Collective Messaging—Changing the National Narrative about Suicide

Ms. Maureen Iselin
Senior Communications Specialist
National Action Alliance for Suicide Prevention
miselin@edc.org

Ms. Aimee Johnson, LCSW
Program Analyst, Partnerships
VHA Office of Mental Health and Suicide Prevention
Aimee.Johnson@va.gov

Ms. Katherine Warrick
Director, Outreach and Engagement
Department of Defense Suicide Prevention Office
Katherine.warrick2.civ@mail.mil
Action Alliance Changing the Conversation Member
Disclaimer

The National Action Alliance for Suicide Prevention (Action Alliance) at Education Development Center is supported by a grant from the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA), Center for Mental Health Services, under Grant No. 5U79SM062297.

The views, opinions, and content expressed are the views of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the official position of SAMHSA or HHS.
Presentation Goals:

- Understand the Action Alliance’s Changing the Conversation efforts
- Learn best practices about how to successfully message to the public about suicide
- Identify collective messaging resources
Presentation Overview:

- About the Action Alliance
- Changing the Conversation About Suicide
- Public Messaging Tools and Resources
- VA and DoD Messaging Efforts
- Key Takeaways and Next Steps
WHO WE ARE
The Nation’s Public-Private Partnership

Bringing together influential public and private sector leaders (representing automobile, construction, defense, education, entertainment, faith, forestry, health, insurance, justice, law enforcement, mental health, military, news media, sports, railroad, technology, and veteran services) to advance the National Strategy for Suicide Prevention.
Our Road Map
Action Alliance’s Priorities

- Transforming Health Systems
- Transforming Communities
- Changing the Conversation
CHANGING THE CONVERSATION
Changing the Conversation

*National Strategy Goal 4:* Promote responsible media reporting of suicide, accurate portrayals of suicide and mental illnesses in the entertainment industry, and the safety of online content related to suicide.

We leverage news reporters, entertainment industry representatives, and suicide prevention messengers to change the national narratives around suicide and suicide prevention to ones that promote:

- Hope
- Connectedness
- Social support
- Resilience
- Treatment
- Recovery
Why Is Messaging Important?

It Can:
• Promote positive behaviors
• Support prevention goals

OR

It Can:
• Increase risk
• Undermine prevention
Messaging Influencers

**News Media**
- Responsible reporting
- Safety of online content

**Entertainment Industry**
- Accurate and responsible portrayals

**Public Messengers**
- Research-informed campaigns
- Organizational messaging
- Prevention- and action-focused
News Media

www.reportingonsuicide.org
News Media

INSTEAD OF THIS:

- Big or sensationalistic headlines, or prominent placement (e.g., “Kurt Cobain Used Shotgun to Commit Suicide”).
- Including photos/videos of the location or method of death, grieving family, friends, memorials or funerals.
- Describing recent suicides as an “epidemic,” “skyrocketing,” or other strong terms.
- Describing a suicide as inexplicable or “without warning.”
- “John Doe left a suicide note saying…”.
- Investigating and reporting on suicide similar to reporting on crimes.
- Quoting/interviewing police or first responders about the causes of suicide.
- Referring to suicide as “successful,” “unsuccessful” or a “failed attempt.”

DO THIS:

- Inform the audience without sensationalizing the suicide and minimize prominence (e.g., “Kurt Cobain Dead at 27”).
- Use school/work or family photo; include hotline logo or local crisis phone numbers.
- Carefully investigate the most recent CDC data and use non-sensational words like “rise” or “higher.”
- Most, but not all, people who die by suicide exhibit warning signs. Include the “Warning Signs” and “What to Do” sidebar (from p. 2) in your article if possible.
- “A note from the deceased was found and is being reviewed by the medical examiner.”
- Report on suicide as a public health issue.
- Seek advice from suicide prevention experts.
- Describe as “died by suicide” or “completed” or “killed him/herself.”
Entertainment Industry

www.suicideinscripts.org
Entertainment Industry

Convey that suicide is complex and often caused by a range of factors, rather than by a single event.

Portray characters with suicidal thoughts who do not go on to die by suicide.

Avoid showing or describing the details about suicide methods.

Consult with suicide prevention messaging experts and people with personal experience.

Show that help is available.

Portray everyday characters who can be a lifeline.

Depict the grieving and healing process of people who lose someone to suicide.

Use nonjudgmental language.

Connect viewers to resources.
PUBLIC MESSAGING
What Is Public Messaging?

Public Messaging IS:

- Campaigns
- Social media
- Newsletters
- Event publicity
- Websites
- Public talks/speeches

Public Messaging IS NOT:

- Private conversations
- Sharing in support groups
- Clinical interactions
Common Messaging Problems

Violates safety guidelines or undermines prevention.

Yet . . . majority already agree suicide is a problem.

In the U.S.
4 people die by suicide every hour.

Emphasis is on the problem—not on how to solve it.

Stop Bullycide!

Stop Veteran Suicide Now
After war, our heroes face a lifetime of struggle. Like and share this status to raise awareness about the epidemic of Veteran suicide.

Like • Comment • January 16 at 02:41pm

Suicide is preventable
Collective message:  
“It’s hopeless and there’s nothing anyone can do.”

Public messages can add to the negative narrative.

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE
LANDMARK MENTAL HEALTH REPORT DOCUMENTS DEVASTATING EFFECTS, SIGNIFICANT STIGMA AGAINST SUFFERERS

Full-Day Event
Suicide Prevention: Why Can’t We Find Answers?
Unlikely To Be Effective

• Not thoughtfully planned
• Undefined goals & audiences

“Calls to action” are vague or absent.

Messaging is not tied to other programs or services.

“It’s time to shift from messaging for awareness to messaging for action.”
Research and Best Practices

➢ “Don’ts” for media also apply to public messaging

➢ Principles of effective health communications

➢ Various guidelines exist (channels, populations, goals, etc.)
National Action Alliance for Suicide Prevention: Framework for Successful Messaging

Four considerations when developing messages:

1. Strategy
2. Safety
3. Positive narrative
4. Guidelines

www.SuicidePreventionMessaging.org
Framework for Successful Messaging

**Strategy**
Plan and focus messages

**Positive Narrative**
Help the audience to envision prevention and action

**Safety**
Avoid unsafe and unhelpful messaging

**Guidelines**
Use message-specific best practices
Start with Strategy
(Strategy shapes all other decisions)

Should we use communications?

We need posters!

Decide “why” before “how.”
Principles of Effective Communications

▸ Focus messages: Who are you messaging to and why?
  • Think “GAB” = Goals, Audience, Behavior
  • “Call to action”

▸ Tie messaging to other programs or services

▸ Audience research & message testing

▸ Appropriate channels & sufficient exposure
## Systematic Planning Is Key

### Planning Steps

1. **Set the CONTEXT**
2. **WHY Message?**
3. **WHO to influence?**
4. **To DO what?**
5. **WHAT to say?**
6. **HOW to reach them?**
7. **SO WHAT?**

---

**“How” decision is here**
Convey a Positive Narrative

- Balance the negative narrative.
- In every message: Help your audience to *envision* prevention, action, hope, or healing.
Many Ways to Promote the Positive!

Ask: What fits with my strategy?

- Concrete actions your audience can take
- Stories of coping, resilience, & recovery
- Program successes
- Available resources
- What we know about successful prevention
- How people are making a difference
DON’T:

- Show or describe methods or locations
- Normalize by portraying suicide as common or acceptable
- Use data or language implying suicide is inevitable or unsolvable
- Oversimplify causes
Tips on Messaging Safely

Use data thoughtfully:
• Ask: What does it add? Does it fit with my strategy (GAB)?
• Check: is the overall emphasis on prevention?
• If appropriate, use positive statistics:
  • The VA saves about 70 lives each day via its crisis hotline.

Convey the complex causality of suicide.

Avoid problematic language and images
• “Die by suicide” rather than “Commit”
• No “headclutcher” photos
Use Applicable Guidelines

- **Messengers**: Best Practices for Survivor/Attempt Stories
- **Channels**: AAS Video Guidelines, Working with the Media, Social Media Guidelines for MH & Suicide Prevention
- **Goals**: Stigma Reduction
- **Populations**: Talking about Suicide & LGBT Populations

And more!
Learn More about Messaging

Example: Review the Framework website
SuicidePreventionMessaging.com
Learn More about Messaging

- **Introduction to Strategic Communication Planning**
  SPRC Director of Grantee and State Initiatives Keri Nickerson discusses the importance of strategic communication planning and walks through the key components of successful communication materials. Use the accompanying worksheet to develop your communication plan.

- **Understanding and Reaching Your Audience: We R Native**
  Stephanie Craig Rushing, project director at the Northwest Portland Area Indian Health Board, discusses how We R Native engages its target audience to develop messaging that resonates with tribal youth. Use the accompanying worksheet to identify the best messaging and channels to reach your audience.

- **Understanding and Reaching Your Audience: South Carolina**
  Suicide Prevention Trainer/Coordinator Robert Cottingham describes how the South Carolina Youth Suicide Prevention Initiative (SCYSP) is working with youth to plan and implement their social media efforts. Use the accompanying worksheet to identify the best messaging and channels to reach your audience.

- **Evaluating Your Communication Efforts**
  Rajeev Rangan, senior behavioral scientist at RAND Corporation, presents key evaluation concepts and questions to consider when creating an evaluation plan for communication efforts. Use the accompanying worksheet to help evaluate your communication efforts.

- **Example:** Suicide Prevention Resource Center Strategic Communications Training Series
  
  [http://www.sprc.org/resources-programs стратегической коммуникации](http://www.sprc.org/resources-programs/strategic-communication-planning)
VA AND DOD MESSAGING EFFORTS
Promoting Responsible Coverage of Veteran Suicide

SAFE MESSAGING BEST PRACTICES
A guide for anyone communicating and writing about Veteran suicide

Suicide is a serious national public health problem that affects communities everywhere. At the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA), preventing suicide among all Veterans is a top priority — including among those who do not, and may never, seek care within our system. We are working to reach Veterans where they live, work, and thrive.

Suicide is preventable, and we all have a role to play.

Just as suicide has no single cause, no one strategy can end Veteran suicides, VA is using a bundled public health approach that involves multiple sectors, including media and entertainment industries. Research has shown that the way media covers suicide can influence behavior — either positively, by encouraging help-seeking, or negatively, by increasing contagion or “normalizing” suicide, which occurs when exposure to suicide or suicidal behaviors contributes to another suicide.

The Recommendations for Reporting on Suicide reportingon_suicide.org offers guidance to members of the media covering suicide in a safe and ethical manner.

The following are recommendations for developing messages about Veteran suicide. When best practices are applied, messages can correct misconceptions, convey hope, and encourage help-seeking among those at risk for suicide.

Start Here:

1. Find the most recent VA National Suicide Data Report at www.mentalhealth.va.gov/suicide_prevention/data.asp.

2. Find the most recent CDC national suicide statistics at

Download at https://www.mentalhealth.va.gov/suicide_prevention
Case Study – Media Roundtable

• VA and the Action Alliance recently hosted a “Safe Messaging to Prevent Veteran Suicide Media Roundtable” for reporters, VSOs, and other community partners to discuss the important role the media plays in influencing suicidal behavior.

• The roundtable featured speakers from VA, Education Development Center, Inc, Suicide Awareness Voices of Education, the Tragedy Assistance Program for Survivors, the Military Times, and the Action Alliance for Suicide Prevention.

• Attendees were invited to ask questions about why safe reporting matters and were offered interviews with experts following the event.

You can watch the roundtable on the Action Alliance YouTube page or at: www.youtube.com/watch?v=oKh1R-kAhLE&
Social Media Safety Toolkit

• As discussed in the National Strategy for Preventing Veteran Suicide, social media is an important intervention channel and a key piece of VA’s comprehensive, community-based suicide prevention strategy.

• The Social Media Safety Toolkit for Veterans, Their Families, and Friends equips everyone with the knowledge needed to respond to social media posts that indicate a Veteran may be having thoughts of suicide.

• The toolkit includes best practices, resources, and sample responses.

How the DoD uses messaging to promote suicide prevention

Focus on:
- Improving safe communication and reporting practices about suicide
- Increasing help-seeking behaviors
- Reducing perceived barriers to care.

Incorporate “Recommendations for Reporting on Suicide” into policy and training for Public Affairs Officers

Develop new communication materials:
- Coping
- Self Care
- Safe Homes

Design annual campaign theme in support of Suicide Prevention Month
- Materials and resources
- Outreach Channels
- Outreach Recognition
How the DoD uses messaging to promote suicide prevention

SAFE HOMES SAVE LIVES

Make it Your Mission to

#BeThere
KEY TAKEAWAYS AND NEXT STEPS
Key Takeaways

➤ Think about *all* public-facing messaging.
➤ Align talking points and messaging with suicide prevention goals.
➤ Be strategic and focused (goal, audience).
➤ Help balance the negative narratives.
➤ Promote positive actions and share resources.
➤ Be proactive.
Alone we can do so little.

**TOGETHER** we can do so much.
Selected References & Resources: Public Messaging


