SUICIDE COVERAGE A DILEMMA FOR MEDIA

The increase in the suicide rate has been making the news. The debate continues on how — or if — media outlets should be covering suicides at all depending on who is involved and how the death occurred. Ongoing research shows the imitative effects of media coverage of suicide to be minimal and usually under special circumstances. To minimize imitative effects, how media outlets cover suicide and how much can make a big difference.

BY BRADLEY WILSON, MJE
Suicide rates rising

Suicide rates have been rising in nearly every state, according to a Vital Signs report by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. In 2016, nearly 45,000 Americans age 10 or older died by suicide. Suicide is the 10th leading cause of death and one of three leading causes that are on the rise.

“Suicide is a leading cause of death for Americans – and it’s a tragedy for families and communities across the country,” said CDC Principal Deputy Director Anne Schuchat. “From individuals and communities to employers and healthcare professionals, everyone can play a role in efforts to help save lives and reverse this troubling rise in suicide.”

Suicide is rarely caused by a single factor. Although suicide prevention efforts largely focus on identifying and providing treatment for people with mental health conditions, there are many additional opportunities for prevention.

MANY FACTORS CONTRIBUTE TO SUICIDE

CDC researchers examined state-level trends in suicide rates from 1999-2016. In addition, they used 2015 data from CDC’s National Violent Death Reporting System, which covered 27 states, to look at the circumstances of suicide.

Researchers found that more than half of people who died by suicide did not have a known diagnosed mental health condition at the time of death. Relationship problems or loss, substance misuse; physical health problems; and job, money, legal or housing stress often contributed to risk for suicide. Firearms were the most common method of suicide used by those with and without a known diagnosed mental health condition.

STATE SUICIDE RATES VARY WIDELY

The most recent overall suicide rates varied fourfold: from 6.9 per 100,000 residents per year in Washington, D.C. to 29.2 per 100,000 residents in Montana.

Across the study period, rates increased in nearly all states. Percentage increases in suicide rates ranged from under 6 percent in Delaware to more than 57 percent in North Dakota. Twenty-five states had suicide rate increases of more than 30 percent.

WIDE RANGE OF PREVENTION ACTIVITIES NEEDED

The report recommends that states take a comprehensive public health approach to suicide prevention and address the range of factors contributing to suicide. The action requires coordination and cooperation from every sector of society: government, public health, healthcare, employers, education, media and community organizations.

To help states with this important work, in 2017 CDC released a technical package that describes strategies and approaches based on the best available evidence about suicide prevention. The strategy can help inform states and communities as they make decisions about prevention activities and priorities.

EVERYONE CAN HELP PREVENT SUICIDE

- Learn the warning signs of suicide to identify and appropriately respond to people at risk. WWW.BETHE1TO.COM
- Reduce access to lethal means, such as medications and firearms, among people at risk of suicide.
- Contact the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline for help. 1-800-273-TALK (8255). SUICIDEPREVENTIONLIFELINE.ORG;

THE MEDIA CAN AVOID INCREASING RISK WHEN REPORTING ON SUICIDE BY

- Following and sharing recommendations available at REPORTINGONSUICIDE.ORG (for example, avoiding dramatic headlines or explicit details on methods);
- Providing information on suicide warning signs and suicide prevention resources; and
- Sharing stories of hope and healing.
Let’s talk about it: spotlight on mental health

By Gillian Bressie, senior print editor, The Coat of Arms
Menlo School (Atherton, California)

On Jan. 19 at around 9:30 p.m. I no longer wanted to live and had planned to kill myself. My parents noticed the gravity of the situation and did their best to calm me down. They later decided to take me to the emergency room.

On Feb. 3 after a few hours, I was given a gown, all of my personal belongings were taken from me, and I was left in a very empty room with a few keepers with small glass windows. They took my blood, ran a few other tests and sent a nurse in to talk to me.

The first thing the nurse asked me was, “Why are you here?” As I thought about how to answer her question, a number of responses popped into my head.

1. I don’t really like myself.
2. My dad gave me no choice.
3. I’m overwhelmed by my life.
4. I want to die.

But finally, I determined that the most pertinent response was, “I tried to kill myself.” Even to this day it’s hard for me to say without crying. One thing I learned in my time in the hospital is that those words don’t really get any easier to say the more you say them.

On Jan. 22 at around 9 p.m., I was released from the hospital and opened my phone to 52 text messages of friends and acquaintances hoping I was OK.

Leaving the hospital and returning to school, I have never felt more supported. My friends check in with me constantly to see how I’m doing, and I have a million places to turn should I ever end up in a critical state as I did that night.

However painful my experience may have been, I could have avoided it completely had I been able to open up. Before I went to the hospital, my friends had absolutely no idea what I was going through because I always thought my feelings weren’t justified. I felt like no one would understand what I was thinking. I never tried to get help, and I never saw a counselor.

I hope anyone who has ever felt the same way I did knows that they are not as alone as they may feel. So many people have been there and would love to offer their help and support.
10th
is where suicide falls as a cause of death.

$50.8 billion
was the cost of suicide to the U.S. workforce in 2013.

44,965 people died of suicide in 2016, mostly by firearms.

28%
was the total suicide rate increase from 1999 to 2016, an increase of 10.5 to 13.4 people per 100,000.

SOURCE: Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and National Institute of Mental Health

Covering suicide responsibly

Coverage of suicide is nothing new.

More than two centuries ago, in 1774, Goethe wrote a novel in which the hero committed suicide — The Sorrows of the Young Werther. While no conclusive link was ever made between the publication of the book and the increase in the suicide rate, authorities banned the book in Italy, Leipzig and Copenhagen.

A century later, researchers Durkheim (1897) and Tarde (1903) found no conclusive evidence of imitations on the suicide rate.

However, more recently, in 1974, in an often-cited story in the American Sociological Review, David Phillips wrote, “[S]uicides increase immediately after a suicide story has been published in newspapers. … The more publicity devoted to a suicide story, the larger the rise in suicides thereafter.”

Still, media outlets continue to cover suicides repeatedly and in multiple media outlets. This fall the headline in USA Today: “Seattle-Tacoma International Airport plane crash rare employee suicide.” Or the New York Post: “‘Suicidal’ mechanic crashes plane after stealing it.” These unvalidated assumptions occurred within hours of the crash and despite no official ruling on the cause of death.

Suicide stays in the news as do reminders about why this topic warrants special consideration, not simply by journalists but by anyone posting or commenting about it online.

Kelly McBride, vice president of the Poynter Institute and a media ethics expert, explained the uniquely careful treatment this subject requires to avoid inciting “suicide contagion.”

• Do not state the specific means of death, if possible.
• Include information about warning signs, along with language noting that “treatment and intervention work.”
• Choose photographs of the person that are neutral in tone — ones that do not invoke either melancholy or serenity (which could imply that suicide could get a person to “that peaceful place”).
• Describe suicide trends accurately, without sensationalism.
• Use the passive voice to minimize the attribution of actions to the individual.

McBride and others favor an industry-wide code of practice, and some have called for news organizations to refrain from serving ads alongside coverage of suicide.

DISCUSS
Should the coverage of suicides by public figures be regulated in some way? If so, how? If not, why not? Should news organizations withhold some information about suicides? About mass shootings? If so, what information should be withheld and how should that decision be made?

IN THE MEDIA
Students, working in teams of two or three, should find a story covering a suicide within the last year or two. Did the reporters following McBride’s guidelines? Speculate: Why or why not?

TALK TO THE MEDIA
Again working in teams of two or three, go visit with a local reporter, photographer or editor. What is that person’s take on how to cover suicide? Report the group’s findings back to the class or staff and discuss.
Yearbook staff covers mental health, suicide

Last year, I got an all-staff message from our superintendent: one of our sophomores had committed suicide. As news spread, our yearbook editors started texting about covering a planned memorial gathering at the park in the center of town.

The 2018 book was planned chronologically, and they thought it appropriate to have the photography editor attend to get some images that they could use in coverage, if they chose to include the story. The editors had a spot for the coverage, a sidebar on page 11, but decided to hold off on its development for about two months — thus shifting that spread to a later deadline than its neighbors.

Through a staff connection to the sophomore’s family, the editors reached out to his mother, and she in turn contacted me.

In instances where there are sensitive stories and coverage opportunities, I have at times served as a go-between in the background to help families understand the goals of our staff’s coverage. I did the same in this case, and the sophomore’s mother asked only that our staff work from a list of a dozen friends for interviews; they had some negative experiences with classmates coming out of the woodwork just after his passing. The editors assigned a veteran reporter, our most talented writer, to the coverage, and she got to work, using the list from his family as guidance.

At the same time, our district was in the first months of creating a task force to take a hard look at student mental health across all grades in our district. When our superintendent put out a request for volunteers for the 30-person committee, he received requests for participation from 337 of my colleagues. It was obvious that the professional staff saw a need to tackle mental health head-on. I shared that statistic with our editors, and they quickly saw the opportunity to cover issues of mental health and depression in their features section.

The students were free to address the topic journalistically, which they did in a three-package feature: an extended article sourced from interviews with four female students, a Q&A with one of our school psychologists, and an extended pull quote from our superintendent. Both the mental health feature and the sidebar memorializing the sophomore student included a kicker paragraph with information about accessing hotlines and school-based resources for students or friends in need.

Among our tasks this year is development of a staff manual, which will formalize and set in policy an informal understanding that our editors have had for a decade or more: they do not dedicate entire books to a student or staff member, but rather look for opportunities to cover that person’s life and the impact on those around them in a journalistic way. Too, our editors will continue seeking opportunities to highlight a variety of issues related to student well-being, including work the school and district are doing to provide for its student body.

MICHAEL SIMONS, adviser, Tesserae
Corning-Painted Post High School (New York)
Media Contagion and Suicide Among the Young

MARIED GOLDF,
PAMELA RYAN,
DANIEL ROSSER

University of California, San Francisco

Introduction

The media has long been recognized as a powerful influence on public opinion and behavior. The potential for the media to shape public attitudes and behaviors is particularly significant in the case of suicide, where the impact of the media on public opinion and behavior is not only significant but can also be devastating.

The media's influence on suicide has been the subject of extensive research, with studies examining the relationship between media coverage and suicide rates. This research has revealed a complex and multifaceted relationship between the media and suicide, with some studies suggesting that media coverage of suicide can have a direct and measurable impact on suicide rates.

One approach to reducing the harmful effects of media portrayals is to educate journalists and media programmers about ways to present suicide so that imitation will be minimized and help-seeking encouraged.

Several studies have found dramatic effects of televised portrayals of suicide that have led to increased rates of suicide and suicide attempts using the same methods displayed in the shows. Recent content analyses of newspapers and films in the United States reveal opportunity for exposure to suicide, especially among young victims.

The substantial evidence that vulnerable youth are susceptible to the influence of reports and portrayals of suicide in the mass media underscores the importance of educating media professionals about the potential for suicide imitation and ways to avert it.

Recommendations for language:

- Avoid referring to suicide in the headline.
- Consider phrasing for headlines such as “Marilyn Monroe dead at 36” or “John Smith dead at 48.”
- Describe the deceased as “having died by suicide” rather than as “a suicide” or having “committed suicide.”
- Contrasting “suicide deaths” with “non-fatality attempts” is preferable to using terms such as “successful,” “unsuccessful” or “failed.”

IN ONE SENTENCE: The greater the amount of coverage of suicide in the media, the greater the increase in suicide rate.

Widespread coverage of a suicide in the media has long been thought to be capable of triggering copycat suicides in the mass public.

Systematic scientific investigations on copycat suicide began with the work of David Phillips in the 1970s. The largest possible copycat effect was found for the well-known movie star Marilyn Monroe. During the month of her suicide in August 1962 there were an additional 303 suicides, an increase of 12 percent. In general, however, highly publicized stories increase the national suicide rate by 2.51 percent in the month of media coverage.

More than 40 scientific papers have been published on the impact of suicide stories in the media on suicide in the real world. However, there have been some inconsistencies in the findings of this research.

The meta-analysis showed: (1) studies including stories airing on one TV network were 84 percent less apt to find a copycat effect; (2) studies based on television stories, which contain less detail than newspaper stories, were 87 percent less likely to report a copycat effect than studies based on newspapers.

IN ONE SENTENCE: The weight of the evidence is, in fact, against an imitative effect after a study of 419 findings from 55 studies determined this insight.

Findings based on entertainment and political celebrity suicide stories were more than five times as likely to report imitative impacts than their counterparts.

Findings based on stories marked by strong negative definitions of suicide were 99 percent less likely to uncover copycat effects.

The amount of coverage of the suicide shapes the chances of reporting a copycat effect.

Findings based on television stories were 79 percent less likely to uncover a copycat effect.

Research done during certain historical periods, such as the Great Depression, indicates an unlikely probability of uncovering an imitative effect. Research findings based on the suicide rates of women were 4.89 times more likely than others to report an imitative effect.

Research findings based on either young or middle-aged persons revealed fewer copycat impacts than studies based on the total or general suicide rate.

IN ONE SENTENCE: After a single suicide of a popular television reporter, the reporting of the suicide preceded a rise in the number of suicides.

The main objective of this article was to document the effects of the media coverage following the suicide of a well-known and popular television reporter in Quebec, Canada. A content analysis of the printed media and an analysis of suicide rates during the following year, of coroners’ records and of calls to suicide prevention centers during the following months was conducted.

There is good reason to believe that the news of the reporter’s death was instrumental in at least 50 of the suicides in the four-week period immediately following Jan. 14, especially those that occurred by hanging as in the original case. A possible explanation is that a positive role model for that the news of the reporter's death might have been instrumental in at least 50 of the suicides in the four-week period immediately following Jan. 14, especially those that occurred by hanging as in the original case. A possible explanation is that a positive role model might have been instrumental in at least 50 of the suicides in the four-week period immediately following Jan. 14.

IN ONE SENTENCE: The news media's continued emphasis on interpersonal violence may exacerbate social stigma and decrease support for public policies that benefit people with mental illnesses.

Might responsible media coverage reduce suicide risks? Research suggests as much. For example, the introduction of media guidelines on Viennese subway suicide reporting resulted in reduced sensationalist reporting, a 75 percent decrease in the rate of subway suicides, and a 20 percent decrease in the overall suicide rate in Vienna.

A careful review of six systematic reviews on multilevel suicide prevention strategies concluded that training journalists in responsible reporting about suicide and imposing of media blackouts on suicide reporting were both effective in population level suicide prevention.

Suicide is newsworthy, and the media have a duty to report such news. The way forward, therefore, lies in a collaboration between mental health professionals and the media with a view to sensitize media personnel about the issues involved and to provide guidelines for safer reporting.

• News coverage should be neutral.
• News coverage should be discreet.
• News coverage should be sensitive.


IN ONE SENTENCE: Responsible reporting of suicide by the media is a niche but important preventive measure that has been relatively neglected.

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IN ONE SENTENCE: The news media's continued emphasis on interpersonal violence may exacerbate social stigma and decrease support for public policies that benefit people with mental illnesses.

The volume of print and television news coverage of mental illness trended downward from 1995 through 2014, aligning with the secular trend in the downsizing of newspapers.

More than half of news stories mentioned some type of violence related to mental illness. News stories were more likely to mention interpersonal violence than suicide, despite the fact that research indicates that suicide is much more directly related to mental illness than interpersonal violence.

News media coverage of mental illness changed little during 1995–2014. Coverage has continued to emphasize interpersonal violence in a way that is highly disproportionate to actual rates of such violence among the U.S. population with mental illness. Initiatives to educate reporters and the opinion leaders they use as sources regarding the relationship between mental illness and interpersonal violence are needed. So are efforts to increase news media depictions of successful treatment for and recovery from mental illness as those efforts may have the potential to reduce harmful social stigma toward this population.
REGARDING DEATHS
Kirkwood High School (Missouri)
1. Any current student, staff member, faculty member or building administrator that dies during the year will be recognized in the school media.
2. The media will publish factual information (date of birth, date of death, survivors, organizations, hobbies, interests) in a 300-400 word article including one mug shot if possible in The Kirkwood Call and thekirkwoodcall.com.
3. The school media will work to obtain permission from the deceased’s family before publishing any information regarding the cause of death. If permission is not granted, the student editors reserve the final say in publication of cause of death. Suicide will not be listed as a cause of death.
4. The school media will treat all deaths in a tasteful, respectful way.
5. An issue, or portion of an issue, should not be dedicated to or in memory of the deceased.
6. Any current student, staff member, faculty member or building administrator that dies during the year will be recognized in the school yearbook if still within press time.
7. The school yearbook will publish factual information (date of birth, date of death, survivors, organizations, hobbies and interests) on one page after the respective grade of school pictures in the reference section.

COVERING DEATH
Whitney High School (Rocklin, California)
Should a student or staff member die at any time during the current coverage period, Whitney High Student Media will treat the death in a tasteful, respectful manner.

In the yearbook people section with student/staff portraits, the portrait of that person will appear as it would under normal circumstances. Next to the portrait will appear birth date and date of passing unless the death occurs after the book’s final deadline, which is generally April 1. If deadlines allow, the death may be covered as a news event on Whitney Update or in The Roar news magazine if deemed appropriate by the editorial board, although no tribute, obituary or other memorial item will appear in the yearbook. Families and/or friends or other parties may purchase space for a memorial or tribute to appear in the advertising section of the yearbook, and may do so at the “early-bird” pricing structure regardless of purchase date, but advertising space generally is available only August-December and production of these pages is complete by January. Students may choose to cover the death as a news story and/or possible feature in the next issue of The Roar or online depending on the situation, including cause of death and timing. It is the aim of the staff to handle any such situation in a fair and sensitive manner.

STUDENT OR STAFF DEATH
Antwerp Local High School (Ohio)
The Archer yearbook
Upon the death of a current student or staff member of Antwerp Local School, the yearbook staff will run quarter-page memorial which will include a recent photo of the deceased and the date of birth and death. The death of a staff member will run in both yearbooks. Elementary students will be included in the elementary yearbook and middle and high school students will be included in the middle/high school yearbook. The memorial will be in the back of the yearbook.

LOGAN CREWS, editor, The Kirkwood Call
With everything we do on the Call, we like to say we’re people first, journalists second. We’ve had a few students pass away in recent years and each time, we communicate with their family to make sure the information they want out gets published and to make sure that anything they want to withhold we don’t publish. Our policy is there for us to refer to if we need it, but we make sure the family’s comfort comes first.

In Brian Stieglitz’ case, they wanted us to publish that he took his own life. In years past, I believe there’s been times when families don’t want more attention after their son or daughter passes away, so we just publish the very bare minimum because that is our job as a community news resource.

It’s hard sometimes, but we always use our policy as a backup after we try to find a comfortable balance with what we run.
OBITUARY POLICY
Anderson W. Clark Magnet High School (La Crescenta, California)
Pantera (yearbook)
Should a student or school staff member die during the current coverage period, the staff will treat the death in a tasteful, respectful manner. The portrait of that person will appear as it would under normal circumstances, but the name of the person and the date of birth and death will be set off in a 10 percent black screen (or some other like treatment). This treatment will provide adequate memory of the individual for those closely associated, while not overemphasizing the death for other readers.

OBITUARY POLICY
Anderson W. Clark Magnet High School (La Crescenta, California)
Clark Chronicle (news website) and The Magnet (magazine)
If a faculty member or student should pass away, the staff will publish a story in the news section about the individual and/or circumstances concerning the death. If the staff wishes to publish articles that extend beyond the news story, it must consult with the family of the deceased individual(s). The family must concur with any extra information or photographs about the individual that are not included in the news story.

ABOUT POLICY
We've had one student die during the school year while I've been yearbook adviser, and we didn't actually follow this policy, as it was too late to do anything with the portraits section of the yearbook. So, with the family's permission, we also published an obit in the back of the book. So, really, this policy would only be useful if the death occurred within the first semester, before those pages were printed.

I don't recall where the language for that policy came from. I don't think all of it is 100% original to me. I do think I would flesh out the language a bit to deal with what we'd do when the death occurs after those portrait pages have been printed, as was the case more than 10 years ago when we had the student death that occurred in early spring. In that case, I like what we did in creating a memorial page in the back of the book (where student/senior ads go). That is something we'd probably do in addition to the portrait treatment.

Chris Davis, adviser, Anderson W. Clark Magnet High School (La Crescenta, California)

DEATH POLICY
St. Paul Academy and Summit School (Minnesota)
The Rubicon (newspaper)
In the event of the death of a current student, faculty or staff member at St. Paul Academy, The Rubicon will publish a tribute in print. The tribute will include a 400-450 word story that focuses on the life of the individual and a photograph. The family will be contacted to provide permission and a photo. The tribute will be published in the news section. The story will not have a byline as the entire staff, not an individual reporter, is paying tribute to the individual with publication.

DEATH POLICY
St. Paul Academy and Summit School (Minnesota)
The Ibid (yearbook)
The Ibid does not publish obituaries. Our responsibility to the printer for production deadlines may not allow for equity of coverage should a member of the community die after the book goes to press. Photos of any students or faculty who die during the year will remain in the book. When possible, family will be contacted and a quarter-page tribute ad space will be made available to them, free of charge, for a memorial. A book will be provided to the family free of charge.
When it comes to dealing with grief, you’re not alone

OUTLETS AND RESOURCES FOR SUICIDE PREVENTION

GRC Counselling Hours: 7:30 a.m. to 4 p.m. Monday through Friday
Grace Church Counseling Center Hours
Mondays: 10 a.m. to 5 p.m., Tues-Friday, 10 a.m. to 8 p.m.
National Suicide Prevention Hotline, Call 1-800-273-8255
Knowresive.org, youth suicide prevention: everyday looks are a good way to tackle the issue of suicide prevention.

DEATH POLICY
Grosse Pointe South High School (Grosse Pointe Farms, Michigan)

Any current student, staff member, faculty member or building administrator who dies during the year will be recognized in the school media. The media will publish factual information (date of birth, date of death, organizations, hobbies, interests) in a 150- to 300-word obituary including one mug shot if possible.

The school media will work to obtain permission from the deceased’s family before publishing any information. The school media will treat all deaths in a tasteful, respectful way. Suicide will not be listed as a cause of death. An issue, or portion of an issue, should not be dedicated to or in memory of the deceased.

Last year a student committed suicide. The staff talked in great detail about how they should cover the death — if at all. They decided not to cover what happened. The students made the right choice. I had the school social worker come and talk to the students about how publishing a story would be glorifying the suicide. I also had the students contact a local news outlet where they affirmed covering suicides is not something done in mainstream media.

Instead, the students ran a series of articles about mental health.
Publications should have a standard policy for covering the death of a community member. Coverage should be the same for suicide, cancer, accident, etc. For our publication, we have a policy that we write a memorial for that community member. Prior to work at this school, I advised the newspaper and yearbook at a school where in six weeks we dealt with two suicides and a fatal four-wheeler accident. We covered the lives of those three students the same way. Details of their deaths were not included; the focus was on their lives. We reached out to parents of all three and let them know we were writing memorial pieces and got quotes and information from all of them. It is an uncomfortable conversation to start with a grieving parent, but all three of my reporters said that the parents were happy to tell stories of their children's lives and thanked the reporters for celebrating their lives on a platform for their peers.

Amy Robb, CJE
Norfolk Collegiate School (Virginia)

CONSISTENCY

We have the same death policy for suicide as we do for death by any other cause. This policy helps us be fair, especially in a situation that might be more uncomfortable to talk about.

Amanda Thorpe
Portage Northern High School (Michigan)

Potential suicide coverage is another consideration that reinforces the value of having detailed policies in place. In this case, a staff or editorial board should study professional resources, such as the Dart Center's Guide on Covering Trauma, when developing its policy related to whether the student media outlet will cover suicide and how. Coverage of mental illness, anxiety, pressure, substance abuse and other related topics (safety, access to firearms, availability of prescription drugs) can be incredibly helpful to a school community in addressing the larger issues without drawing attention to the suicide.

Sarah Nichols, MJE
Whitney High School (Rocklin, California)

Suicide is a complex topic and should be reported in a multi-pronged approach. There's the need for obituaries when a student or staff member dies by suicide — as when any student or staff member dies. Then, there's the topic of suicide in general, which also deserves coverage — with attention to warning signs, resources and personal pressures. This type of coverage can be done independently or in tandem with an obituary.

In many places, talking about suicide (or deaths by suicide) are taboo. However, suicide is an important public health topic for teenagers. Staffs should consult published guidelines and then report truthfully and responsibly.

Susan Holihan, CJE
Mount Si High School (Snoqualmie, Washington)

Student suicide is the most difficult task our young journalists face. Their words will have great weight and must be fair and objective while also being sensitive to so many who are hurting.

Deborah Chiles Glenn, CJE
Blue Valley West High School (Overland Park, Kansas)
FROM ADVISERS

COMPLICATIONS

I am a yearbook adviser. We do not have a newspaper. We had two suicides two years ago. We gave them a tribute ad because we had space. I may have overstepped my bounds, but I waited until final deadline (because everything was so raw) for the students to cover the suicides.

Maureen Farry, CJE
West Forsyth High School (Cumming, Georgia)

In the early 1980s we had a student confined to a wheelchair after an automobile accident that took the life of her twin sister. She died a few months later in a house fire that many believed she started. We treated her death like any other with her birth and death date and black border around her mug shot in the class section.

Pat Gathright, retired adviser

I generally discourage any coverage unless it is part of a larger story on an issue. Accidental deaths and suicides should be covered differently.

Rob Guyette
De Pere High School (Wisconsin)

This is one of the most challenging stories facing student journalists and, therefore, advisers. Fortunately, we have had only two suicides in more than two decades at my school — one of a current student and one of a recent graduate. In both cases, we did a feature/obit style story about the individual. It was before we had much of a social media presence, but I would advise my students to use social media on a suicide story only to direct readers to the web/print edition. ... I try to remember the “do-no-harm” ethical guideline in these kinds of situations, and I try to help my students do the same.

Karl Grubaugh, CJE
Granite Bay High School (California)

CONSIDERATIONS

The Recommendations for Reporting on Suicide work with a variety of partners in the field, including the Associated Press Managing Editors. Those recommendations should be considered when a district or school writes its policy about how student media should cover student suicides to avoid suicide contagion.

Shanon Woolf
McIntosh High School (Peachtree City, Georgia)

There is some research linking media coverage of suicides with copycat effect so staffs should consider their responsibility to the community.

Jennifer Dixon
Carmel Christian School (Matthews, North Carolina)

“Advising” can also mean having students seek guidance from reliable sources such as the DART Center before they make decisions about coverage. The goal is to help them make wise decisions, not simply to tell students what they should or should not do.

To achieve that goal, I recommend this approach:

• Regardless of the cause, make haste slowly when covering the death of any community member,
• Take extra time when covering suicides, and make sure you are adhering to the type of coverage professional organizations such as the DART Center suggest. People will still be grieving weeks later and will read the coverage. It is better to be right even though you may not be first.

Tracy Anne Sena, CJE
Convent of the Sacred Heart High School (San Francisco)
COOPERATION

General rules we use (in theory — we haven't had to put them into practice yet) are to keep it honest and to focus on the student's death and memory, not on the suicide.

Tripp Robbins, CJE
Menlo School (Atherton, California)

In our yearbook, we treat all deaths equally with a memorial photo. Our concern is (to avoid giving) more coverage to one death over another. We (want to avoid) giving one death more importance than another. However, for the school magazine, I love the idea of a feature story that focuses on the positive aspects of a person's life. Despite the value, the success of the piece depends on the openness of friends and family members. Crafting and publishing a story of this nature can also promote healing for everyone involved: those who write it and those who read it.

Sherri Greenfield-Ludwig
Elkhart Memorial High School (Indiana)

Twitter makes me recoil. It was used once in our area, and it "broke" the news before family members were notified. It is essential that family members be contacted. Most successful and appropriate coverage of suicide I have seen has been in print newspapers. Coverage is more problematic in yearbooks, due to deadlines. I strongly advise a "death" policy for all student media.

Mary Kay Downes, MJE
Chantilly High School (Virginia)

I’ve been an adviser for 21 years (newspaper for all 21, yearbook for the last 3), and we have had numerous student deaths, including suicides. We established a precedent, and fortunately it was a good one: a small feature celebrating the student’s life. If the student's death was newsworthy, even if it was a suicide, we include the manner. For instance, we had a student die by suicide on campus during school hours. It made the news. In fact, a local news station’s Twitter account is how we found out what was really happening while we were in lockdown. Most suicides, however, are not mentioned.

Early in my career, however, I had the parent of a student who died by suicide ask me to run in the newspaper that her son took his own life. She became a suicide awareness advocate and wanted to make sure the school was not trying to hide the manner of death. Based on what has occurred at my school, I don’t think the policy on covering suicide or student deaths is black and white. It needs to be handled on a case-by-case basis. We have a general policy in place, but it allows for flexibility.

Kris Urban
Corona del Sol High School (Tempe, Arizona)

We have a liberal community in terms of press freedom. Our school therapists have advised against covering specific suicides for fear of “glamorizing” it — an approach that could lead to copycat events. They encourage us to cover the topic of suicide to educate but not in context of any individual’s suicide. They also support doing obituaries of students who have committed suicide without mentioning the cause of death.

Bryan Halpern
Glenbrook North High School (Northbrook, Illinois)

We had a student commit suicide on campus at a school in our district. Rather than cover the suicide as news, we covered a town unity rally and concert that was held at the school where the incident occurred.

Alyssa Boehringer, CJE
McKinney High School (Texas)

COMPLEXITY

For suicide situations, we try to be guided by the ethical obligation to weight news value against harm. It will vary in different schools — a K-12 student publication has a different audience and will probably cover the event differently from a senior high school publication.

David Graves
St. Thomas Episcopal School (Houston)

When covering tragedy of any kind, especially suicide, reporters must weigh many factors. Students will hear the details. Student media should focus on telling stories as they happen. That means focusing on mental health to help those who struggle while protecting and respecting those who grieve by not bringing up intimate details. By focusing on telling students’ stories, student journalists are including all and not focusing on the suicide.

Rebecka Frey
Denton High School (Texas)
Students decide ‘to err on the side of minimizing harm’

In November 2016 a senior died by suicide. Because our program had only risen from the ashes and become relevant several years before this coverage, we did not have policies in place about much of anything, much less deaths, much less suicides. As a result, we had numerous internal discussions about how to handle it, and the administration had certain ideas about what we should and should not do.

To be clear, administrators never required us to handle it in any specific way, but our principal told our editors, among other things, that the psychologists in our school’s Wellness Center suggested that any memorializing could result in copycat suicides. While we do have prior review, it has never been practiced during my four years as adviser.

When the principal visited an editors’ meeting, he expressed his rationale to them about why he and the other administrators were suggesting we not cover it. The main rationale was their fear of copycat suicides. At the same time, I made it clear to our editors that what the principal suggested was simply that — a suggestion — and the ultimate decision about how to handle the coverage was completely up to them.

After much internal discussion, our editors decided to err on the side of minimizing harm and defer to conventional psychological opinion on the subject.

Needless to say, a few of them still had misgivings and were not sure we were doing the right thing, and our editor expressed this concern in the opinion piece at the end of the year. The biggest takeaway was what we learned. In case a similar situation happens again, we need to have a policy in place to guide us through decisions about how to cover a similar story.

BILL RAWSON, adviser, The Smoke Signal
Pascack Valley High School (Hillsdale, New Jersey)

At the end of the year, our editor wrote a column that chronicled his thought process through the whole ordeal. It won first place in our state competition for opinion writing that year.

READ THE ENTIRE COLUMN ONLINE
AT HTTPS://ISSUU.COM/SMOKESIGNAL3

CASE STUDY

Handling a Tragedy

In 2017 The Smoke Signal staff published a print issue using teen mental health as a theme. In it, the student journalists addressed some of the emotional fallout among the survivors in this situation. The issue provided a sense that they had covered the incident more fully if these stories were more than a year after the fact.

The Smoke Signal’s online version of the issue can be accessed at: HTTPS://ISSUU.COM/SMOKESIGNAL3

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“We need more discussion, education and awareness. As one of our speakers said two years ago, ‘I’ll talk about the topic and make you uncomfortable every day. The alternative is attending a funeral.’ ”

| MITCH EDEN, ADVISER, KIRKWOOD HIGH SCHOOL (MISSOURI) |

Suicide Awareness Week

BY MITCH EDEN, MJE

Four years ago The Call staff decided to conduct a Suicide Awareness Day at Kirkwood High School with the approval from administrators and under the direction of counselors and professionals.

This came about because our program lost an editor heading into her senior year. She took her life over the summer and her friends group was all journalism students. We all had a long year, and the group felt that spring they should raise awareness and educate.

The result was outstanding! We got so much positive feedback and support.

So the next year the group decided to make it a week-long celebration of life, education and ending the stigma surrounding mental health, anxiety and suicide. The old adage of not covering the topic was not working as suicide climbed to the No. 2 leading cause of death of teens. So, again, under the consultation of professionals, the group planned daily activities including guest speakers and an assembly.

The following year and last year, we invited local schools to bring “teams” to our assembly and then have lunch with our group to debrief and have a Q&A session on how they could do something similar at their school. As a result, many St. Louis-area schools are now hosting their version of Suicide Awareness Week.

A day, a week, a speaker, it’s just been a great thing to raise awareness together.

MISSION
Eliminate the stigma associated with mental illness and the suicide of young people. Our goal is to facilitate healing in the community through educational programs and resources with openness and compassion.

In the opening video of the press kit, Annie and Emma introduce the topic. Emma begin. “We hope to eliminate the stigma associated with mental illness and the suicide of youth through educational programs and resources with openness and compassion. We hope to facilitate healing in our community.”
FROM MITCH EDEN
I used my platform as the 2015 Dow Jones News Fund Teacher of the Year to address the topic as I want it in the forefront of education.


The Kirkwood SCHEDULE

Day 1  
Moment of Silence, Whiteboard or Posterboard Day

Day 2  
Bracelet Day

Day 3  
Chalk Day

Day 4  
Speaker Day

Day 5  
Walk and Celebration

With suicide being the second leading cause of death for ages 10-24, according to the American Foundation for Suicide Prevention, mental illness continues to be an issue for many teens. Negative view about mental illness may cause teenagers to be reluctant to seek help. This week aims to give students an outlet and create a more welcoming community.

INVITATIONS

“I feel alone.” “I don’t have anything worth living for.” “I’m going away for a while.” “I won’t need that where I’m going.” These phrases and actions may be invitations to talk about suicide. When someone says something along these lines, the individual may be taking the first step to opening up about suicide. When people show changes in behavior or give hints about suicide, friends should acknowledge them and work to find them help.

REFERENCES AND REACHING OUT

Speak to school administrators and guidance counselors as soon as possible about organizing an event. The bigger the event, the sooner you should begin the conversation. The student, faculty and staff leaders in the school need to be on board and need to understand the goals. Suicide is a daunting, yet important, topic. Present a layout of the plans as soon as possible to show you want to cover suicide prevention in a way to help educate students. The hope is that administrators will see the benefits and jump on board. Reach out to school guidance counselors. They can help you craft how you go about the topic respectfully as well as provide you with local resources for your event.

INTEGRATE OTHER DEPARTMENTS AND CLUBS

Involves classmates, faculty and staff as resources. For example, ask the:

• School’s health department to designate time to educate students about mental health;
• English department to recommend texts that serve as an escape for students suffering;
• Art department to design posters advertising the event;
• Business department to market the project and to reach out to the community for sponsors;
• Incorporate suicide prevention articles into your newspaper or magazine, both in print and online; and
• Campus clubs to help set up events.

ACTIVITY

DRAW IT OUT VIDEO: DEPRESSION
Katie Judd and Jane Stewart narrate the story of an anonymous Kirkwood High School student who has dealt with depression and bipolar disorder.

https://www.thekirkwoodcall.com/indepth/2016/02/10/draw-it-out-video-depression/

WHITEBOARD PROJECT
In a time of deep depression, it may seem like there are only two options: life or death. In that moment, one option seems more appealing. But there is a third option, too: safety. In a split second, offering others this new option may save a life. Kirkwood High School students showed that everyone has a dream and everyone has something to live for.


SUICIDE AWARENESS WEEK VIDEO 2017
This video contains sensitive material regarding suicide. The Kirkwood Call understands that everyone deals with the problems differently and wishes to offer resources and to spread awareness about mental illness in the community. Individuals concerned about friends or themselves should talk to a guidance counselor or trusted adult.


The Kirkwood SCHEDULE

Day 1  
Moment of Silence, Whiteboard or Posterboard Day

Day 2  
Bracelet Day

Day 3  
Chalk Day

Day 4  
Speaker Day

Day 5  
Walk and Celebration

YouTube
13 TIPS FOR MEDIA COVERAGE OF SUICIDES

Every person is different, every situation is different. The important point is to interview parents (Don’t be surprised if they appreciate being included.), relatives and friends about the person, who he or she was, his or her loves and talents, anything that brings the person to the reader. Avoid sentiment, a sense of tragedy or readers feeling the writer is having a nervous breakdown. Death is a part of life; we all die. Through a really well done obituary, people live on. | WAYNE BRASLER, RETIRED JOURNALISM ADVISER

1. **Maintain objectivity.** Do not use big, sensationalistic headlines. Phrase headlines to refer to the death, not the manner of the death.

2. **Maintain objectivity.** Do not place the story at the top of page one or at the top of the website for an extended period of time.

3. **Maintain objectivity.** Do not devote too much space to the coverage of the event. Instead, devote space to the mental health issues.

4. **Be sensitive to the family and to the community.** Be careful about how and when you release timely information on social media.

5. **Discuss warning signs,** perhaps as a sidebar. Do not say the death was “without warning.”

6. **Include up-to-date information on the investigation** to present information such as whether a note was found, without quoting the note.

7. **Realize that investigations take time.** Do not refer to the cause of death without an official statement. The rest is speculation. When discussing the speculation, include comments from suicide prevention experts and mental health experts.

8. **Use a traditional school photo or a photo provided by the family.** Avoid pictures of the scene or grieving friends.

9. **Describe the deceased as “having died by suicide”** rather than as “a suicide” or having “committed suicide.”

10. **Contrast “suicide deaths” with “non-fatal attempts.”** Do not use “successful” suicide or “unsuccessful attempt.” Attempted suicide may technically be a crime. It is best reported as a public health issue.

11. **Work with mental health officials,** including school counselors, to discuss the bigger issues of mental health that help present the suicide in context.

12. **Do background research.** Use data from the Centers for Disease Control and the state’s health department to discuss trends in suicide.

13. **Include suggestions about what to do or whom to consult if students or their friends are considering suicide** with all coverage, including information on where students can go for assistance, including the National Suicide Hotline number and local crisis phone numbers.