

## **Samaritans' submission - Editors' Code of Practice public consultation**

Samaritans is pleased to make a submission to this Editors' Code of Practice public consultation. This is a welcome opportunity to review the code, in its current form, and to consider how effectively this supports journalists in reporting safely and to high standards when covering suicide.

This submission is based on the most up-to-date international research evidence into the effects of media depictions of suicide and Samaritans' monitoring data on suicide reporting in the UK.

Suicide and self-harm are major public health concerns and therefore topics which are very much in the public interest. Sensitive reporting can inform and educate the public about these issues. Research examining the positive impact of media coverage continues to grow, with stronger evidence of a protective effect by increasing help-seeking behaviour and reducing feelings of low mood and suicide ideation. This body of research, known as the Papageno effect, has linked news stories showing hopeful recovery with falls in suicide rates, demonstrating the media's opportunity to play a significant role in preventing suicide deaths. Press stories of hopeful recovery are very powerful testimonies to the fact that suicide is preventable.

Suicide is an extremely sensitive topic which presents a distinct set of risks and challenges for journalists. It is important to balance reporting, to inform the public, while taking account of the potential for stories to influence the behaviour of vulnerable people, including the possibility of imitational suicides.

A well-established body of international research, known as the Werther effect, has consistently shown that media reports of suicide are associated with increases in suicide rates. In particular coverage that includes details of suicide methods, sensationalises or normalises suicidal behaviour, or is prominent, can lead to imitational suicide deaths.

A systematic review of studies, published in 2020, shows that press reports covering celebrity deaths by suicide are associated with an average 13% rise in suicides in the following 1-2 months. To put that in context, the UK currently has around 540 deaths by suicide per month. A 13% increase means there would be an additional 70 deaths per month following media coverage of a celebrity's death. The study also showed that when the media reported the specific suicide methods used by celebrities, the number of deaths in the population using the same method increased by an average of 30% in this period.

A study carried out following news reporting of actor Robin Williams' death in 2014 showed a 10% increase in suicides in the US in the months after he died. A large proportion of these deaths were by a similar demographic of men and by the same suicide method. This equated to 1,841 more suicide deaths in the country compared to the same period the previous year. The study identified three high-risk elements in the press reports: details of the suicide method, a lack of suicide prevention messaging and many romanticised headlines and comments were published.

Samaritans' Media Advisory team works closely with the press to support responsible and informed coverage of suicide. We know from international research that when media guidelines are followed this has a positive effect on standards of reporting and studies have linked adherence to media guidelines with falls in suicide rates.

Samaritans' submission to this consultation is based on the most significant areas of risk evidenced in the research into media reporting of suicide and data analysis of suicide reporting in the UK during the last decade.

## **Recommendations to improve and strengthen clause 5 of the Editors' Code of Practice**

This submission makes recommendations to strengthen clause 5 to ensure the public is adequately protected from the consequences of harmful content, by more robustly supporting journalists across five key areas of suicide reporting:

1. Remove or replace the word 'excessive' in relation to the detail of suicide methods
2. Acknowledge the extra care required with covering new and emerging suicide methods
3. Address the increased likelihood of imitational suicides following reports of celebrity deaths
4. Address the risks associated with drawing attention to harmful online content
5. Encourage signposting to sources of support when covering suicide

Incorporating these recommendations will align the code with the most up-to-date research evidence and ensure the code supports journalists and editors in making well-informed decisions on how to report suicide safely.

This will significantly reduce the risk of suicide contagion and increase the potential for press coverage to educate the public on the issues relating to suicide and self-harm. This will, in turn, increase the likelihood of vulnerable people seeking help and support UK-wide efforts to prevent suicide deaths.

### **1. Recommendation to strengthen clause 5 by removing or replacing the word 'excessive' in relation to details of suicide methods that should be reported, including inquests:**

We are grateful that it is rare to see excessive details of suicide methods published in reports. While it is reassuring to see that the code is effective in this area, it is very concerning, given the substantial international evidence, that descriptions containing sufficient information to clearly illustrate suicide methods are frequently reported, including in headlines.

We have seen a rise in suicide methods being published in news headlines in recent years. While we are now beginning to see a decline, this continues to remain high, including in reports of high-profile deaths. (% of stories)

We know from research that the more prominently a suicide method is presented in press stories, the greater the cognitive awareness of these. This can increase people's perceptions of the prevalence and lethality of particular methods, serving to promote these and increasing the likelihood of imitational suicidal behaviour. This includes more commonly used suicide methods.

In its current form with inclusion of the word 'excessive', the code is confusing and risks misleading journalists in believing it is safe to name suicide methods in reports, including in cases of high-profile deaths and prominently displayed in news headlines.

The evidence is clear, the code will far better protect the public if the word 'excessive' were to be removed or replaced, by significantly reducing instances of suicide methods being published in press articles.

*For further information please refer to Samaritans' [Media Guidelines for Reporting Suicide](#)*

### **2. Recommendation to strengthen clause 5 by including mention of the extra care required in cases involving new and emerging suicide methods:**

In its current form clause 5 does not adequately mitigate against the risk of new suicide methods being introduced into the UK.

International studies have shown very clearly how new methods have been introduced and have grown in use in some countries following news reporting, with deaths increasing at a disturbing rate.

The data shows the increase in the use of new methods corresponds with an increase in suicide rates. No corresponding decrease has been evident across other suicide methods.

The naming of novel suicide methods in news reports provides enough information to promote the use of these, significantly increasing the likelihood of these becoming more commonly known of and used in this country.

Novel suicide methods should not be named in reports at all, including reports covering inquests.

Care should also be taken with the use of alternative terms used to describe a method and links made to other stories, to reduce the likelihood of people being exposed to harmful content via online searches.

Qualitative studies involving interviews with people who have survived suicide attempts, provide additional evidence that people learn about suicide methods from news reports, and that these details influence their perceptions of the accessibility and effectiveness of methods.

People who survive a suicide attempt, and most do, get a second chance at seeking help and recovery. Those who choose a highly lethal suicide method get no second chance.

*For further information please refer to Samaritans' [Media Guidelines for Reporting Suicide](#)*

### **3. Recommendation to strengthen clause 5 by acknowledging the increased risk of contagion associated with reports of celebrity suicides:**

The likelihood of media coverage influencing imitational suicidal behaviour increases considerably following widespread reporting of celebrity suicides.

This contagious effect is well documented through numerous international studies which have analysed news reports alongside the corresponding impact on suicide rates. A review of 31 studies examining the impact of suicide reporting found that suicide rates consistently increase by approximately 10 to 18% following reporting of celebrity suicides, and deaths by use of the same method increase by an average of 30%.

Samaritans' news monitoring data has shown that the recommendations made to journalists in our media guidelines are frequently disregarded when news reports covering celebrity suicides are published. This is particularly concerning given the greater likelihood of these stories influencing imitational suicidal behaviour.

In the majority of cases reports of celebrity deaths include all of the following:

- details of the suicide method, often prominently highlighted in headlines
- sensationalised or romanticised language and themes
- speculation of causes, which can over-simplify suicidal behaviour
- repeated, prominent stories, with coverage reaching excessive levels.

Evidence clearly shows that each of these increases the risk of influencing suicidal behaviour.

Samaritans believes providing clarity around the importance of safe reporting of celebrity suicides, within clause 5, will better support journalists when faced with covering these deaths.

On the strength of the evidence, as a direct consequence this would provide more robust protection to UK audiences, reducing the likelihood of increased suicide rates following celebrity deaths.

*For further information please refer to Samaritans' [Guidance for reporting on celebrity suicides](#)*

#### **4. Recommendation to strengthen clause 5 by adding mention of avoiding signposting people to harmful online content**

Great care should be taken to avoid unintentionally exposing vulnerable people to harmful content online, which we know can influence decisions around self-harm and suicidal behaviour, with the potential to make a suicide attempt a more likely outcome.

This includes; videos showing self-harm and suicidal behaviour, guidebooks and websites which promote suicidal behaviour and give instructions on methods, content which glorifies suicidal behaviour and sites where people have accessed the means to end their life.

Care should also be taken around the use of alternative terms and descriptions used to describe content, to avoid unintentionally highlighting harmful online content.

While there is a public interest in understanding the potential harms online, when making decisions as to whether or not it is appropriate to run such stories, it is critical that consideration is given to the possible consequences.

*For further information please refer to Samaritans' [Guidance for reporting on self-harm and suicide content online](#)*

#### **5. Recommendation to strengthen clause 5 by adding a point covering the importance of signposting people to sources of support when reporting on suicide**

People can be significantly affected by media coverage of sensitive issues. Due to the associated risks with media coverage and suicide contagion, news articles covering suicide should encourage help-seeking by directing audiences to places where they can find help.

Samaritans monitors news reporting of suicide on a daily basis and our data has shown a decline in the number of articles which have included references to support organisations.

Journalists should be made aware that a greater number of people survive suicidal crises, than the number of those who die by suicide. The World Health Organisation estimates that for each person who dies by suicide across the world, there may be more than 20 others who make an attempt on their life.

Stories that remind people that suicide is preventable, with a focus on recovery, can have a protective effect by encouraging vulnerable people to reach out for help.

This is a clear example of how the press can make a significant contribution to helping to reduce suicides by taking very simple steps.

People do contact Samaritans' helpline having been affected by stories in newspapers or magazines when the helpline details have been included in the piece.

*For further information please refer to Samaritans' [Media Guidelines for Reporting Suicide](#)*

*Research references have intentionally been omitted from this submission due to the nature of content, these are available on request.*