

Suicide in the Media

■ Whether to participate in the story

Avoid participating in repetitive, prominent or excessive reporting of suicide. Will the story increase community understanding of suicide? If so, are you the most appropriate person or organisation to provide comment?

■ Provide support information

Provide media professionals with help line numbers and information about available treatment and support. Suggest that this information is included to provide support for those who have been distressed by the story.

■ Avoid description of the suicide

Avoid discussing details of method and location and suggest the exclusion of this information from stories wherever possible. Detailed description of a suicide death can prompt some vulnerable people to harm themselves.

■ Use appropriate language

Check that your language does not sensationalise suicide or present it as an option for dealing with problems - e.g. use 'non fatal' rather than 'unsuccessful', 'took their own life' or 'died by suicide' rather than 'successful suicide' or 'committed suicide' and use statements such as 'cluster of deaths' rather than 'suicide epidemic'.

■ Place the story in context

Place stories in context by providing general information about suicide and its relationship to mental illness and other risk factors. Avoid simplistic explanations that suggest suicide might be the result of a single factor or event.

■ Interviews with people bereaved by suicide

People bereaved by suicide may be at risk of mental health problems or self-harm. Caution should be exercised when providing media access to these people.

Mental Illness in the Media

■ Whether to participate in the story

Consider whether the story has the potential to contribute to community understanding of mental health and mental illness. If so, are you the most appropriate person or organisation to provide comment?

■ Provide support information

Provide media professionals with help line numbers and information about available treatment and support. Suggest that this information is included to provide support options for people who may have been prompted by the story to seek help.

■ Use appropriate language

Be aware of your own language and suggest alternatives to any unhelpful phrases used by media. Avoid terms such as 'deranged', 'mental patient' or 'psycho'. Do not refer to someone as 'a victim', 'suffering from' or 'afflicted' with mental illness. Do not label people with their illness e.g. a person is 'living with' or has a 'diagnosis of schizophrenia', they are not a 'schizophrenic'. Ensure that medical terminology is used correctly and in context.

■ Avoid negative stereotypes

Be mindful not to reinforce stereotypes such as those that link mental illness with violence or suggest people are unable to work, parent or lead fulfilling lives. Where possible provide information to counter these stereotypes, presenting a balanced view of people who have a mental illness.

■ Consumer and carer involvement

Consumers and carers considering talking to the media should have access to appropriate support throughout the experience and an opportunity to debrief afterwards. Encourage those considering media involvement to ask questions of journalists before making a decision.

In all verbal and written communication, refer journalists to the Mindframe website at www.mindframe-media.info for reporting issues and links to resources.

The above suggestions are a summary of those in the resource book *Suicide and Mental Illness in the Media: A resource for the Mental Health Sector*, available at www.mindframe-media.info/mentalhealth



When the media calls:

- Find out about the story/interview:
 - Who is the journalist?
 - What is their knowledge/opinion of the issue?
 - Who else are they speaking to?
 - Who do they want to interview?
 - When do they want to do the interview?
 - What is the story about?
 - What is the reason for the story?
 - What information will be required?
 - What types of questions will be asked?
 - Is it for radio, television or print media?
 - Is it for a news story, feature, other?
 - Will pictures/video be required?
 - When will the story be published/broadcast?
- Refer the journalist to the Mindframe website for information about reporting issues.
- Give a response within the agreed deadline.
- Remember that it is OK to say no.
- Follow the procedures in your media policy.
- Be clear about the areas you are able to comment on and stick to these.
- Identify spokespeople and make sure they are well briefed and familiar with the Mindframe principles.
- Collect relevant facts and statistics and helpline numbers to support the story.

When you are seeking media coverage:

- Make sure your story is 'newsworthy':
 - Do you have something new to say, new data or trends to show change?
 - Is it an issue that will affect the lives of the audience, or that the audience may relate to?
 - Does it relate to an issue currently in the media?
- Emphasise one of these aspects in your approach – this is your 'angle'.
- Be prepared to follow up on any story you pitch:
 - Prepare background information.
 - Line up spokespeople for interview.
 - Identify photograph or video opportunities.
 - Be clear about what you can and can't provide.

Preparing a media release:

- To catch attention use a short clear heading that highlights the most important point.
- Summarise the main points in the first paragraph. In one to two sentences outline who, what, where and when and if possible why and how.
- Keep it to one page and use short sentences and simple language.
- Include contact details for people who can provide further information at the bottom of the release.
- List the Mindframe website at the bottom of the release.
- Use letterhead if available and use double spacing (or 1.5) between lines of text.
- Fax or email the release and follow up with a phone call.

Interviews:

- Be prepared:
 - Know your subject and organisation well.
 - Be clear about your message.
 - Identify three main points that you want to get across. It may be useful to write these on a card to refer to during the interview.
- During an interview:
 - Keep your message simple.
 - Use short sentences and avoid jargon.
 - Stick to your subject.
 - Don't say anything you don't want reported.
 - Instead of saying 'no comment' give a reason why you are unable to answer the question, e.g. 'That is out of my area of experience'.
 - In an interview is about a crisis, do not give extra information that may worsen the situation.
 - Keep coming back to your three main points.

For more information on working with the media go to the mental health section of the Mindframe website at:
www.mindframe-media.info/mentahealth

