
Reporting on Suicides: A resource for journalists

Media and online coverage of suicide can influence people negatively by contributing to copy-cat behaviour, or positively by encouraging help-seeking behaviour. According to the National Mental Health Survey 2016, in India, among those with suicidal risk, 80% don't receive any health intervention. Your report on suicide could be a matter of life or death to someone else.

Points to Consider

1. Suicide is complex

Avoid oversimplifying your report by linking the suicide attempt/or death by suicide to a single reason such as:

- Failure in an examination
- Debt
- Failure in love etc

The reasons why people choose to take their own lives is complex and may be due to longstanding, **multiple reasons**, including treatable mental illnesses

2. Readers need helpful information

The National Mental Health Survey says that over half of those surveyed in India with high suicidal risk had a co-occurring mental disorder. Substance use disorder has also been linked to suicidal behaviour.

In your story, try to include a quote from a suicide prevention expert on:

- The likely causes of suicide
- Ways to prevent suicide
- How to help someone who has attempted suicide

Educate your readers about the trends in suicide

- Likely causes of suicide
- How to recognize suicidal behavior
- What types of treatments are available



3. For readers who are depressed or contemplating suicide

- Include positive quotes from survivors
- Inspire hope in readers



Link the readers to suicide helpline numbers or resources where they can get more information

4. It could be a matter of life or death

Many studies show that the way suicide is covered in the news can increase the likelihood of certain vulnerable readers attempting suicide. Therefore to minimize the risk of copy-cat suicides avoid:

- Headlines that sensationalize or glamorize
- Explicit or graphic details of the methods used for suicide
- Giving extensive space or undue prominence to suicide stories

5. Remember, in order to change public mindset:

- Maintain balance in your story
- Ensure your information is accurate and maintain sensitivity

Consider giving your reader the following tips on how to recognize someone who experiences suicidal thoughts:

The person:

- > may talk about wishing to die
- > express feelings of hopelessness
- > say that they feel life is useless or aimless
- > say they feel trapped
- > often mention that they are a burden to others
- > display rage

The person may also:

- > Increase the consumption of alcohol or drugs
- > Display rage or extreme swings in mood from happy to depressed
- > Show anxiety
- > Act recklessly
- > Sleep too little or too much
- > Withdraw from family, friends and social circles

- **If you notice anything unusual about a person's behaviour, especially children or people living away from home, contact a mental health professional**
- **The greater the number of warning signs, the greater the risk of a suicide attempt**
- **Do not leave such a person alone. Remove any sharp/cutting objects such as blades and knives, firearms, pesticides/medicines/chemicals ropes etc. that could be used to attempt suicide**
- **Seek help through a suicide helpline/qualified psychiatrist**

DO'S & DON'TS



Avoid headlines that are sensational and that describe the method of suicide. For example:

"Class 10 student jumps off bridge to death"

Avoid photos that graphically depict the place or method of death

Avoid using words such as 'commit suicide', 'soaring suicide rates', 'epidemic of suicides'

Do not go into what a suicide note said

Do not quote policemen on the causes of suicide

Avoid classifying suicides as successful, unsuccessful, or a failed attempt



Provide the bare essential details of the event without sensationalizing the suicide. For example:

- "Class 10 student found dead in Adyar"
- "Michael Jackson dies at 50"

Images could include photos of the person at work, in school/college or with family

Death by suicide can be used instead of 'commit' suicide.

When presenting data about suicides, refer to recent studies that represent national or state level data, using words such as 'rising rates' to describe trends

Convey minimum information on suicide notes. For example: the deceased had left a note which is now being reviewed by the medical examiner"

- Present suicide as an issue which involves individual, social and health related factors.
- Discuss your report with psychiatrists/suicide prevention experts

Use killed himself/herself or died by suicide to describe the event. Include a phone number or link to a suicide helpline

**September 10th is observed as
World Suicide Prevention Day each year**

Suicide Prevention Helpline:  **+91 44 2464 0050**
open on all days

For more resources, visit: www.snehaindia.org

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References:

- 1) www.reportingonsuicide.org
- 2) Suicide in India – changing trends and challenges ahead
- 3) National Mental Health Survey 2016
- 4) Dr. Lakshmi Vijayakumar, SNEHA, Member WHO Network on Suicide Prevention and Research
- 5) Dr. Akshay Singh, (Consultant, Lucknow)

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This resource was designed by REACH as part of our efforts to help improve the quality and frequency of media reporting on NCDs.

If you have any questions, please write to us at media@reachindia.org.in

