

July 23rd, 2013

Safe Messaging for Suicide Prevention

Why does messaging matter in Suicide Prevention?

Messages about mental health and suicide prevention can both help and harm someone who is at risk for suicide. Dozens of studies have shown that certain kinds of messages can actually increase the likelihood of suicide in vulnerable individuals (sometimes called “contagion”). Although the focus has often been on safety of messages in the news media, experts recommend that suicide prevention programs themselves also follow similar guidelines in all campaigns and materials.

Guidelines for safe messaging

Several resources exist to guide messaging around suicide, including the Recommendations for Reporting on Suicide (<http://reportingonsuicide.org/>) and the guidelines for Safe and Effective Messaging for Suicide Prevention (<http://www.sprc.org/sites/sprc.org/files/library/SafeMessagingrevised.pdf>). This guidance points to a shared list of “Do’s and ‘Don’ts,” drawing from the existing studies around messaging and suicide contagion:

DO:

- ✓ Emphasize help-seeking and provide information on finding help, including the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline: 1-800-273-TALK (8255).
- ✓ Emphasize that suicide is preventable.
- ✓ List the warning signs for suicide, as well as risk and protective factors.
- ✓ Highlight the effectiveness of mental health treatment.

DON'T:

- ✗ Glorify or romanticize suicide or people who have died by suicide.
- ✗ Normalize suicide by presenting it as a common event.
- ✗ Present suicide as an inexplicable act or explain it as a result of stress only.
- ✗ Focus on personal details of people who have died by suicide.
- ✗ Present overly detailed descriptions of suicide victims or methods of suicide.

As mentioned above, these safety considerations apply to prevention programs, as well as to the media. For example, the use of statistics in messages about suicide (e.g. “Every 15 minutes, someone dies by suicide” or “Suicide is the second leading cause of death among college students”) is a common tactic in campus communication efforts for suicide prevention. Although these kinds of data points might be important in communicating with decision makers or deans, they should be used with caution. Research indicates that ‘normalizing’ suicide in broadly publicized campaigns may convey to vulnerable individuals that suicide is common among their peers, and thus an acceptable option for them.

How else can suicide prevention messaging be more effective?

The National Action Alliance for Suicide Prevention (<http://actionallianceforsuicideprevention.org/>) convened an expert panel in January 2013 to discuss the current state of communications efforts and to make recommendations for shaping the public dialogue around suicide prevention. They concluded that suicide prevention messaging:

- Generally has a heavy focus on severity, not prevention, despite national data indicating that the majority of Americans already agree that suicide is a problem and prevention is important.
- Often doesn't follow general communication best practices, especially in terms of what we know is most likely to lead to behavior change.
- Is often vague and does not have a clear call to action.
- Includes too few stories of hope, recovery, and resilience.

Where can I find more resources around communication for suicide prevention?

- Visit the Strategic Communication Planning on SPRC's website: <http://www.sprc.org/grantees/strategic-communication-planning>
- Browse the SPRC online library: http://www.sprc.org/library_resources/listing
- Access your State Page at <http://www.sprc.org/states> for more about suicide prevention initiatives and leadership in your state.

Tip of the Week authored by Ellyson Stout, Prevention Support Program Manager- Suicide Prevention Resource Center and SCOPE Advisory Board member

This publication is a member-only publication and may not be disseminated to non-members or posted publicly without authorization from SCOPE.

©SCOPE 2013. All rights reserved.