

Covering Suicide

A DART CENTER TIP SHEET FOR COLLEGE MEDIA ADVISORS/EDITORS AND STUDENT JOURNALISTS

When covering a suicide on campus, a reporter must approach the situation delicately and professionally. These situations are difficult and the story can be challenging to cover. It's an important story about someone's life and also allows you to inform your campus community about an important public health issue on a bigger scale.

Student journalists can prepare themselves for how to handle these situations by following some of the tips outlined below.

NEWSGATHERING AND REPORTING STAGE

Raise awareness about suicide before it happens. As an advisor/editor or student journalist for a campus publication, you have the opportunity to inform the campus community about suicide prevention and intervention before a suicide occurs on your campus. Are there warning signs that the campus community can be aware of to prevent something like this from occurring again? Are there prevention and intervention programs available for the campus community?

Remember this is about a person. When covering a suicide, remember this is about a human being – someone who was a friend, a daughter or son, a colleague to someone. It's important that you tell the story from a human perspective.

Focus on the public health issue. According to Al Tompkins of the Poynter Institute, it's better to focus on the bigger picture of suicide as a public health issue than on the individual death.

For sources – go beyond the typical. Contact public health experts, counselors, support groups, advocacy groups, and legal experts. They can provide different perspectives on or dimensions to the situation.

Add context/history. Look at the context of this suicide in relation to the bigger public health issue nationwide. What are the statistics? What are current issues playing out on the national stage? What kinds of prevention and intervention programs are out there to help?

Be careful when you approach sources – be transparent, calm and soft-spoken. Identify who you are, what organization you represent, what will happen with the information you collect from the interview, how it might be used in the story and when it will appear in publication. Tell them why you want to talk with them. If they are open to an interview, then proceed. If not, then leave your contact information with them and ask them to contact you anytime if they would like to talk. If they are not interested in talking, or willing to speak on the record, there will be another opportunity to find a different source.

Let your sources have some control. People who know a person who died by suicide may likely be traumatized by what happened. Give your sources a chance to make some decisions in

Dart Center videos from a Covering Suicide workshop held in 2012:

- [Suicide on College Campuses \(video\)](#)
- [Suicide on College Campuses, A Parent's Perspective \(video\)](#)
- [Ethics and Practice When Reporting on Suicide \(video\)](#)
- [Suicide Research, Myths and Trends \(video\)](#)

the interview process – for example, where they would like to sit, what photos or images they would prefer you use, when they would like to stop or take a break, etc. These small accommodations can go a long way.

The story will be complex. Keep in mind that victims and survivors often have complicated past experiences. Regardless of what information you uncover, they should never be blamed for what happened.

WRITING THE STORY

According to reportingonsuicide.org, covering suicide can increase the likelihood of suicide in individuals who are vulnerable and exposed to stories on a suicide. It's important to be careful in how and what you write about the suicide because it can lead to "copycat suicide." Reportingonsuicide.org offers some specific tips on this:

- **Don't be sensational.** Be matter of fact – don't state that the person committed suicide, but instead that they died.
- **Don't use photos of the location of the death or the method used** – find other photos that capture the life of the person instead.
- **Don't classify the suicide as a crime.** It should be addressed as a public health issue.
- Don't call the suicide "successful," "unsuccessful" or a "failed attempt." Describe the situation as one where the person "died by suicide," "completed" or "killed him/herself."
- Don't focus on death. **Focus on stories about hope and recovery.**

Remember your audience. Remember who will be reading your story. If you are publishing in a campus publication and your audience is students, faculty and staff, keep this in mind as you write. The make up of your audience will always inform your approach to an extent and help shape the story.

Provide resources. Be sure to offer helpful information in a sidebar or bulleted list. This information might include hotlines, warning signs, names of support groups or other entities that can provide help, etc. See the list of resources on the right that might be helpful to you both in your reporting and in a sidebar for your story.

Talk with your friends, family, advisor or editor. Don't bottle up your feelings. Don't forget that covering a rape or sexual assault can impact you – find ways to talk about the experience with your friends, family, advisor or editor. They may have covered something similar and/or can

More resources:

- [Suicide Resources from Dart](#)
- [Recommendations for Reporting on Suicide](#)
- [Covering Suicide: New Science, New Guidelines](#)
- [A Tip Sheet on Covering Suicide from Al Tompkins](#)
- [Reporting on Suicide](#)
- [National Suicide Prevention Lifeline](#)
- [Suicide Prevention Resource Center](#)
- [Suicide Prevention by CDC](#)
- [American Foundation for Suicide Prevention](#)
- [Preventing Suicidal Behavior Among College and University Students \(PDF\)](#)

just be a listening ear. You should not keep your emotions bottled up; sharing your experience is one way of coping with witnessing and reporting on such a difficult event.

For more information visit the Dart Center website:
www.dartcenter.org

