



10 Tips

FOR JOURNALISTS REPORTING ON SUICIDE

Suicide is a serious societal problem. Each year in the Netherlands there are approximately 1850 deaths and 14.000 attempted suicides, leading to treatment in hospital. Suicide, in more than 90% of the cases, is not a question of deliberate choice, but an expression of a psychiatric illness, often depression.

In recent years, suicide has increasingly become a taboo. One of the causes is the way it is dealt with in the press. When good contextual information is provided, press coverage can actually help to prevent suicides. However, merely announcing the details of occurrences of suicide can be dangerous. People who are on the edge can get the idea that suicide is the only solution to their problem. Several scientific studies have shown that copying behaviour is a real risk. If journalists keep this in mind, this 'copycat effect' can be reduced.

1 Be restrained

In the coverage of actual, concrete cases of suicide be as restrained as possible. Don't overemphasise the occurrence and its consequences.

2 Don't give details

Don't give a description of the method of suicide or the means used. By withholding details you prevent someone coming up with the idea that this is an effective way to commit suicide – and also becoming a news item.

3 Don't romanticise

Be careful that coverage does not romanticise or dramatise a suicide, by for example quoting from a suicide note or diary. This will forestall the perception that people who end their own lives are heroes or martyrs and will hinder those with suicidal tendencies from identifying with them.

4 Avoid oversimplification

Never describe suicide as a solution to a problem. Never relate a suicide to a single cause or event. Suicides often have a long history in which multiple factors are involved.

5 Use abstract visual imagery

Consider whether pictures have added value. If they are really necessary for a news item, choose images that are not directly linked to the method of suicide, such as a picture of a rushing train or of a vial of medicine.

6 Provide supportive information

Give, when discussing general aspects of suicide and the causes and prevention thereof, helpful practical information, such as for example, the Dutch helpline 113.

7 Respect privacy

Respect the privacy of the deceased and the bereaved. Family members are at an especially increased risk of suicide, partly because they may struggle with shame, incomprehension of the event, and/or guilt. Unnecessary personal details about the suicidal deed or about the deceased can have an extra hard impact on them.

8 Be particularly careful in regard to celebrities

When covering the suicide of a well-known person, extra restraint is called for. In such cases articles and commentaries can have an even greater impact on suicidal persons and more readily lead to imitation.

9 Refer to trustworthy sources of information

Only use information on suicide and issues having a bearing on suicide that comes from institutions that are above suspicion, such as Foundation 113 Online, the Trimbos Institute, the Dutch Knowledge Centre Anxiety & Depression, and the Ivonne van de Ven Foundation.

10 Point out that aid helps

In the Netherlands each year an estimated half a million people have suicidal thoughts. More than 99% of these people are able to cope with their situation, often with the aid of their family, friends or a professional. Finding assistance really works! By calling attention to this you may help to reduce the number of suicides.