

**News reporting on suicidal behaviour in relation to the COVID-19 pandemic:
need for caution**

News reporting of suicidal behaviour can have important influences on population levels of suicide and self-harm.¹ This is particularly relevant during the current COVID-19 pandemic.

With rising numbers of deaths from infection with the virus and negative effects of the pandemic on key factors that are associated with suicide, including social isolation, unemployment and financial problems, there is understandable concern that suicide rates may increase.² It is important that news reporting does not add to the potential risks.

Dramatic coverage of the impact of the pandemic in the media, especially when focussed on suicidal behaviour, may increase the risk of imitation, and contribute to normalising suicidal behaviour as a common and acceptable way to cope with difficulties related to the crisis. Of particular concern is the impact on young people, who are more likely to be influenced by what they see and hear in the media, are disproportionality featured in news coverage of suicide,³ and are at increased risk of imitative suicidal behaviour.⁴

Concerns about media reporting on suicide and the pandemic also apply to messaging from members of the research community and health experts. There needs to be care in how research findings are presented and disseminated, not to conceal important findings but to ensure that results are presented in a balanced fashion. Of particular concern are predictions about the potential effects of the pandemic on future suicide rates. There have been several attempts to 'model' these which have resulted in dramatic and pessimistic stories likely to have negative effects on people who may be facing adverse circumstances and perhaps feeling hopeless. A further concern is the language some have used to

emphasise the extent of potential mental health problems that may develop. This has sometimes been taken out of context and used to generate sensational headlines directly linked to suicide. Important examples include terms such as ‘tsunami’ and ‘tidal wave’, especially given the association of such phenomena with deaths.

In discussing potential mental health consequences of the pandemic it is desirable to avoid automatically conflating declining mental health with suicide/suicide risk (although these are clearly associated). It is also important to avoid stigmatising mental illness and suicide as this may discourage help-seeking. We acknowledge that striking a balance in this area can be difficult to achieve.

There is, however, room for some optimism, especially if one of the impacts of the pandemic is increased social cohesion. Suicide rates have been shown to decline in the wake of some (but by no means all) large-scale natural disasters and national crises.² Also, media reporting of suicide is not inevitably associated with suicide rises, and may indeed help to prevent suicide. Including links in news reports to sources of support, and also focusing on stories of hope and recovery, may have protective effects against suicide, especially amongst individuals at higher risk.⁵ Encouraging people to look out for each other and encouraging those who are struggling to seek help can be a legitimate role of the media. Media reports can model how to cope with suicidality and difficult circumstances, and provide a powerful reminder that suicide is preventable and suicidal crises can be overcome. The online panel summarises key points for news reporting on suicidal behaviour.

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Online Panel

Summary of guidance on reporting of suicide in relation to the Covid-19 pandemic

- Remind people that suicide is preventable, encourage help-seeking by signposting to sources of support, such as Samaritans. In the UK and Ireland people can call Samaritans for free 24/7 on 116123, or email: jo@samaritans.org
- Avoid making speculative comments and predictions about potential rises in suicide rates, as these can result in sensational stories that over-simplify the issue.
- Do not use alarmist language to describe any potential impact of the pandemic, such as 'surge', 'spike', 'crisis', 'epidemic'. Terms such as these have been used out of context, generating sensational news headlines.
- Take extra care if covering the potential longer-term implications of the pandemic for mental health and suicidal behaviour (for example economic impacts and potential job loss) to avoid unhelpful or sensational media coverage which may contribute to people's anxiety and a sense of hopelessness.
- Use media opportunities to promote the importance of supporting people's mental health through this difficult time and to ensure support is available to those who need it most.
- Be aware that hopeful stories that show how people manage their mental health and can demonstrate recovery, have been linked to falls in suicide rates. These can serve as powerful testimonies to others, who may be struggling to cope.
- When speaking with media, remind them of Samaritans' Media Guidelines for Reporting Suicide (<https://www.samaritans.org/about-samaritans/media-guidelines/>)

Be mindful of these points on social media as well. Many will be concerned about the pandemic and keen to talk about it, but not always be aware of the risks or have the knowledge of how to do this safely.