from neighbours, may be upsetting for families. This is particularly true if neighbours engage in speculation about the circumstances surrounding a death and this is then reported.

For general tips on best practice consult *Samaritans and IAS' Media Guidelines for Reporting Suicide* at: [www.samaritans.ie/mediaguidelines](http://www.samaritans.ie/mediaguidelines)

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 #reportingsuicide