

## COVERING SUICIDE

### RECONSIDERING THE TABOO

**Some news organizations still have policies against covering suicide – policies that are often broken when newsworthy suicides occur. This traditional taboo is now out of step with recommended practice.**

Suicide is the ninth leading cause of death for Canadians of all ages and the second biggest killer of adolescents between the ages of 15 and 19. The suicide rate among teens, however, is static. There is a strong, but not universal, connection between suicide and mental illness.

Studies have suggested that adolescents in particular may be susceptible to ‘suicide contagion’. Yet suicide prevention experts now advocate open discussion and do not oppose sensitive reporting of newsworthy deaths by suicide. This is especially important in the age of social media, when false information and rumour may be rampant.

How we report newsworthy suicides matters. Here is a brief guide to what reporters and editors need to know to cover suicide deaths responsibly:

## SUICIDE DOS AND DON'TS

- Do** consider whether this particular death is newsworthy.
- Do** look for links to broader social issues.
- Do** respect the privacy and grief of family or other ‘survivors’.
- Do** include reference to their suffering.
- Do** tell others considering suicide how they can get help.
- Don’t** shy away from writing about suicide. The more taboo, the more the myth.
- Don’t** romanticize the act.
- Don’t** jump to conclusions. The reasons why people kill themselves are usually complex.
- Don’t** suggest nothing can be done because we usually never know why people kill themselves.
- Don’t** go into details about the method used.

## LANGUAGE BEST PRACTICE

**Do** use plain words. Say the person ‘died by suicide’, ‘killed herself’, or ‘took his own life.’

**Don’t** say the person ‘committed suicide’. It’s an outdated phrase implying illegality or moral failing.

**Don’t** call suicide ‘successful’ or attempted suicide ‘unsuccessful.’ Death is not a matter of success.

**Don’t** use or repeat pejorative phrases such as ‘the coward’s way out’ which reinforce myths and stigma.

*Media attention to the issue of bullying – linking it to suicide – is one example of how suicide has been oversimplified.*

Tim Wall  
Executive Director  
Canadian Association for Suicide  
Prevention

## BACKGROUND FACTS

Although much attention is focused on suicide by the young, killing oneself intentionally is more common among men who are elderly or middle-aged. Canadian men are three times more likely to die by suicide than Canadian women. This has been a long-term trend. Married people are the least likely to die by suicide compared with those who are single, divorced or widowed.

About 90% of people who die by suicide in Canada have some mental or addictive disorder. The most common of these is depression (around 60% of cases).

Tim Wall, executive director of the Canadian Association for Suicide Prevention, says: “Suicide is a very complex issue and there are many things that will contribute to someone getting to the point in their life where their sense of hope is completely overwhelmed by feelings of despair and pain and hopelessness.” Stigma is thought to be among the contributory causes.

The overall suicide rate in Canada peaked in 1983 at 15.1 per 100,000 deaths. By 2009, the rate had declined by 29% to 10.7.

Suicide today represents an increasing proportion of deaths among adolescents, but only because the other most significant cause of death – accidents – has been steadily declining, while adolescent suicide rates have been essentially flat.

The most common means of suicide is by hanging (44%) but this declines with age. Poisoning, including overdoses, is the second most common at 25%. Suicide by gunshot (16%) increases with age.