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COVID-19: TRENDS IN SUICIDE

Researchers must contribute to responsible reporting of suicide

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In their editorial on trends in suicide in the covid-19 pandemic, John and colleagues discuss the role of the media in preventing suicide.¹ We would like to add that academics themselves need to contribute to responsible reporting through carefully described research findings, including in relation to covid-19.

Research has shown the potentially harmful effect of news reporting of suicide deaths on population suicide rates.² Accordingly, media guidelines for reporting on suicide exist.³⁻⁵ These typically target journalists and media professionals, but researchers also have an important role in making reporting safer. It is crucial that the research community does not contribute to increasing suicide risk in the pandemic.

We recommend that authors, peer reviewers, university press offices, and journal editors consider the following points when publishing information about suicide in the covid-19 pandemic and its aftermath:

- Remove references to methods of suicide from article titles (where possible) and avoid detailed description of methods
- Descriptions of novel methods of suicide can contribute to spreading these methods and should (where possible) be avoided, especially in titles
- Avoid simplistic explanations of suicide, such as single “triggers” or causes of suicide—for example, covid-19 and its associated public health measures. Rarely does a single event or factor cause someone to take their life. Associating the negative effects of the pandemic with suicidal behaviour carries substantial risk of normalising it as a way of coping at times of crisis
- Avoid sensational language, such as “surge,” “crisis,” “tsunami,” and “epidemic” when describing the potential impact of the pandemic—these terms have been used out of context, generating sensational news headlines
- Special care should be taken when describing suicidal behaviour in young people as this group is particularly susceptible to suicide contagion.⁶

We are not trying to limit discourse about suicide or restrict research findings. But we must ensure safe and accurate translation of suicide research findings into media reporting that minimises risks to vulnerable people.

Written on behalf of the International COVID-19 Suicide Prevention Research Collaboration (ICSPRC) https://www.iasp.info/COVID-19_suicide_research.php.

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Full response at: <https://www.bmj.com/content/371/bmj.m4352/rr-0>.

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