

Samaritans

Response sent as email

Recommendations to improve clarity and strengthen the BBC editorial guidelines to ensure appropriate editorial standards:

Samaritans is pleased to share recommendations to this consultation on the BBC draft editorial guidelines. This is a welcome opportunity to consider how effectively the guidelines support journalists and programme makers with covering suicide and self-harm safely and to a high editorial standard.

Our recommendations are based on the most up-to-date international research evidence into the effects of media depictions of suicide and Samaritans' monitoring data on suicide reporting in the UK.

Suicide and self-harm are major public health concerns and therefore topics which are very much in the public interest. Sensitive coverage can help inform and educate the public about these. Research examining the positive impact of media coverage of suicide continues to grow, with stronger evidence of a protective effect by increasing help-seeking behaviour and reducing feelings of low mood and suicide ideation. This body of research, known as the Papageno effect, has linked stories showing hopeful recovery with falls in suicide rates, demonstrating the media's opportunity to play a significant role in preventing suicide deaths. Stories of hopeful recovery are very powerful testimonies to the fact that suicide is preventable.

Suicide is an extremely sensitive topic which presents a distinct set of risks and challenges for journalists and programme makers. It is important to balance content, to inform the public, while taking account of the potential for media coverage to influence the behaviour of vulnerable people, including the possibility of imitational suicides.

A well-established body of international research, known as the Werther effect, has consistently shown that media reports of suicide are associated with increases in suicide rates. In particular coverage that includes details of suicide methods, sensationalises or normalises suicidal behaviour, or is prominent, can lead to imitational suicide deaths.

A systematic review of studies, published in 2020, shows that press reports covering celebrity deaths by suicide are associated with an average 13% rise in suicides in the following 1-2 months. The study also showed that when the media reported the specific suicide methods used by celebrities, the number of deaths in the population using the same method increased by an average of 30% in this period.

A study carried out following news reporting of actor Robin Williams' death in 2014 showed a 10% increase in suicides in the US in the months after he died. A large proportion of these deaths were by a similar demographic of men and by the same

suicide method. This equated to 1,841 more suicide deaths in the country compared to the same period the previous year. The study identified three high-risk elements in the press reports: details of the suicide method, a lack of suicide prevention messaging and romanticised headlines and comments were published.

Samaritans' Media Advisory team works closely with journalists and programme makers to support responsible and informed coverage of suicide. Many BBC journalists, programme makers and drama producers consult Samaritans when approaching these sensitive topics. We know from international research that when media guidelines are followed this has a positive effect on standards of reporting and studies have linked adherence to media guidelines with falls in suicide rates.

Samaritans' submission to this consultation is based on the most significant areas of risk evidenced in the research into media coverage of suicide and data analysis of suicide reporting in the UK during the last decade.

It is good to see the editorial guidelines advise careful consideration must be given to all portrayals of suicide and self-harm, with the risk of imitation highlighted, and that these must be referred to Editorial Policy.

In our view, based on the international research evidence into the impact of media depictions of suicide, the guidelines would be appropriately strengthened if the risk associated with covering novel and lethal suicide methods, including some related terms, were to be added.

Similarly it would be helpful to give clearer guidance around the importance of scrutiny in assessing risk in relation to editorial justification. The risk of imitation associated with graphic suicide depictions is not reduced if these are shown within the context of graphic drama content.

The guidance would also provide better protection to vulnerable viewers by the addition of suicide and suicide attempt to the point 5.4.60 *Care is required when portraying self-harm or conditions such as eating disorders in ways that are potentially imitable, in factual or fictional content. Vulnerable people, especially the young, may imitate or emulate behaviour and techniques depicted. Care should be taken to ensure that content is responsible and appropriate for the likely audience.* The research evidence shows that this applies to depictions of suicide and suicide attempts also.

It is good to see journalists and programme makers advised that Samaritans is able to offer support with suicide portrayals. We also provide support with portrayals of self-harm.

We would ask that the BBC considers including the advisory service email address: mediaadvice@samaritans.org and a link to the [Media Guidelines for Reporting Suicide](#)

We also have specific guides on covering these topics in drama [Guidance on depictions of suicide and self-harm in drama and film](#) and documentaries [Guidance for covering suicide and self-harm in documentaries](#)