

Media and Suicide

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Now-a-days, people are increasingly using new media technology (e.g., smartphones, tablets, laptops, and desktops for Internet access), with increasing frequency to text message, E-mail, blog, as well as access social networking websites (like Facebook, Twitter, WhatsApp, Instagram etc.) for business, entertainment, and to stay in touch with family and friends and simultaneously acquiring information about national and world events from other traditional sources of mass media (like television, newspaper, magazines, books, movies, radio etc.). Mass media have a strong effect on our expectations for family, parents, and children, creating standards for our way of life, affection, worship, and society. It also serve as socializing agents that aids in construction and perpetuation of perceptions and learned behaviors.¹ In simple words, we view reality in terms of our own experience that is influenced by primary groups (Family and Friends); secondary groups (School, religious institutions, and government), and mass media. While the influence of the primary group is waning and the secondary groups are time limited, the influence of mass media is increasing as it is a pervasive and permanent fixture of our lives. In addition, time spent with media decreases the amount of time available for pursuing other more healthy activities such as sports, physical activity, community service, cultural pursuits, and family time. Children who watch more television than their peers experience significant impairments in comprehending stories, a crucial skill in achieving

academic success.⁷

Two mass communication theories, cultivation theory, and social learning theory work in tandem to influence the construction and perpetuation of mental illness stigma. Cultivation theory proposes that those who spend more time "living" in the virtual world of television may perceive the "real world" as per the imagery, principles, and portrayals depicted on the small screen. People who spend a lot of time watching television are likely to assume a television worldview of mental illness.²

There is evidence to suggests that particular mode of reporting and portrayal of suicide in the mass media may result in increased rates of suicide in vulnerable people.⁴ By modifying their reporting and portrayal of suicide, the media can contribute to suicide prevention as was proved by the Vienna experiment where changes in media reporting resulted in a > 80% reduction in the number of subway-suicides and suicide-attempts.⁵ The protective media effects are termed the *Papageno effect*, as opposed to the harmful *Werther effect*.⁶ The consensus at present is that prominent display of media reports about suicide result in a significant increase in suicide attempts, especially among adolescents and young adults, within the media outlet's coverage area. Based on research experience, a number of guidelines on media reporting have been formulated.³ While reporting suicide, media have to avoid generalizations based on little evidence and shun catchy, sensational but inaccurate expressions such as

“epidemic of farmer suicide” or “suicide capital of the world”; etc. Before releasing the news, the journalist/editor should consider its effect on families and other survivors regarding both stigma and psychological suffering. Sensational reporting in explicit detail of suicides or self-harm especially when a celebrity is involved is probably the norm and may be legitimate news. However, it should actually be avoided or minimized to the extent possible. Detailed descriptions of the method used and how it was procured should be completely avoided.

In print media, the news should not appear on the front page with a banner or large font headline and should not mention suicide. The method should not be mentioned in the headline like “jumped from a building”. Mentioning the full name or other personal information of the deceased or attempter or printing his photo or location may pass a wrong signal to the vulnerable people that committing suicide can make them famous. Do not illustrate the suicide method or venue of suicide in graphic presentation. The reporting should pay special attention to this. The reason for suicide must not be oversimplified. Suicide never occurs due to a single factor or event, but is the result of a complex interaction of a number of factors and often there is a background of psychosocial problems. It should be emphasized that the overt cause was the precipitating event and not the only cause of the suicide. While publicizing the background factors that may have played a causative role is neither necessary nor desirable, they should be acknowledged. Any history of psychiatric disorders including drug abuse should be mentioned.

In the visual media, avoid presenting suicide cases as the headline TV news unless the reporting involves public interest; avoid repetitive, ongoing and excessive reporting of the events. The breathless excitement of the reporter should be tempered by the tragic event that he is reporting. Mourning the dead is appropriate. Glorification of the suicide victims as martyrs may encourage vulnerable persons to imitate the behavior to win public adulation. Highlighting the adverse consequences of deliberate self-harm (brain damage, paralysis, etc.) may deter future attempts.

Celebrity suicide

Undoubtedly, celebrity suicide has great news value; however, it can also influence the vulnerable and suicidal people. The reporting should be cautious, factual and mourning and not glorify, sensationalize or romanticize. While oversimplification of the causes of suicide should be avoided, a history of psychiatric disorder including alcohol or drug abuse should be clearly stated. Repetitive reporting of a celebrity suicide should be avoided since susceptible people may develop enhanced suicidal ideation on being inundated and overwhelmed with details about a specific suicide.^{8,9}

Interviewing surviving relatives and friends

In the immediate aftermath of suicide, the grieving relatives and friends may have fluctuating emotions, anger, and even suicidal thoughts. Out of humanitarian considerations, the media should avoid disturbing them for a sound bite. The relatives and friends are unlikely to reveal any earth-shattering news but may say things which they would regret later. Great restraint and sensitivity is called for if the relatives have to be interviewed. Publishing photographs of the deceased or the surviving relatives should be avoided as it may greatly hurt them.²

Conclusion: Mass media, due to its tremendous reach and constant exposure have the unique ability to alter perception and sway popular opinion of large number of people. In fact, the media shape our ideas and understanding of various issues and events. Persistent repetition along with reporting intricate details about various aspects of suicidal behaviour may help in some cases but can also increase rates of suicide in vulnerable people and does harm society. So, it is necessary to build up an awareness of these adverse consequences and sensitive reporting of issues relating suicide. This may help to reducing suicide rates.

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