

How to Talk About Suicide

Practical suggestions for professionals

Talking about suicide has often been avoided or only done in hushed whispers. It is this taboo that promotes the misunderstanding about suicide and prevents people from seeking help. The purpose of this fact sheet is to increase awareness among professionals about how to talk about suicide. Be aware that certain characteristics of discussion about suicide, rather than the discussion itself, should be avoided.

AVOID doing the following:

Calling the suicide “successful”

Instead of calling a suicide successful, use the words “died by suicide,” “completed suicide,” or “self-inflicted...”

Presenting simplistic explanations for suicide

Suicide is never the result of a single factor or event, but rather results from a complex interaction of many factors. Suicide usually involves a history of mental illness. Carefully explain that the final, precipitating event was not the only cause of a suicide.

Providing sensational coverage of suicide

Limit the morbid details in public discussions of suicide. Avoid the use of dramatic photographs related to the suicide. Instead, use objective, factual, and neutral statements that do not add to the emotional atmosphere.

Reporting “how-to” descriptions of suicide

Do not describe the suicide in such detail that others know exactly the tool, location, and mechanics of suicide. Again, limit the morbid details.

Presenting suicide as a tool for accomplishing certain ends

Suicide is a rare act of a troubled or depressed person. Presenting suicide as a means of coping with personal problems may suggest suicide as a coping mechanism to at-risk persons.

Glorifying suicide or persons who commit suicide

News coverage is less likely to contribute to suicide contagion when reports of community expressions of grief are minimized.

Empathy for family and friends often leads to a focus on reporting the positive aspects of a suicide completer’s life. However, if the suicide completer’s problems are not acknowledged, suicidal behavior may appear attractive to other at-risk persons—especially those who rarely receive positive reinforcement for desirable behaviors.

And remember, always:

Include factual information on the risk factors for suicide, warning signs, ways to prevent suicide, and community prevention resources.



Example of a Suicide News Story IMPROPERLY Presented...

Hundreds turned out at St. Joseph Church Monday for the funeral of Ralph Jones, 15, who shot himself in the head late Friday with his father's hunting rifle. Town Moderator Richard Lewis, along with State Senator Timothy Wells and Selectman's Chairman Marvin Brown, were among the many well-known people who offered their condolences to the sobbing Mary and Gavin Jones, the parents of the Jonestown High School sophomore.

Although no one could say for sure why Jones killed himself, classmates who didn't want to be quoted said Jones' girlfriend, Cynthia Luellen, also a sophomore at the high school, and Jones had been having difficulty. Jones, who had a large collection of comic books that his classmates admired, recently threw away most of the comics, which he'd collected over the last five or six years. Friends said he took them to the Jonestown dump and watched with tears in his eyes while the comics burned.

School closed at noon Monday and buses were on hand to transport those who wished to attend Jones' funeral. School officials said almost all of the student body of 1,200 attended. Flags in town were flown at half staff in his honor.

Police Chief Oscar Buster said Jones fired his father's rifle twice. "He must have missed the first time," Chief Buster speculated. "We're still looking for the missing bullet. And of course we found the second one."

Jones was born in Gunderson, Vermont, and moved to this town 10 years ago with his parents and sister, Rachel, who was uncontrollable at her brother's funeral. In addition to his comic book collection, Jones was known by his friends for his large

snake collection. He also was a good swimmer. He had been a Cub Scout some years ago, but when he failed to pass his final badge, he quit.

Members of the School Committee and the Board of Selectmen are working to erect a special flag pole in the turnaround in front of the high school in Jones' honor.

A BETTER Way...

Ralph Jones, 15, of Maplewood Drive, died Friday from a self-inflicted gunshot wound. The son of Mary and Gavin Jones, Ralph Jones was a sophomore at Jonestown High School.

He had lived in Jonestown since he moved here 10 years ago from Gunderson, Vermont, where he was born. His funeral at St. Joseph Church was held Sunday. School counselors are available to any students who wish to talk about Jones' death.

In addition to his parents, Jones is survived by his sister, Rachel.