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American Foundation
for Suicide Prevention

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Media Coverage of Suicide Can Contribute to the Problem

Public Health Community Issues New Recommendations for Media Coverage of Suicide

(Washington, DC) A national panel of experts in behavioral science, suicide, and the media has developed specific recommendations for the media on how to report acts of suicide. These recommendations are intended both to help reduce the copycat or contagion effect that media coverage of suicide may produce and also to provide accurate and helpful information to the public about suicide. A partnership of public and private organizations will disseminate the recommendations to reporters, editors and producers throughout the United States.

Representatives from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, the National Institute of Mental Health, the Office of the Surgeon General, the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, the American Association of Suicidology, the American Foundation for Suicide Prevention, and the Annenberg Public Policy Center of the University of Pennsylvania crafted the recommendations after evaluating the guidelines previously developed by the public health community and synthesizing more recent research findings on contagion.

Decades of scholarly research on media coverage of suicide have found:

- Certain ways of describing suicide in the news contribute to what behavioral scientists call "suicide contagion" or "copycat" suicides.
- Research suggests that inadvertently romanticizing suicide or idealizing those who take their own lives by portraying suicide as a heroic or romantic act may encourage others to identify with the victim.
- Exposure to suicide method through media reports can encourage vulnerable individuals to imitate it. Clinicians believe the danger is even greater if there is a detailed description of the method. Research indicates that detailed descriptions or pictures of the location or site of a suicide encourage imitation.
- Presenting suicide as the inexplicable act of an otherwise healthy or high-achieving person may encourage identification with the victim.

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“The media often look for simple explanations as the cause of a suicide, when in fact, the cause of an individual suicide is invariably more complicated than a recent painful event such as the break-up of a relationship or the loss of a job,” said Dr. Herbert Hendin, Medical Director of the American Foundation for Suicide Prevention. “The majority of suicide victims have psychiatric illnesses – most commonly mood disorders or substance abuse problems. These disorders are treatable and if the media would convey that, rather than link suicide to a single event, they could educate people at risk to seek the help they need.”

The recommendations outline some of the causes of suicide and document the “contagion effect” of media coverage. They also offer reporters “questions to ask” when covering a suicide and angles to pursue. Prior to finalizing the recommendations, Kathleen Hall Jamieson, Director of the Annenberg Public Policy Center conducted a series of focus groups with reporters to garner their comments and suggestions.

United States Surgeon General David Satcher applauded the new recommendations, noting that they were consistent with the new National Strategy for Suicide Prevention.

"Reaching out to the media is a priority goal for our National Strategy for Suicide Prevention," said Satcher "We hope media outlets will take note of these recommendations and help educate their readers and viewers about the steps they can take to prevent suicide."

As part of the plan to disseminate the recommendations, the Annenberg Public Policy Center and the American Foundation for Suicide Prevention will print and distribute the recommendations to newspaper, television and radio editors and reporters and participate in educating both mental health professionals and the media at national meetings. This work will be funded by a grant from the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation.

The recommendations are available on the sites of partner organizations that drafted them, including www.appcpenn.org and www.afsp.org.

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