How do the media report suicide?  
What influence does it have on how communities discuss suicide?

Suicide is a legitimate issue for the media to cover. It is, however, a complex issue to convey. Although it is important to talk about suicide as individuals and communities, this is not the same as one-way mass communication through the media.

In Australia, the Mindframe National Media Initiative provides comprehensive guidance on media portrayals of mental illness and suicide. The following fact sheet is based on information available via the Mindframe resources.

Research has shown that the way suicide is reported in the media is important. While some styles of reporting have been linked to increased rates of suicide, in some cases appropriate reporting may be helpful.

People who are feeling suicidal may become affected by media reports of suicide, particularly where they identify with the person in the report, or where suicide is sensationalised or shown as a way to solve problems.

There are times when journalists will report suicide because it is considered to be ‘in the public interest’, that is, the public need to know about it. While the media generally take a responsible approach to reporting suicide, examples of inappropriate reporting can still be seen.

The most effective stories look at social and emotional wellbeing, increase understanding of risk factors and warning signs and promote ways people can find support for a number of problems. This resource provides some basic information on how media approach suicide stories in Australia and the impact of those stories.

How influential is media coverage of suicide?

More than 100 international studies have been conducted looking at the link between media reporting of suicide and suicidal behaviour. A critical review conducted in 2010 provided a snapshot of how the media represents suicide and the impact of that representation on attitudes and behaviour in the community. It also reported changes to media coverage of suicide in Australia over a 10 year period. You can find a summary of the review HERE.

There is strong support for the relationship between media reporting of suicide deaths and increases in completed and attempted suicide rates. The way in which suicide is reported appears to be particularly significant. Evidence for media reporting that can contribute to a reduction in rates is generally lacking. However, there are some isolated studies that suggest some reporting may linked to reduced rates of suicide. This includes reporting that frames suicide as a tragic waste and an avoidable loss and focuses on the devastating impact of the act on others, or explores how someone overcame suicidal thinking.

Australian research has indicated that there has been a two-fold increase in media reporting of suicide in Australia since 2001. Importantly, the study also indicates that the media have integrated the national guidelines on reporting suicide into their reports, with around 30% improvement in quality of
When do the media report on suicide?

Print media (newspapers and magazines), broadcast media (TV and radio) and online media (including social media) have all published stories on suicide.

As with any news report, media will be interested in educating, informing and engaging. It is therefore not uncommon for people who are bereaved to be contacted immediately after a suicide death or around anniversaries and special events such as World Suicide Prevention Day.

The media have a responsibility to conduct interviews and write stories ethically. This includes ensuring that the interviewee has adequate support, understands their rights, and understands that they are not required to disclose anything if they don’t want to.

If you approach media about a story, they may ask what your motivation is for telling your story, to determine whether a media report is the appropriate avenue.

What kind of media reporting contributes to risk?

The recent review of international research indicated that imitation or ‘copycat’ suicide is more likely to occur under certain circumstances.

For example:

- Risk increases where the coverage is prominent – that is, repeated coverage, reports across multiple media sources or news items that are prominent (e.g. front page).
- Risk increases when the story is about a death by suicide and the reader or viewer identifies with the person as either someone that is similar to themselves or someone they look up to (e.g. a celebrity).
- Certain subgroups in the population (e.g. young people; people experiencing a mental illness) may be more vulnerable.
- Explicit descriptions of the method or location have been linked to increased rates of suicide by that specific method or at that specific location.

Media guidelines for reporting suicide generally encourage the following considerations:

- **Volume and prominence** - A succession of stories can normalise suicidal behaviour as an acceptable option for people who are already vulnerable. If the story goes ahead, consider positioning the story on the inside pages of a paper or magazines, or further down in the order of reports in TV and radio news.
- **Context** - Reporting the underlying causes of suicide (e.g. mental illness, drug-related illness or other familial or social risk factors) can help dispel myths and increase community understanding.
- **Method and location** – Detailed descriptions of suicide methods can prompt some vulnerable people to copy the act. If it is important to the story, discuss the method in general terms only. Particular care should be taken not to promote locations as ‘suicide spots’ or ‘hotspots’.
- **Add crisis support contacts** - Include phone numbers for 24 hour crisis support services to provide immediate support to those who may have been distressed, or prompted to act, by the story. NB: A list of these is available on the Conversations Matter website.
- **Language** – If the story is about a death, use the term ‘suicide’ sparingly and check the language you’re using does not glamourise, sensationalise, or present suicide as a solution to problems.
- **Celebrity suicide** - Celebrity suicide is often reported where it is considered to be in the public interest. To minimise risk, ensure the story does not glamourise suicide or provide specific details about method or location of death.
- **Interviewing the bereaved** - The bereaved are often at risk of suicide themselves. Follow media codes of practice on privacy, grief and trauma when reporting personal tragedy.
**Links to further information**

Information within this fact sheet aligns with resources provided to the Australian media on reporting suicide by the *Mindframe* National Media Initiative:

– [www.mindframe-media.info](http://www.mindframe-media.info)

You can keep up to date with new developments and activities by registering your interest on the Conversations Matter website in the form at the bottom of the website homepage:


**Thinking about talking to the media?**

If you are thinking about interacting with media on the issue of suicide (e.g. being interviewed about your experiences, or submitting press release), please see the *Supporting Fact Sheet: How to talk to the media about suicide*, available at [www.conversationsmatter.org.au](http://www.conversationsmatter.org.au)