



**International Association for Suicide Prevention (IASP)**

## REPORTING ON SUICIDE DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

It is well-documented that the way media report on suicide can impact risk of suicide and increased contagion. The World Health Organization and a variety of organizations have developed media recommendations to aid journalists on best practices for covering suicide and self-harm related behaviors. With the world facing the Covid-19 health crisis and unremitting emergency health reporting, it is more important than ever for the media to be able to quickly understand and consider these best practices as it relates to suicide. Media reporting that is accurate, factual, fair, evidence-based and non-sensational is critical, in particular around the issue of suicide. At all times media are encouraged to report on the topic of suicide and below are tips that *support and supplement* existing media recommendations (best practice links can be found below) with the goal here to provide guidance on how to report about suicide specifically during a pandemic.

- **Reporting on a specific suicide:** During the Covid-19 pandemic the public is continuously informed by the media of deaths from the disease, while deaths from virtually all other causes are not being reported, yet continuing to occur. Therefore, when a suicide does occur it is important for the media to determine if it should be reported on, i.e. is this story newsworthy? If so use of the best practices for reporting on suicide as a guide is recommended.
  - Tip: Consider the journalistic value of reporting on the suicide and the impact on the audience? Will it educate, inform, provide clarity around the issue, help prevent other suicides, etc.?
  - Tip: If you do report on suicide, make sure that the story is accurate, fair, treatment-positive, emergency-hotline positive, not blaming and making clear that in the majority of cases suicide can be prevented with the proper care.
  - Tip: Because it is impossible for anyone to know exactly “why” a suicide occurred, especially immediately, it is important to limit speculation.
  - Tip: Unless there is direct evidence to support a direct connection between the specific suicide and the pandemic, include the information uncovered in the investigation as well as any other background information on the suicide.
  - Tip: Use caution when including grieving survivor’s statements that make claims about the cause of the suicide, especially if they believe it to be only due to the pandemic.
  - Tip: Research suggests that it is helpful to include a message of hope, story of recovery or mastery over a crisis to reduce the risk of contagion. This advice also applies to stories of recovery from COVID-19, therefore it is worth considering adding where possible.
- **Reporting on the suicide-pandemic issue:** Suicide is always complex and is the tragic result of multiple factors, some known and some unknown at the time of death. Making an assumption, generalization or correlation between suicide and the current pandemic could be inaccurate, over-simplify the understanding of suicide and trigger suicides among those affected by COVID-19. Some connection between suicide and the current pandemic appears worth reporting on, for example how Covid-19 impacts those with a mental illness, trauma survivors or those thrust into a mental health crisis. Therefore, presenting a full, balanced picture of what is known about suicide and pandemics is important to avoid over-simplifying the two issues.



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- Tip: Help your audience understand that suicide is multi-faceted and includes biological, psychological, environmental and societal causes.
  - Tip: Avoid reporting on the topic of suicide as only related to one causal factor and/or the current pandemic as the sole factor in any one suicide.
  - Tip: Help your audience understand that jumping to one conclusion about why someone died by suicide could result in others (family, friends, co-workers, etc.) over-looking important warning signs because they falsely believe it could be tied to one thing such as the pandemic.
  - Tip: Seek an expert in suicide prevention to help your audience understand suicide.
  - Tip: It is important to use caution when reporting that recommendations for social distancing resulting in isolation are the cause of any suicide. While in some cases social and physical distancing can result in isolation, that is not always the case and it does not always lead to increased psychiatric symptoms or suicide. Instead make sure to report on there being more than one factor resulting in any suicide.
  - Tip: Cover the challenges for those living with a mental illness who are (more) isolated from caregivers, healthcare providers and others during this pandemic, as well as less access to supportive care such as treatment programs, support groups, etc.
- **Reporting on suicide as a public health issue:** Suicide is a major, global public health issue and in more normal times reporting on the topic is helpful for the public. However, during a pandemic more careful thought and consideration should be given to how to tell the public health related story about suicide when another global public health concern is front and center for the general public.
    - Tip: Ensure your report includes information on the history and trends of suicide, local and national information on suicide, as well as it occurring daily and not just at one time or due to one cause.
    - Tip: Consider including ongoing research, programs, treatments and evaluation programs related to suicide.
    - Tip: If you report on a specific suicide, include a statement about the global nature of suicide in your report and help the audience understand the context of the suicide.
    - Tip: Research suggests including stories of recovery, hope and those with lived-experience makes a positive impact and reduces risk of contagion.
  - **Reporting on suicide data:** Use caution when reporting on data released in the midst of a current health crisis. To ensure appropriate context when reporting on suicide data, separate current statistics from historical numbers. We also do not have enough data on the prior pandemics to compare to annual suicide data, nor do we have enough data to compare natural disasters and suicide to annual suicide rates, however there is some data on disasters such as 9/11. Thus helping your audience understand the data in perspective is important.
    - Tip: In all reports on suicide data clearly state that there is minimal data on suicide being correlated with pandemics.
    - Tip: In all reports on suicide data clearly state that annualized data should not be measured against suicides during a pandemic. Further, use caution when reporting on annualized data during a pandemic.
    - Tip: Be careful when reporting on data for special populations during a pandemic.



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- **Reporting on suicide hotlines and emergencies:** All media guidelines recommend including local or national suicide hotline numbers in stories. There is also a wide variation on how suicide and other crisis lines around the world are able to operate during a pandemic. Some hotlines are able to fully staff and answer calls, some are less able to, merely because of volunteers being out ill and/or state or national restrictions being placed on travel outside of their homes using telehealth technologies.
  - Tip: When reporting on suicide make sure to include a hotline or crisis line number and check to make sure the hotline is operating given the national emergency.
  - Tip: When reporting on suicide make sure to include websites with credible information for the public, such as the World Health Organization or the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention websites.
  - Tip: If possible, check local announcements from national or regional bodies covering resources on how to get help including mental health resources during COVID-19. These bodies might list specific capacity and modes of work during the pandemic.
  - Tip: Clearly inform your audience on the content and data related to call volume normally vs. during the pandemic.
  - Tip: Ensure your report helps your audience understand what happens to calls when volume is increased.
- **Reporting on suicide related to hospitalization:** The current pandemic is overwhelming hospitals throughout the world resulting in challenges for admission due to psychiatric emergencies. Therefore, doing a report on the reduced access to care issue could increase anxiety, panic and fear over an inability for some to seek the psychiatric services that they need.
  - Tip: Share information with your audience on a variety of local, regional, national healthcare available via telephone, text and chat services, as well as online websites and resources.
  - Tip: Focus on other services and access to healthcare for those needing psychiatric healthcare.
  - Tip: Include information from your local Health Department on recommendations for seeking hospitalization and how to access hospital care if needed.
- **Reporting on suicide as a policy-related issue:** There may be a desire to report on the issue of suicide and policy-related implications during a pandemic. For example, “legislative bodies should enact special funding for crisis hotlines during a pandemic.” Because pandemics are rare, use caution when reporting on policy issues specific to the current pandemic to avoid the policy issue being lost after the pandemic resolves.
  - Tip: Consider whether an active pandemic period is the best time to report on policy issues or whether such reporting could be more effectively pursued after the acute crisis has subsided, once more research, data and perspective are available.
  - Tip: If you decide on doing a policy-related report, focus the story on the policy or action item(s) that are important to the narrative you want conveyed, rather than on the connection between suicide and the pandemic.



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#### Helpful Resources

1. Preventing suicide: a resource for media professionals, World Health Organization found at: [https://www.who.int/mental\\_health/suicide-prevention/resource\\_booklet\\_2017/en/](https://www.who.int/mental_health/suicide-prevention/resource_booklet_2017/en/)
2. Mental Health and Psychosocial Considerations during the Covid-19 Outbreak, World Health Organization, found at: [https://www.who.int/docs/default-source/coronaviruse/mental-health-considerations.pdf?sfvrsn=6d3578af\\_2](https://www.who.int/docs/default-source/coronaviruse/mental-health-considerations.pdf?sfvrsn=6d3578af_2)
3. Best Practices for Media Reporting on Suicide (US) found at: [www.reportingonsuicide.org](http://www.reportingonsuicide.org)
4. Poynter: Reporting on suicide responsibility found at: <https://www.poynter.org/reporting-editing/2018/best-practices-for-covering-suicide-responsibly/>
5. Covid-19 Resource and Information Guide, National Alliance on Mental Illness, found at: <https://www.nami.org/covid-19-guide>

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