

Best Practices for Media Reporting on Suicide and Mental Illness

Q & A



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Can press coverage help change the trajectory of the suicide crisis in today's fast-paced society where everyone is pressed for time?

Press coverage can indeed change the trajectory of the suicide crisis. Responsible and well-informed media reporting can educate the public on the signs of mental distress, effective preventive measures, and available resources.

By creating a culture of openness and education around the topic, the media can help remove the stigma often associated with mental health and suicide.

The media must adhere to responsible reporting guidelines, to prevent triggering vulnerable individuals. Failing to do so can result in harmful consequences, including potential "copycat" suicides.

In a society pressed for time, concise yet impactful stories, infographics, or even social media posts can effectively reach a broader audience and bring attention to the issue.

Note: For detailed guidance, refer to the *World Health Organization's publication Preventing Suicide: A Resource for Media Professionals, Update 2023 (12 September 2023)*.



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Is it likely that suicide-related conversations in publications, personal narratives, and press coverage can have a profound impact?

Suicide-related conversations in publications, personal narratives, and press coverage can indeed have a profound impact on public perception, awareness, and behavior. The way these topics are covered can either perpetuate stigma and misinformation or contribute to education and prevention.

Positive Impact: Sensitively crafted stories that offer insights into mental health challenges, without sensationalizing the issue, can humanize the subject and provide valuable context. These stories can also guide people to relevant resources and encourage conversations around mental well-being.

Negative Impact: Conversely, irresponsible reporting that sensationalizes suicide or overly focuses on methods can result in harmful effects, such as "copycat" suicides among vulnerable individuals.

Given the sensitive nature of the topic, the media must adhere to responsible reporting guidelines, such as those provided by the World Health Organization or similar credible bodies.

Note: For detailed guidance, refer to the *World Health Organization's publication Preventing Suicide: A Resource for Media Professionals, Update 2023 (12 September 2023)*.

Can certain visuals or language impact a person's decision to live or die?

Is there a way one person's suicide might lead to another?

The use of certain visuals or language in media can profoundly influence a person's decision-making process regarding life and death.

Graphic images, explicit descriptions of suicide methods, or overly dramatic narratives can trigger vulnerable individuals and might contribute to "copycat" suicides.

This phenomenon, where one person's suicide might lead to another, is known as "suicide contagion." Exposure to suicide within one's family, peer group, or through media reports can significantly increase the risk of suicide among vulnerable individuals.

The Werther effect describes how publicized suicides can result in a cascade of similar acts, particularly when the original act is reported sensationally or graphically.

To mitigate this, responsible reporting guidelines strongly recommend avoiding specific details about suicide methods and refraining from romanticizing or glamorizing the act.

Instead, media outlets can play a crucial role by providing information on available help and focusing on stories of recovery and hope.





To what extent does the media contribute to the suicide crisis? How can the media help stop people from dying by suicide?

The media's role in contributing to the suicide crisis can be significant, but it varies depending on how responsibly the topic is handled. Sensationalized or poorly executed reporting can inadvertently glamorize suicide, propagate myths, or encourage "copycat" behavior, thereby exacerbating the crisis. However, the media can also play a pivotal role in preventing suicides.

- 1. Education and Awareness:** Media outlets can offer valuable insights into the signs of suicidal ideation, risk factors, and preventive measures, serving as a platform for public education.
- 2. Resource Sharing:** Information about helplines, crisis centers, and mental health services can direct people to immediate help.
- 3. Removing Stigma:** Sensible and sensitive reporting can help normalize conversations around mental health and suicidal thoughts, thereby reducing stigma and encouraging people to seek help.
- 4. Promoting Resilience and Hope:** Stories that focus on recovery, resilience, and the effectiveness of treatment can provide hope to those in distress.
- 5. Expert Consultation:** Incorporating the advice of psychologists, psychiatrists, and other mental health professionals in reports can add credibility and offer clinically backed guidance to the public.
- 6. Adherence to Guidelines:** Media should adhere to established ethical guidelines, such as those provided by the World Health Organization or the Press Council of India, which advocate for cautious language, avoiding explicit details, and focusing on broader issues like mental health care inadequacies or societal pressures.
- 7. Community Engagement:** Initiating and fostering public dialogues or campaigns around mental health and suicide prevention can catalyze collective action and policy changes.

Is it your experience that news coverage of suicides, particularly those with newsworthy elements such as celebrity suicides, suicide pacts, clusters, or new methods, tends to follow a consistent pattern in which incidents are widely reported as soon as they are disclosed, with increased pressure to cover the story quickly and fueled by the need to place them on front pages with a sensational tone?



News coverage of suicides often follows a consistent pattern, especially when the incidents involve elements deemed "newsworthy," such as celebrity involvement, suicide pacts, clusters, or novel methods. There is often a rush to report these incidents as quickly as possible, which can result in a lack of depth or nuance in the reporting.

The need for speed and exclusivity can sometimes lead to sensationalism, which is highly discouraged by responsible reporting guidelines due to the risk of triggering vulnerable individuals or causing "copycat" suicides.

Sensationalized headlines, vivid descriptions, and dramatic narratives can contribute to the problem by glamorizing the act or planting ideas in the minds of those already contemplating suicide.

This approach contrasts with responsible reporting, which advocates for a more nuanced, sensitive portrayal that acknowledges the complexities involved in such a tragic event.

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In India, what are the major challenges in mental health and suicide coverage that you can recall from the last several years? Why do some suicides garner more media coverage than others?

Some of the major challenges in mental health and suicide coverage in India include:

1. **Stigma:** Mental health issues are often highly stigmatized in India, making it challenging to discuss them openly in the media.
2. **Lack of Awareness:** General unawareness about mental health conditions and their severity can result in inaccurate reporting.
3. **Sensationalism:** The tendency to sensationalize certain cases, particularly those involving celebrities or unusual circumstances, often detracts from a nuanced understanding of the underlying issues.
4. **Inconsistent Guidelines:** There is a lack of uniform guidelines for responsible reporting on suicide and mental health, making it easier for media outlets to resort to sensational or harmful tactics.
5. **Resource Constraints:** Limited access to experts and research can hinder the quality of coverage.
6. **Regional Disparities:** Mental health issues in rural or less affluent areas often go underreported.

Why Some Suicides Garner More Media Coverage:

1. **Celebrity Involvement:** Suicides involving public figures naturally attract more attention due to their high-profile status.
2. **Novelty Factor:** New or unusual methods or circumstances, such as suicide pacts or clusters, capture media attention due to their unique aspects.
3. **Public Interest:** Cases that evoke strong public emotions or involve controversial issues are more likely to be widely reported.
4. **Accessibility of Information:** Suicides that are easier to report on due to readily available information or sources are often covered more extensively.

Is it helpful or more harmful to exclude suicide reporting altogether? Why?



Excluding suicide reporting altogether could be more harmful than helpful for several reasons:

Lack of Awareness: Completely avoiding the topic could perpetuate the stigma around suicide and mental health, making it even more challenging for people to seek help or discuss their feelings openly.

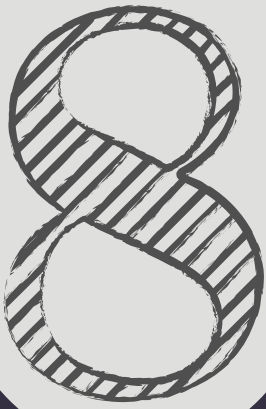
Missed Educational Opportunities: Responsible reporting can provide valuable educational insights into mental health, preventive measures, and available resources, serving as a public service.

Uninformed Public: Without proper reporting, myths and misunderstandings about suicide and mental health could proliferate, leading to ill-informed opinions and actions.

Absence of Public Discourse: Media coverage can initiate important public conversations leading to policy changes, improved healthcare systems, and community-based support.

However, it is critical that such reporting adhere to guidelines that prioritize sensitivity, factual accuracy, and a focus on prevention rather than sensationalism.

Media outlets should avoid detailing methods, avoid glamorizing the act, and provide helpline numbers or other resources for those in need.



Do you believe the media can play a positive role in busting misconceptions regarding mental health and suicide?

The media has the potential to play a significant positive role in busting misconceptions surrounding mental health and suicide.

- **Educational Content:** Media can provide evidence-based information that helps educate the public about the nature of mental health issues, effective treatments, and prevention strategies.
- **Expert Opinions:** Including interviews or articles from mental health professionals can lend credibility and depth to the reporting, helping to dispel myths.
- **Real Stories:** Human interest stories that focus on recovery and effective coping strategies can provide hope and a balanced view of mental health conditions.
- **Resource Sharing:** Media outlets can disseminate information about mental health services, helplines, and community resources, aiding immediate intervention and long-term treatment.
- **Promoting Public Discourse:** By responsibly covering these topics, the media can facilitate conversations that help break down the stigma associated with mental health and suicidal ideation.
- **Policy Advocacy:** In-depth, fact-based reporting can draw attention to systemic issues and potentially influence policy changes.
- **Counteracting Misinformation:** Responsible journalism can act as an antidote to widespread myths and misinformation, often propagated through social media or cultural beliefs.

By adhering to responsible reporting guidelines and focusing on educational and constructive content, the media can be a force for good in this context.

Do you agree with the statement that "violent criminals have had mental disorders at some point in their lives?"



The statement "violent criminals have had mental disorders at some point in their lives" is an oversimplification and potentially misleading, contributing to the stigmatization of mental health conditions.

Evidence suggests that most individuals with mental health conditions are not violent, and the vast majority of violent acts are not committed by individuals with mental disorders.

Several factors contribute to violent behavior, including but not limited to socioeconomic conditions, substance abuse, family upbringing, and personal experiences. Mental illness can sometimes be a contributing factor, but it is rarely the sole cause.

Statistically speaking, people with mental illnesses are more likely to be victims of violent crimes rather than perpetrators.

Associating mental illness with violent criminal behavior can further stigmatize an already marginalized group, making it more difficult for individuals to seek help.

It's essential for discussions about violence and criminality to be nuanced and evidence-based to prevent perpetuating stereotypes and stigmas related to mental health.

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How can journalists ensure their work is free of reporting bias to ensure that mental health-related news pieces reflect a fair point of view?

Ensuring unbiased, fair reporting on mental health-related topics requires a multi-faceted approach:

1. **Thorough Research:** Conduct comprehensive research using reliable, evidence-based sources to ensure the information presented is accurate.
2. **Consult Experts:** Interview mental health professionals, scientists, and other subject matter experts to provide a balanced and nuanced perspective.
3. **Avoid Sensationalism:** Eschew sensational headlines, language, or imagery that could perpetuate stigmas or misconceptions.
4. **Use Inclusive Language:** Choose language that is non-stigmatizing and inclusive, avoiding terms that might marginalize or trivialize mental health conditions.
5. **Diverse Voices:** Include perspectives from various stakeholders, including patients, caregivers, advocates, and policymakers, to provide a well-rounded view.
6. **Transparency:** Indicate if the journalist or the publication has any potential conflicts of interest that could influence the reporting.
7. **Follow Guidelines:** Adhere to established journalistic and ethical standards, such as the guidelines provided by the World Health Organization or other relevant bodies, for responsible reporting on suicide and mental health.
8. **Fact-Check:** Rigorously fact-check all information and claims before publication.
9. **Peer Review:** Have the piece reviewed by experts or senior editors who are familiar with the subject matter.
10. **Resource Sharing:** Always include information on where readers can seek help, such as helpline numbers or websites for mental health services.
11. **Feedback Loop:** Pay attention to feedback from the audience and be prepared to make corrections or clarifications as necessary.

By following these steps, journalists can contribute to a more informed, compassionate public discourse around mental health issues.

Do you agree that most mental illnesses, including depression, are treatable and people can often get better and live normal lives?



The majority of mental illnesses, including depression, are treatable, and many people do recover or learn to manage their symptoms effectively to lead fulfilling lives. Various forms of evidence-based treatments exist, such as:

1. **Pharmacotherapy:** Medications like antidepressants can be effective in managing symptoms.
2. **Psychotherapy:** Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT), Dialectical Behavior therapy (DBT), and other therapeutic approaches have proven efficacy.
3. **Lifestyle Changes:** Diet, exercise, and sleep can also impact mental health and are often recommended as part of a holistic treatment plan.
4. **Support Networks:** Support from family, friends, and mental health professionals can be invaluable for recovery or symptom management.
5. **Integrated Care:** Often, a combination of medication, psychotherapy, and lifestyle changes yields the best results.

However, it's essential to note that:

1. **Individual Variation:** Treatment efficacy can vary from person to person.
2. **Complex Cases:** Some severe or complex cases may require long-term management.
3. **Stigma and Access:** Social stigma and lack of access to quality healthcare can be barriers to treatment.

In summary, while not all mental illnesses are "curable" in the traditional sense, most are treatable, allowing individuals to function well in society with the right treatment and support.



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What can the media do better about those with mental health concerns to give a more accurate portrayal?

Improving the portrayal of mental health in the media involves adopting a multi-dimensional approach. Here are some strategies:

- **Avoid Stereotyping:** Refrain from depicting individuals with mental health conditions as dangerous, unpredictable, or responsible for their own suffering.
- **Use Responsible Language:** Be cautious with terminology. For instance, rather than labelling someone as "schizophrenic," say "a person with schizophrenia."
- **Showcase Diversity:** Mental health issues affect people across all ages, genders, and socio-economic backgrounds. Reflect this diversity in stories and reporting.
- **Seek Expert Input:** Incorporate insights from mental health professionals to provide a balanced and scientifically-backed view.
- **Humanize, Don't Humiliate:** Personal stories can be powerful, but they should be handled carefully to avoid sensationalism or exploitation. Always respect the dignity of the individual involved.
- **Educate the Audience:** Use the platform to spread accurate information about symptoms, treatment options, and where to seek help.
- **Challenge Stigma:** Actively work to challenge societal stigmas and misconceptions surrounding mental health issues.
- **Promote Positive Narratives:** While it's essential to portray the challenges, it's equally important to highlight stories of recovery, resilience, and effective coping strategies.
- **Resource Sharing:** Include relevant helplines or support services related to the topic at hand, offering a direct channel for assistance.
- **Ongoing Coverage:** Mental health isn't a "one-off" topic but a crucial public health issue that deserves consistent, thoughtful coverage.
- **Feedback Mechanism:** Be open to public feedback and ready to make corrections or improvements to ensure responsible reporting.
- **Adherence to Guidelines:** Follow established journalistic ethics and guidelines on reporting mental health issues, such as those provided by professional bodies and health organizations.

By adopting these practices, the media can significantly contribute to a more nuanced, empathetic, and informed public dialogue about mental health.

Do you think journalists are persuaded to use sensational media in their reporting?



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There is a tendency for some media outlets to resort to sensationalism, particularly in a highly competitive news landscape where capturing audience attention is critical. Sensationalism can manifest in various ways, including dramatic headlines, emotional language, or selective reporting that skews the facts to create a more engaging or alarming narrative. Here are some reasons why this happens:

1. **Ratings and Clicks:** Media companies often rely on ad revenue, which is driven by views, clicks, or ratings. Sensational stories tend to generate more public interest, at least in the short term.
2. **Competition:** With the proliferation of news sources, especially online, there is intense competition to be the first to break a story, leading to rushed reporting that may lack depth or nuance.
3. **Public Interest:** Sensational stories often feed into public curiosity or fears, thereby ensuring higher levels of engagement.
4. **Editorial Pressure:** Journalists may experience pressure from editors or publishers to write stories that are more likely to attract public attention.
5. **Lack of Training:** Some journalists may not have received adequate training on responsible reporting, especially on sensitive topics like mental health, leading to unintentional sensationalism.

However, it's important to note that many journalists and media outlets strive for responsible, balanced reporting. Organizations that prioritize ethical journalism often provide guidelines for reporting on sensitive subjects like mental health, aiming to inform rather than sensationalize.

How does media aid in amplifying the echo chamber effect of social media

The media can play a significant role in amplifying the echo chamber effect observed on social media, wherein individuals are exposed to information that aligns with their existing beliefs, thereby reinforcing those beliefs and limiting exposure to diverse perspectives.

1. **Aggregated Content:** Media outlets often source trending topics from social media, thereby reinforcing popular opinions and narratives.
2. **Selective Reporting:** Some media outlets cater to specific ideological groups and may choose stories that validate the views of their target audience, further amplifying existing beliefs.
3. **Feedback Loop:** Media stories that gain traction on social media may be given additional coverage, thus reinforcing the prominence of certain perspectives.
4. **Framing and Language:** The way a story is framed—through headlines, choice of language, and imagery—can influence how it is received, often reinforcing pre-existing biases.
5. **Viral Content:** Media outlets may produce content designed specifically to be shareable on social media, catering to trends or beliefs that are already popular among users.
6. **Polarization:** In attempting to capture audience attention, media outlets might sensationalize or polarize issues, which then get picked up and amplified on social media platforms.
7. **Algorithmic Amplification:** Media content is often distributed via algorithms that prioritize engagement, feeding into the echo chamber by promoting content that is likely to generate likes, shares, and comments.
8. **Celebrity and Influencer Endorsements:** When media stories are shared or commented on by popular figures, their reach and influence are substantially amplified, often within like-minded communities.
9. **Lack of Contrarian Views:** Failing to present diverse perspectives can contribute to the echo chamber, as audiences may assume a single viewpoint represents the entire scope of public opinion.
10. **Repetition:** Constantly repeating the same news or viewpoints across various platforms and formats can make those views seem more prevalent or acceptable than they may be.

While the media can contribute to the echo chamber effect, it also has the potential to counter it by providing balanced reporting, diverse perspectives, and nuanced analysis.

The term "echo chamber" in the context of media and social media refers to an environment where individuals are exposed primarily to information or opinions that align with their own, thereby reinforcing their existing beliefs and attitudes. This limited exposure can result in a distorted perception of reality, a decreased willingness to consider alternative viewpoints and heightened polarization.

Here's how it operates:

- 1. Selective Exposure:** People often choose news sources or social media platforms that align with their beliefs.
- 2. Algorithmic Sorting:** Algorithms on social media platforms prioritize content that users are more likely to engage with, based on past behavior. This usually means showing users posts that align with their existing beliefs.
- 3. Confirmation Bias:** Once people are exposed to views that confirm their pre-existing beliefs, they become more confident in those beliefs, further isolating themselves from diverse perspectives.
- 4. Group Polarization:** Within these echo chambers, opinions can become more extreme as individuals are only exposed to viewpoints similar to their own.
- 5. Social Reinforcement:** In an environment where one's beliefs are constantly being echoed back, social approval from like-minded individuals can further reinforce one's own views.
- 6. Limited Challenge:** In an echo chamber, ideas are not rigorously challenged, tested, or scrutinized, leading to the potential spread of misinformation or one-sided narratives.
- 7. Resistance to Change:** The constant reinforcement of existing beliefs makes individuals within an echo chamber more resistant to information that challenges these beliefs, regardless of the evidence supporting it.

The echo chamber effect is particularly consequential in matters of public importance like politics, science, and healthcare, including mental health topics. It can perpetuate stigmas, misinformation, and polarized viewpoints, making it a significant concern for informed public discourse.

Did you know online content employs catchy, emotional, and frequently deceptive headlines to maximize advertising revenue?



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The practice of using catchy, emotional, or even misleading headlines to attract clicks is commonly known as "clickbait." This approach is often employed to maximize advertising revenue by driving user engagement and page views. While it can be effective for increasing traffic, it has several downsides:

1. **Misinformation:** Deceptive headlines can spread false information, which can be especially harmful on topics like healthcare, politics, and social issues.
2. **Reduced Credibility:** Over time, the use of clickbait can erode trust in media outlets, making it harder for them to serve as reliable sources of information.
3. **Short-Term Focus:** While clickbait may yield immediate gains in terms of traffic and ad revenue, it often prioritizes short-term engagement over long-term reader loyalty.
4. **Dilution of Quality:** The use of sensational headlines can overshadow substantive, well-researched content, reducing the overall quality of information available to the public.
5. **Ethical Concerns:** The use of misleading or exaggerated headlines poses ethical questions about journalistic integrity and responsibility.

Despite their drawbacks, not all catchy or emotional headlines are clickbait; they can also be used responsibly to attract attention to quality, informative content. However, the line can be thin, and the onus falls on both media organizations and readers to navigate it carefully.

The media holds immense power in shaping the narratives that influence society, especially in the realms of mental health and suicide.

Through diligent, deliberate, and dedicated coverage, journalists and media outlets can shatter stigmas, spark awareness, and save lives.

By adhering to ethical standards, rejecting sensationalism, and spotlighting stories of resilience and recovery, the media can build a future rooted in understanding and empathy.

As gatekeepers of global dialogue and mass media influencers, the responsibility extends beyond just reporting—it's about driving meaningful change.

Every headline, every story, every broadcast holds the potential to either dismantle harmful myths or reinforce damaging misconceptions.

The influence of the media is profound, and with it comes the power to shape minds, attitudes, and ultimately, the culture surrounding mental health.

Let us commit to creating a media landscape that informs and inspires. Media professionals can transform into powerful influencers for good.

With unwavering dedication to ethical journalism and deep sensitivity to the issues at hand, the media can lead the charge in the fight against stigma and the spread of misinformation.

In the end, it's not just about telling the story—it's about changing the narrative.