

**Confidential Briefing:**

**Communication covering mental health and suicide during the COVID-19 pandemic**

**A growing number of stories are appearing in the media about the impact on mental health and suicide, relating to COVID-19. While there are some important issues that need to be raised at this time, there is a risk that some messaging could be translated by journalists, resulting in unhelpful and sensational media coverage. This may increase vulnerable people’s concerns and the likelihood of imitational suicidal behaviour.**

**If working with the media either proactively or reactively during the COVID-19 pandemic, we are asking that care is taken in the way suicide and mental health is talked about.**

While many people may be distressed and facing a mental health crisis, the message should focus on supporting people through this very difficult time and reminding them that help and support is still available.

International research has consistently drawn links between certain types of media coverage of suicide and increases in suicide rates. This risk significantly increases if details of suicide methods are reported, if the story is placed prominently and if the coverage is extensive or sensationalised - for example by over-simplifying suicidal behaviour through speculation of causes and the implication that this is an inevitability.

Linking the current uncertain situation with a possible increase in suicide rates is unhelpful and we would ask you to avoid it. It could add to people’s distress and introduce a greater sense of hopelessness. It could also over-simplify the reasons why someone may be feeling suicidal, which may result in vulnerable people over-identifying with others who are struggling and in distress. It could also increase the distress of those already concerned for others.

The impact of the pandemic and associated consequences are clearly a matter of public interest and the media has an important role to play in supporting the nations physical and mental health during this challenging time. However, there is currently no evidence of a rise in suicide rates and due to the risks associated with media coverage of suicide, it is important that we discourage media from leading on the narrative that this is an inevitable outcome.

Research also shows that positive stories of recovery can encourage vulnerable people to seek help and are associated with fewer suicides.

We would therefore ask that if you do have any contact with the media at this time and are asked about suicide, please:

* Focus on the potential mental health risks of COVID-19, recognise that it is important to support people’s mental health at this time and ensure support is available to those who are distressed.
* Use the opportunity to encourage people to connect with each other, take part in activities that help them to manage their mental health and give people hope.
* Please do not directly reference suicide and avoid any predictions about the potential impact on suicide rates – journalists may inflate this, resulting in stories over-simplifying the issue.
* Avoid sensationalising suicide by inadvertently promoting the idea that suicidal behaviour is becoming a common response to the difficulties facing the UK population during the COVID-19 pandemic.
* Avoid speculation of causes or simplistic explanations. Remind journalists that suicide is extremely complex and seldom the result of a single factor - a combination of psychological, social and physical factors contribute to a person’s risk of suicide.

Please be mindful of this on social media as well. There will be lots of people who are worried about it and keen to talk about it, but not always aware of the risks or with the knowledge of how to do this safely.

When speaking with any media, please remind them of Samaritans’ [*Media Guidelines for Reporting Suicide*](https://www.samaritans.org/about-samaritans/media-guidelines/best-practice-suicide-reporting-tips/) and encourage them to include sources of support.

For further advice on working with the media, please contact Samaritans’ Media Advisory team on 07850 312224/07483 028725 or email: [**mediaadvice@samaritans.org**](mailto:mediaadvice@samaritans.org)