

Responding to the media



The media can sometimes be interested in youth suicide, especially if there has been more than one instance of attempted or completed suicide within a school or community.

However, the reporting of suicide needs to be approached with care, as media coverage can increase the risk of suicide 'contagion' (see **headspace** School Support fact sheet *Suicide Contagion*).

It is important that only one member of the school staff is given the role of media liaison. This will help to ensure a consistent message is being given by the school. However, you should always contact your education department or equivalent body before speaking to the media. Refusing to speak to the media will not prevent coverage of suicide. Use the media's request for information as an opportunity to influence the content of the story and encourage responsible reporting.

When you speak to the media, it's important to reinforce some principles about the reporting of suicide. You should:

- Highlight the relationship between suicide and mental illness;
- Encourage reporters to raise public awareness of the risk factors and warning signs of suicide, as well as the actions that can be taken to help a suicidal person; and
- Provide reporters with information about local support services, local mental health services and crisis support numbers.

There are some things you should be mindful of when dealing with the media:

1. Do not glamourise the victim or the suicide itself.

Reports of community expressions of grief, such as erecting permanent memorials, should not be emphasised. Such actions may contribute to suicide contagion by suggesting that society is honouring the suicidal behaviour, rather than mourning the person's death. This can make suicide appear attractive to other at-risk people.

2. Do not oversimplify the cause of suicide.

Suicide is never the result of a single factor or event. Although one event may appear to have triggered the suicide, it is unlikely to be explained by this alone. Most people who die by suicide have had a history of problems, which may not get reported in the aftermath of the suicide.

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3. Tell the media not to include pictures of the death scene or distressed mourners.

4. Do not give details of the method of suicide.

While it is important to be clear and consistent when presenting information about suicide, giving a detailed description of where or how a person took their life can promote imitation by other at-risk people.

5. Do not allow TV cameras or reporters on to school grounds.

Refer reporters to *mindframe-media.info*, a good website looking at suicide, mental health and how the media should report on these issues. The site includes:

- An overview of reporting about suicide and how to do this with the least risk of contagion (*mindframe-media.info/client_images/1002445.pdf*); and
- Tips and tools for how to work with the media (*mindframe-media.info/client_images/1002449.pdf*).

Another good resource covering important issues about suicide and the media can be found at *reportingonsuicide.org/wp-content/uploads/2011/Recommendations14.pdf*.

Schools can refer reporters to **headspace** School Support on **1800 688 248** for further information and advice. **headspace** School Support can also provide expert comment on the issue of suicide in schools.

Response and messages from the school

During the stressful time that follows a suicide, it is often difficult to know the best way to liaise with the media or what messages are important to relay. Clear and consistent messages are important.

These may include:

- “We are saddened over the death of one of our students. Our thoughts are with his/her family and friends, and the entire community.”
- “We will be offering ongoing grief counselling for students and staff.”
- “We will be hosting an information session for parents (and the community) regarding suicide prevention on [date/time/location]. Mental health professionals will be on hand to answer questions.”

You should inform the relevant body, such as the education department, and a parent of the young person when the media have made contact or before a statement has been given by the school.

Other fact sheets that may be of interest:

Suicide contagion, Managing social media following a suicide, and Identifying risk factors and warning signs for suicide.

For more information on suicide or support and assistance visit headspace.org.au/schoolsupport or headspace.org.au

Please refer to the **headspace** School Support *Suicide Postvention Toolkit – A Guide for Secondary Schools* for further guidance.

Acknowledgements:

American Foundation for Suicide Prevention and Suicide Prevention Resource Center. (2011). *After a Suicide: A Toolkit for Schools*. Newton, MA: Education Development Center, Inc. Mindframe National Media Initiative in Australia, access through mindframe-media.info

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