

SAFE AND EFFECTIVE MESSAGING ON RAIL INCIDENTS

Useful Tips for Effective Reporting on Rail Suicide

WHY THIS IS IMPORTANT

Irresponsible reporting and messaging following a suicide death may result in ‘copycat’ suicide attempts, also referred to as *suicide contagion*. This phenomenon, known as the Werther Effect, is known to contribute to elevated suicide rates (see [WHO/MSD/MER/17.5](#) from the World Health Organization). This effect has been demonstrated for many methods of suicide, including those that occur on the railway system. Details that are associated with increased risk of contagion may seem critical to the story and are thus included (e.g., the exact location of the incident). However, there are ways to inform the public while still ensuring that the information being communicated is done in a way that reduces the likelihood of imitation by other vulnerable individuals.

The media can also be a tremendous resource for those at risk by encouraging vulnerable individuals to seek help, changing public perceptions, and correcting myths about mental health and suicide. Media can inspire hope and provide resources to those at risk for suicide. By being informed on best practices, the media can play a positive role in suicide prevention.

CONCEPTS THAT INCREASE CONTAGION

PERCEIVING SUICIDE AS COMMON

Including **“suicide” in the headline** of an article or using **language that exaggerates rates of suicide** (e.g. “epidemic”, “skyrocketing”) has the potential to mislead the public into thinking suicide is more common than it actually is, and therefore is a common response to life’s struggles. Headlines are especially important as they allow information to quickly spread online and through social media to influence public perceptions.

IDENTIFYING WITH SOMEONE WHO HAS DIED BY SUICIDE

Elements of an article that **glorify the deceased** or **provide personal details** may prompt a vulnerable reader to identify with the deceased in a way that may make a similar path to suicide more approachable. Similarly, **attributing a suicide death to a single cause** (e.g., loss of job) oversimplifies the complexities of suicide in a way that might mislead the public or make existing thoughts of suicide more salient following similar life events.

VISUALIZING A PARTICULAR METHOD

Providing **details about the location** of a suicide or the **actions of the deceased** (e.g., jumped in front of a train) may prompt individuals already considering suicide to more clearly imagine the event happening, possibly leading them to identify with the specific method reported.

PROMOTING MYTHS THAT RAIL DEATH IS QUICK AND/OR CERTAIN

Emphasis on lethality or the **convenience/accessibility of the rail system** may be read as a confirmation that the rail system is a viable means for suicide. This idea can be reinforced with the use of **terminology relating to instant or certain death** when someone is struck by a train.

OFFER RESOURCES AND INSPIRE HOPE

MESSAGING OF HOPE

Consider crafting content that inspires hope and highlight individuals overcoming suicidal thoughts. These articles can help provide a counterpoint to more common reports of individuals dying by suicide. These types of stories have been shown to reduce suicide rates (referred to as the Papageno Effect, also discussed in [WHO/MSD/MER/17.5](#)).

WHEN REPORTING ABOUT A RAILWAY SUICIDE

There is always a choice about whether to discuss an incident as a suicide or simply as a fatality on the railway. IF a decision is made to report on the incident as a suicide, consider offering helpful information or resources for vulnerable individuals who may read this story. Consider including information about warning signs for those at risk (e.g., see [www.afsp.org](#)) as well as resources where vulnerable individuals may seek help (see below).

Also consider the impact of the story on train crews. Train operators are powerless to quickly stop a train if a person is on the tracks. Language that implies fault, such as “train kills person”, may add stress to an already challenging time in that train crew’s life.

NATIONAL RESOURCES

National Suicide
Prevention Lifeline
Free 24/7 Helpline

1-800-273-TALK (8255)

Crisis Text Line
Free 24/7 Support

Text HOME to 741741

LOCAL RESOURCES

Samaritans
(Example)
Free 24/7 Helpline
Call or Text
877-870-HOPE
(4673)

(Include local resource)
24/7 Assistance

Dial *(local org’s phone #)*
(or website address)

SPECIFIC REPORTING LANGUAGE: DOS AND DON'TS

INSTEAD OF...

- ✗ Local Man Commits Suicide at Broadway Station
- ✗ Suicide on Springfield Line of General Railroad

- ✗ The death occurred after the man jumped from the south end of the platform as the train entered Broadway station
- ✗ She faced the train with her head looking up and her arms outstretched as the train struck and killed her

- ✗ Train kills person

- ✗ Images of memorials or grieving friends
- ✗ Images of trains or train platforms

HEADLINES

DETAILS

FAULT

IMAGES

CONSIDER...

- ✓ Local Man Died on Tuesday Afternoon
- ✓ Woman Trespassing on General Railroad Tracks Struck and Killed

- ✓ The man was struck and killed near Broadway Station.
- ✓ After trespassing onto the railroad tracks the woman was struck and killed by the train.
- ✓ It appears that the actions of the individual were intentional.

- ✓ Person struck by train

- ✓ School photo or work photo
- ✓ No photo or stock photos (e.g., caution tape)