

RESOURCES FOR JOURNALISTS WHO COVER SUICIDE

Links to websites, tip sheets and videos that offer guidelines

1. This site was developed by mental health experts and journalism organizations to provide guidelines for reporters and offer examples of coverage that implemented the guidelines.

<http://reportingonsuicide.org/>

2. This 17-page booklet by Samaritans in the United Kingdom covers research about suicide, media guidelines, digital media guidelines and language.

<http://www.samaritans.org/sites/default/files/kcfinder/files/Samaritans%20Media%20Guidelines.pdf>

3. This site contains guidelines for bloggers — journalists and those who are sharing their personal experiences of suicidal thoughts and actions. Resources include a one-page summary and booklet with expanded guidelines.

www.bloggingsuicide.org

4. This one-page tip sheet offers general guidelines on covering suicide.

<http://dartcenter.org/content/tip-sheet-on-covering-suicide-from-al-tompkins>

5. This one-page tip sheet offers guidelines for covering military and veteran suicides.

<http://dartcenter.org/content/covering-militaryveteran-suicides>

6. This 8-minute video from the Suicide Prevention Resource Center features a journalist and psychologist who offer guidelines on coverage and story ideas to cover the topic outside the context of a death.

<http://www.sprc.org/video/safe-reporting>

7. This 25-minute podcast from the American Foundation for Suicide Reporting discusses suicide as a public health issue and the effects of celebrity suicide coverage on contagion. Hosts are a physician and psychologist.

<https://afsp.org/briefing-press-report-suicide/>

8. This short post from News.Mic discusses social media warning signs of a person's deteriorating mental health that could lead to suicide. It also offers practical advice on how to respond.

<https://mic.com/articles/159820/how-to-tell-if-your-friend-is-having-a-breakdown-on-social-media#.LGZpEmB4h>

Using social media to broadcast suicide deaths

This article examines the phenomena of people who broadcast their suicides on social media and includes interviews with mental health experts.

<http://www.charlotteobserver.com/news/nation-world/national/article129120064.html>

Examples of suicide coverage: the good, the bad and the ugly

1. The good: It leads with suicide warning signs. It doesn't assign blame or attempt to answer why. It includes context about suicide with an expert interview. It mentions the positive role of social media in friends' support. It presents the teen as a human and his positive involvement with the high school band.

The bad: The mother's letter to her dead son that was read at his funeral is published in its entirety. While the letter is compelling, the story is published fewer than six weeks after his death. The internet is permanent. What if the mother decides later the letter is too personal?

The ugly:

<http://www.daytondailynews.com/news/local/mason-teen-suicide-mother-battle-and-warning/NGdSCVYSnB20Ba29g14FaK/>

2. The good: Although a spot news story, it includes links to several resources: Centers for Disease Control survey of teenagers about suicide, signs and symptoms, and how parents can help their children. It also includes an expert interview.

The bad: It mentions method and details in the headline and story. It doesn't directly link the death to bullying but strongly suggests it and mentions a cluster of deaths of young people "killing themselves due to problems at school or at home."

The ugly:

<http://www.cleveland19.com/story/32830581/youngstown-mourns-death-of-13-year-old-lost-in-apparent-suicide>

3. The good: The spot news story mentions details to describe the one who died as a person, not just a statistic.

The bad: The headline suggests a direct causation between his suicide death and criminal charges without any other information to provide context.

The ugly:

<http://www.latimes.com/local/lanow/la-me-ln-actor-death-20170124-htlstory.html>

4. The good: The story includes ways to get help if feeling suicidal.

The bad: The story identifies bullying as a single cause of suicide.

The ugly: The story describes Bethany's method in detail.

<http://www.dispatch.com/content/stories/local/2016/10/29/family-community-struggles-for-answers-after-11-year-old-fatally-shoots-herself.html>

5. The good: The story includes ways to get help if feeling suicidal.

The bad: The sensational headline "Deadly love" dehumanizes the woman; it also indicates a single cause of suicide. This spot news story has very little information, yet it declares the breakup as the cause of her death.

The ugly: The Google map identifies a location where others may choose to die by suicide, thereby promoting contagion.

<http://mynews1a.com/crime/2017/01/09/deadly-love-breakup-leads-distraught-woman-to-amtrak-train-suicide-2/>

6. The good: The story includes ways to get help if feeling suicidal.

The bad: The headline is sensational and mentions method. The story mentions details of the method and location.

The ugly: This is spot news coverage, but no friends or people who really knew the student were interviewed. All sources were official with just the facts and little context of his life.

<http://www.dispatch.com/content/stories/local/2015/08/31/Missing-Denison-student.html>

7. Multiple media outlets cover the suicide of a Texas teen who shot herself in front of her family.

The Associated Press web version

The good:

The bad: The story shares vivid details of the where and how she shot herself.

The ugly: The website headline mentions method and the agony of the family; it also identifies bullying as a single cause.

The AP broadcast version embedded in the web story

The good:

The bad: The story is one-sided; only the family is interviewed.

The ugly: "The Texas teenager had already made up her mind" is a callous description of a young woman in crisis. "I'm glad you got what you wanted. I hope this makes you happy" comment from the brother is inflammatory. The brother has a right to feel this way, but this accusatory quote did not need to be aired.

<http://nbc4i.com/2016/12/02/as-they-beg-her-not-to-do-it-bullied-teen-kills-herself-in-front-of-her-family/>

The CBS News web version

The good:

The bad: The headline identifies bullying as the single cause. The story includes details about the method.

The ugly: The story reports her father's comment that "she was determined" and "she said she'd come too far to turn back" — language that serves to vilify the young woman.

The CBS News broadcast version produced by local CBS affiliate KHOU-TV and embedded in the web story

The good:

The bad: The anchor and the reporter said the teen "committed suicide," using criminal language to describe the act. The story identifies bullying as the single cause.

The ugly:

<https://www.google.com/amp/www.cbsnews.com/amp/news/cyberbullying-pushed-texas-teen-commit-suicide-family/>

8. The good: The in-depth story looks at the issue of suicide within the context of one family's loss. It adds research on rates and compares that to death rates from traffic crashes for context. It discusses that suicide is more complex than a single cause.

The bad: It does not include ways to get help if feeling suicidal.

The ugly: The headline "adolescent suicide spike" can promote contagion. The story wags a big finger at social media based only on two people's opinions.

<http://www.nbcnews.com/news/us-news/suicide-14-i-have-racked-my-brain-trying-understand-n686036>

9. The good: The story includes a link to the #VetoViolence suicide prevention project.

The bad: The story details method and location about the death of a teen who broadcast her suicide on social media. It also uses the term "committed suicide."

The ugly: The callous headline mentions method and demeans the loss of life by using "this time" language to suggest a routine death. The story refers to a social media memorial to the girl who died. The embedded narrated slide show reports all the explicit details of her death and references another similar death by a Georgia teen, both aspects of which could promote suicide contagion.

<http://www.miamiherald.com/news/local/article128563889.html>

10. The good: The story includes a tag line at the end with a phone number for local help.

The bad: It covers a suicide cluster of teenagers at one high school, which could promote contagion. It approaches suicide as an education issue and blames the school system rather than showing the complexities of what leads to suicide.

The ugly:

<http://www.fresnobee.com/news/local/education/article121130428.html>

11. The good: The story covers well the complex issue of providing health care to veterans despite Veterans Administration staffing problems. To show the problem, it tells the story of a veteran who killed himself.

The bad: The story mentions method.

The ugly:

<http://www.npr.org/2017/01/31/512052311/va-hospitals-still-struggling-with-adding-staff-despite-billions-from-choice-act>

Media ethics discussions of good and bad coverage with examples

1. This commentary criticizes an English paper for its reporting about a suicide and offers facts about suicide rates and contagion along with ethical guidelines for covering suicide.

<http://www.imediaethics.org/uk-paper-broke-standards-reporting-suicide-included-much-information/>

2. This commentary criticizes a Pennsylvania paper for its callous reporting of a man's suicide. It includes a follow-up interview with the man's mother and a link to the story and the outrage from readers expressed in the comments section.

<http://www.imediaethics.org/case-study-report-suicide-sharon-herald/>