Responsible Suicide Reporting

Dr. Sallyanne Duncan and Dr. Ann Luce
January 2022
What we’ll cover...

- Background on suicide
- Stigma & Language
- Suicide Reporting Toolkit & RSR Model
Global Statistics on Suicide

700,000 suicides a year (number is expected to be 3x higher)

- Claims more lives than war, murder and natural disasters combined

Accounts for 1.3% of deaths worldwide, making it the 17th leading cause of death in 2019 (most recent stats available, WHO)

For every one individual that dies by suicide, 20 more will attempt

Every 40 seconds a person dies by suicide
US Statistics on Suicide

- 10th leading cause of death in the USA
- 47,500 people die by suicide; 130 people per day
- 2.5 times more suicides than homicides
- Firearms account for half of all suicides (23,941)
Myths About Suicide

- Those who talk about suicide are not at risk of suicide
- All suicidal people are depressed or mentally ill
- Suicide occurs without warning
- Asking about suicide ‘plants’ the idea in someone’s head
- Suicidal people clearly want to die
- When someone becomes suicidal they will always remain suicidal
- Suicide is inherited

O’Connor (2021), “When it is Darkest”
Myths about Suicide

- Suicidal behaviour is motivated by attention-seeking
- Suicide is caused by a single factor
- Suicide cannot be prevented
- Only people of a particular social class die by suicide
- Improvement in emotional state means lessened suicide risk
- Thinking about suicide is rare
- People who attempt suicide by a low-lethality means are not serious about killing themselves

O’Connor (2021), “When it is Darkest”
What, Why & How of Suicide?

Sociological framework established by Emile Durkheim (1897)

- Egoistic: not connected to a community
- Altruistic: overly integrated into a group,
- Anomic: Cannot cope with crisis; relationship with society is changed
- Fatalistic: Excessive societal regulation

A complex issue: multiple reasons for death

Historically, different methods used by different genders

- Been changing since 2008
Stigma & Suicide

NOT ‘commit suicide’, rather, ‘die by suicide’

- Suicide is not a crime in the USA

Stigma—religious, criminal, psychological

- Mortal sin
- Psychotic act
- Rational act
- Human right
Stigma & Language

Mental illness, mental ill-health, mental health problems/issues

How should we describe people thru communication?

- e.g. avoid terms such as the mentally ill, a victim, the afflicted, a person suffering from... a sufferer.
- Use a person with mental health problems

Talk about the person before you talk about their illness/health problems

- e.g. a person living with bipolar or a person with bipolar, not a bipolar person.
Triggers: avoiding stigma and harm

• Stigma consists of:
  • **Labelling** – defining someone by their mental health condition, symptoms instead of seeing the person
  • **Stereotyping** – defining them by recognised undesirable characteristics, either in the minds of other people or in their own minds
  • **Separating** – thinking in terms of “us” (normal people) and “them” (abnormal people) leading to perceived differences and inferiorities [we are all people]
Consider your use of language

**USE**
- A suicide
- Taken his/her/their own life
- Ended his/her/their own life
- Die by/death by suicide
- Suicide attempt
- Attempted suicide
- Person at risk of suicide
- The name of the person who has died, or ask bereaved how they would like to speak about their loved one

**DON’T USE**
- Commit suicide
- Suicide victim
- Suicide ‘epidemic’, ‘wave’, ‘iconic site’, ‘hotspot’
- Cry for help
- A ‘successful’ or ‘unsuccessful’ or ‘failed’ suicide attempt
- ‘completed’ or ‘uncompleted’ suicide
- Suicide ‘tourist’ or ‘jumper’
- The ‘body’
Think about the message

- Think about the question: Why?
  - Why did someone kill themselves?
  - Who or what is to blame?

- Take care answering this question in a suicide story
  - Can result in speculation about why they took their own life.
  - Is it necessary to the story?

- Think about using explanations from sources (friends/family) like:
  “He was struggling with mental health issues.”
Think about the message

“He was struggling with mental health issues.”

- A person who kills themselves → “mental health issues”
- A perpetrator of a mass shooting → “mental health issues”
- An attacker in a terrorist atrocity → “mental health issues”
- An association planted in the audience’s minds, blurring of harm to self and harm to others
- Potentially placing suicide in a criminal frame
Duncan’s 5 Narrative Model of Grief

- Narrative 1: Event-Driven
- Narrative 2: Post-Judicial
- Narrative 3: Tribute-Driven
- Narrative 4: Anniversary
- Narrative 5: Action as Memorial
Luce’s 4 Ethical Rules for Responsible Reporting

• **Categories of Stigma**
  • Reaction to death by those left behind
  • Reason for death
  • Description of the deceased
  • Infantilization
  • Blaming Internet/Social Media

• **4 Ethical Rules (SSGG):**
  • *Do not* sensationalise
  • *Do not* stigmatise
  • *Do not* glorify
  • *Do not* gratuitously report
STEP THREE: STANDARD OF MODERATION

01. MINIMIZE
Have I minimized harm to those affected by suicide?

02. AVOID
Have I told the truth, yet avoided explicit details of method and location?

03. CARE
Have I taken care in producing the story including tone and language?

04. RESPONSIBLY
Have I used social media responsibly?

05. AVOID
Have I avoided stereotypes, harmful content and stigmatising stories?

06. SUPPORT
Have I provided support via helplines?
Two men, who jumped from the Humber Bridge within minutes of each other, were total strangers, according to police.

They both leapt 100ft to their deaths into the fast-moving water within minutes of each other at around 4am on Wednesday.

But it is not believed they had made a suicide pact even though were only 50 yards apart on the south side of the bridge, which is xx miles long.

Police said it was a “complete coincidence” that the two men were there at the same time in order to kill themselves. They have not released their names but one is believed to be a grandfather in his 50s, who had been missing from his home for five days.
The other is feared to be Dave Ford from Hull. His father, Ray, said police had seen his son on the bridge in the early hours of Wednesday and were concerned for his welfare. They were monitoring him on CCTV when a car drove on to the bridge and another man got out of his vehicle. He walked over to the safety rail around 50 yards from Dave and disappeared. Shortly after when they looked for Dave they could not see him.

Ray, 58, said "There is no doubt that Dave is dead after jumping from the Humber Bridge. Obviously, the police cannot confirm it until they find his body."
Dave’s father said his son had been struggling with mental health issues, which he had kept secret from his family for three years. He left a note saying he couldn’t go on.

Ray added "We will never know why Dave took his own life. "The note, which was addressed to the family, said 'I know it's going to hurt you forever, but I just cannot go on any longer'. "We only found out that he was struggling with mental health three months ago, but we never thought he was suicidal."

• If you or someone you know needs help or is distressed contact the Samaritans on 116 123 or by email. For help on mental health issues or support for families and friends visit the charity Mind.
Story Analysis - Firearms

• A man and a woman were found dead in a house in Dayton, Ohio
• They were named as Tait Anderson, 44, and Sophia Brand, 35.
• Police found them at 5.45pm yesterday at a home in Parkside Road. A door at the rear of the property had been kicked in.
• They found Brand on the floor with a gunshot wound to the back of her head. She had been shot at close range. Anderson’s body was lying nearby. He had a gunshot wound to the head.
• Police confirmed that Brand was Anderson’s ex-wife. They were recently divorced and she had started a new relationship.
Story Analysis - Firearms

- Police were called to the area after reports of gunshots. One neighbour, Carol Parker, said she heard loud bangs and screams just after 5.30pm but didn’t think anything was wrong. She later realised that the bangs and screams were the couple in the midst of a heated and violent argument. A few minutes later she heard what sounded like firecrackers, and later discovered they were gun shots. She added: “This is a nice neighbourhood. Things like this don’t happen here.”

- It is understood that Anderson posted a Facebook Live video on Twitter, which appeared to feature him before the killing. The man describes the suffering he has gone through since his divorce but the video ends abruptly.
Story Analysis - Firearms

• Anderson had once posted a photo of himself and his ex-wife on Facebook, stating that she was his “life”.

• Neighbours at their former marital home described Anderson as a “nice guy” who was friendly and a good neighbour. They described his wife as “quiet”, especially when they saw the couple together.

• Brand’s parents and sister were shocked to learn of the murder-suicide. They knew the couple had been having problems for several years and that Anderson could be “quite controlling” but they did not expect that he would kill their daughter/sister.

• Pictures of Anderson and Brand are available from their Facebook and Instagram accounts.
Story Analysis - Firearms

- Helplines: National Hotline: [https://suicidepreventionlifeline.org/] (1-800-273-8255)
- Text '4HOPE' to: 741-741
- Ohio Suicide Prevention Foundation: [https://www.ohiospf.org/]