

Media plays an important role in preventing suicide

Carefully reporting on suicide can change perceptions, dispel myths and inform the public on the complexities of the issue. Many studies have found that risk of contagion is real, and responsible reporting can reduce the risk of additional suicides.

This information is directly from the AP Stylebook and reportingonsuicide.org, which has been vetted by the AP. We hope this document will be a useful reference.

Reporting on suicide

If a story about suicide is necessary, like when the individual is a well-known figure or the circumstances are particularly unusual or public, follow these guidelines to help reduce the chance of contagion.

- Avoid describing or depicting the method and location of the suicide. Graphic details and images of suicide methods may increase risk of suicide attempt or death for individuals who are vulnerable. Instead, report the death as a suicide and keep the location general.
- Avoid using the phrase “committed suicide.” Alternate phrases include “took their own life” or “died by suicide.” The verb “commit” with suicide can imply a criminal act. Do not refer to an “unsuccessful suicide attempt” or “failed attempt.” Instead, refer to an “attempted suicide.”
- Avoid describing intimate details about the person who died. Sharing personal information can lead some to over-identify with the person who died. Confirm that next-of-kin have been notified prior to publishing any identifying details.
- Avoid presenting suicide as a common or acceptable response to hardship. Suicide is not a common reaction to adversity or mental illness. Instead, report that coping skills, support and treatment work for most people who have thought about suicide. We strongly recommend also including the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline: 988.
- Avoid sensationalizing details in the headline or story. Instead, report on the death using facts and language that are sensitive to a grieving family.
- Avoid overstating the problem of suicide by using descriptors like “epidemic” or “skyrocketing.” Instead, research the best available data and use words like “increase” or “rise.” The Kim Foundation, in partnership with the Division of Behavioral Health, is currently finalizing Nebraska’s statewide suicide prevention plan, which will be a good reference for data and resources.

Reporting under unusual circumstances

A mass shooting where a perpetrator takes his or her life is different from an isolated suicide. Recommendations for reporting on mass shootings can be found at reportingonmassshootings.org.

A homicide-suicide is also different from an isolated suicide. The circumstances are often complex in these incidents, as they are in suicide. To minimize fear in the community, avoid speculation on motive and cite facts and statements that indicate that such events are rare. Show sensitivity to survivors (a person who has lost

someone to suicide) in your interviews and reporting. Highlight research that shows most perpetrators of homicide-suicide have mental health or substance use problems, but remind readers that most people who experience mental illness are nonviolent.

Checklist for responsible reporting

- Report suicide as a public health issue. Including stories on hope, healing, and recovery may reduce the risk of contagion.
- Emphasize help and hope. Stories of recovery through help-seeking and positive coping skills are powerful, especially when they come from people who have experienced suicide risk.
- Include resources. Provide information on warning signs of suicide risk as well as local or national resources, like the 988 Suicide & Crisis Lifeline. Additional local resources can be found on our website: thekimfoundation.org/find-help/
- Use appropriate language, as outlined previously in this document.
- Ask an expert. Interview suicide prevention or mental health experts to validate your facts on suicide risk and mental illness.

Other reporting resources can be found in the AP Stylebook and reportingonsuicide.org.

We're here to help

The mission of The Kim Foundation is to serve as a supportive resource and compassionate voice for lives touched by mental illness and suicide. Local data and national best practices inform our events, conferences, and programming initiatives to support suicide prevention education, mental health awareness, and post-suicide support for loss survivors.

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