
Media Guidelines for Reporting on Suicide

The following guidelines were established in 2021 by the Suicide Prevention Office in conjunction with a cross section of New Zealand media, including the Broadcasting Standards Authority, the Media Council and the Media Freedom Committee. The guidelines recognize that suicide is an important public health issue and frequently a topic of media interest. The guidelines are designed to assist working journalists, broadcasters, commentators and students of journalism report on suicide in a way that causes no further harm.

First and foremost - all publications and/or broadcasts must comply with the Coroners Act 2006

Under section 71 –

When publishing information about any death which is self-inflicted, or where there is reasonable cause to suspect is self-inflicted, in New Zealand (or on a New Zealand registered plane or ship) –

- the method or any suspected method causing death cannot be published
- no detail suggesting the method or suspected method of death can be published (eg. the place of death)
- the death cannot be described as a suicide (unless the coroner has certified suicide to be the cause of death)

But the death can be described as a 'suspected suicide'.

Under section 71A –

Anyone, including a journalist or media outlet, can apply to the chief coroner for an exemption to the section 71 restrictions.

The chief coroner may grant an exemption only if satisfied that:

- a) granting the exemption does not present an undue risk that other people will attempt to copy the behaviour of the dead person concerned; and
- b) any risk that people will attempt to copy the behaviour of the dead person concerned is outweighed by other considerations that make it desirable, in the public interest, to allow the publication of the details.

In addition to complying with the Coroners Act 2006, the guidelines advise journalists, broadcasters and commentators to avoid harm by abiding by the following list of 'dos' and 'don'ts'

Do

- Report the death as a 'suspected suicide' until the coroner certifies the death is suicide.
- Keep to the verifiable facts of the case and do not speculate or oversimplify the circumstances of the death
- Apply particular caution when reporting youth suicides or suspected youth suicides:
 - think carefully before including images or content from the deceased's social media and other associated social media links
 - consider how the story (including any interviews) will affect friends and family of the deceased, in both the short and long term
- In all cases consider:
 - the impact the story will have on the immediate family of the deceased person, their community and wider society
 - how to include context and information in the story (for example, about the complexity of the psychosocial factors that contribute to suicide)
 - whether you can include details about how to cope with life's stressors or suicidal thoughts, or about how suicide can be prevented
- Apply caution to coverage of overseas suicides, including taking care to avoid the publication of information which would breach the Coroners Act if the story originated in New Zealand (eg. the method causing death)
- In cases where the deceased is a celebrity, consider what amplified impact the story may have on certain population groups, particularly young people or people with existing mental health issues
- Include information about where and how to get help

Don't

- Do not identify the method of suicide (unless the chief coroner has expressly said you can do so)
 - Do not identify the location of death if it is indicative of the method (unless it is self-explanatory e.g. a prison)
 - Do not publish scene of death photographs if the body is still in situ or if it is indicative of method
 - Do not use sensationalist headlines and try to avoid using the word 'suicide' in the headline unless this is required by the context and framing of the story
 - Avoid language that:
 - presents suicide as an inevitable outcome to a problem
 - romanticises or trivialises suicide or the effect of suicide
 - simplifies the reasons for a suicide or the circumstances that may have led to suicide.
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