

OHIO SUICIDE REPORTING GUIDELINES

Responsible reporting on suicide has the power to save lives. How you shape a story — the details given, words used and resources provided — will minimize suicide contagion for vulnerable individuals and increase awareness of this major public health issue. Social media presents new challenges and opportunities to shape our understanding of and response to this largely preventable form of death.

1. Limit Suicide Contagion

“Suicide contagion” is the process by which one or more suicides increase the risk of suicidal behavior in others. Contagion effects are greatest when suicide is viewed as a means to achieving a goal such as escaping unbearable pain or receiving recognition by way of a strong community response following death. Celebrity deaths by suicide have a strong potential to contribute to suicide contagion due to frequency and depth of reporting, as well as the likelihood that the public feels they can identify with such well-known individuals. Due to being more easily influenced by peer behavior, romanticizing suicidal behavior in peers, and viewing community grief reactions to a friend’s suicide as something they may want for themselves, adolescents and teenagers are at increased risk for suicide contagion compared to adults. To limit suicide contagion when covering suicide, consider these recommendations:

- Cover the story in a non-sensationalistic, sensitive way that respects the individual who died by suicide and those surviving this painful loss.
- If you decide to include narrative that could cause intense emotional distress, use the phrase “Content Warning” or use a visual cut so that users can click to read additional material after a neutral description of the article.
- If images are used, choose images that show the individual who died by suicide engaging in life rather than clutching his/her/their head, depressed and/or disheveled.
- Suicide is complex. Be sure to avoid single-cause explanations. Certain events or factors can precipitate a suicide, but there are typically multiple underlying causes.
- Limit the audience’s exposure to grieving family and friends and memorial services.
- Link to www.mha.ohio.gov/suicidereporting so that these guidelines are readily available when others share or retweet your story.
- Review all links and embedded material to avoid potentially harmful online content, such as pro- suicide websites or social networks. Such sites can include detailed descriptions of suicide methods harmful to vulnerable people and distressing for bereaved families.
- Avoid suggesting that a suicide achieved results or was a noble end.
- Avoid front page placement or oversimplified, dramatic headlines (e.g., “Desperate man plummets from bridge after being fired”).

- Avoid use of sensationalistic or intentionally provocative terms to make up for limited space in a tweet or Instagram caption (e.g., “Deadly love: Breakup leads distraught woman to Amtrak train suicide”).
- Avoid providing information or sharing images on the exact details of location and methods.
- Avoid language that romanticizes the act of taking one’s life.
- Avoid speculation about an individual’s thoughts and feelings leading up to the suicide.
- Avoid publishing the content or image of a suicide note, final text, or final social media post.
- Avoid referencing social networking sites used to eulogize or memorialize someone who died by suicide.
- Refrain from using words like “inexplicable,” “unavoidable” or “without warning” to describe a suicide death.
- Avoid using the term “hotspot” when discussing an accumulation of suicidal acts at a certain location. Use “frequently-used locations” instead.

2. Frame story ethically

A journalist can choose to formulate a story about suicide in many ways: a tragic event that has devastated a community; the unpredictable or dangerous behavior of a person battling a mental health condition (not advised); or the loss of an individual who struggled with profound emotional pain but was unable to access potentially lifesaving resources. A journalist’s story formulation has the power to influence public perception regarding suicide, and it can either increase or decrease the risk of vulnerable individuals to engage in suicidal behavior. When considering how you might formulate a story on suicide:

- Consider the purpose of the story and how the narrative will impact your audience.
- Avoid reporting that aims to captivate readers by the graphic or sensationalistic nature of a suicide; the method of suicide or the death itself should not be the foundation of the story.
- Frame suicide as determined by multiple factors rather than the result of a single cause.
- Frame suicide as a largely preventable form of death and a major public health issue.
- Underscore that there are community prevention strategies and resources that can prevent future suicides, rather than suggesting that one individual or group is to blame for a suicide.

- Develop the story with consideration that the family of the person who died by suicide is grieving and may be struggling with intense feelings of sadness and guilt.
- Do not report on a suicide as criminal behavior.
- Consult mental health professionals, preferably suicide prevention experts, to support the audience's understanding of suicide risks and warning signs. Find a suicide prevention expert at <https://www.newsu.org/resources/sri/covering-suicide-andmental-health>.

3. Use Appropriate Language

Journalists are aware that the precise use of language is critical, especially when discussing uncomfortable topics such as suicide. Specific terminology can either reinforce stereotypical notions, myths, and misconceptions of depression and suicide, or they can frame suicide as a largely preventable public health problem. Many individuals struggle silently with suicidal thoughts without seeking the support of effective treatment, in part because of prejudicial language used to describe suicide. Journalists have considerable power to reframe public perceptions about people who are suicidal by using compassionate language that combats harmful stereotypes. Consider the following recommendations regarding preferred language:

- Recognize that appropriate terms used for those who die by suicide and those affected by a suicide death change over time; always use currently accepted terms.
- Avoid the term “committed suicide.” The use of “committed” is no longer acceptable because of its strong association with moral failing or criminality. Instead, use objective terms such as “died by suicide,” “suicide death,” “took his/her/their life,” or “suicide attempt.”
- Do not frame suicide in terms of successful completion or failure. Do not say suicide attempts were “successful” or “failed,” or that a suicide was “completed.”
- Avoid terms such as “cry for help” or suggest suicide was a bid for attention.
- Avoid describing suicide as a selfish act.
- Avoid sensationalistic terms like “suicide epidemic” or “skyrocketing suicide rates.” Use “increasing rates” instead.
- Do not share stories that imply mental health conditions cause violence, or that individuals who take their own lives are prone to unpredictable acts of aggression towards others.
- If retweeting or sharing a link, look at the entirety of the content before passing it along and confirm that all sources and links contain reliable information.
- When a story about suicide is posted, it may captivate individuals in crisis who identify with the story. Some readers may post comments indicating they are in crisis or may share concerning content.

- Monitor for hurtful messages or messages from those who may be in crisis. Consider a strategy or policy for removing grossly inappropriate/insensitive posts.

4. Provide Suicide Prevention Resources

It is possible to report on suicide in a way that cultivates hope by increasing awareness of available supports and encouraging help-seeking for those who struggle with suicidal thoughts or behaviors. Well-developed stories about suicide can reduce misinformation, increase compassion, increase awareness of coping tools, and provide pathways to recovery. Not only can journalists help shape the conversation about suicide, they can use social media to amplify key messages of prevention and recovery. Regardless of reporting approach, all stories about suicide should include easily accessible local and national crisis and suicide prevention resources. Linking resources is one simple but effective way to support those in need.

- Include the message that those recovering from a suicide attempt or loss can find support and effective treatments for depression.
- Highlight protective factors that lower the risk of suicide and coping strategies that can be used by those managing a suicidal crisis.
- Include specific examples of individuals who developed effective strategies or engaged in effective treatment to manage suicidal thoughts.
- All stories about suicide should include a template like this, including local resources: If you're feeling suicidal, please talk to somebody. You can reach the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline at 1-800-273-8255; the Trans Lifeline at 877-565-8860; or the Trevor Project at 866-488-7386. Text “START” to Crisis Text Line at 741-741, or in Ohio, text “4HOPE”. If you don't like the phone, consider using the Lifeline Crisis Chat at www.crisischat.org.
- Increase public awareness about how to identify individuals at risk for suicide by reserving space for a description of suicide warning signs and risk factors, or include a hyperlink.
- Cover community efforts to prevent suicide and how the community plans to move forward after a suicide such as:
 - suicide prevention efforts or programs in schools that promote awareness and support for those displaying warning signs of suicide.
 - community support and guidance for bereaved friends and family members to help them adjust to the loss of a loved one.
 - community ongoing support and treatment for those who are vulnerable to suicide with links and phone numbers to local agencies.