

Parisi 1

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Journalism Ethics Final

### **How can common reporting practices on mental health and suicide be improved?**

Journalists struggle to keep up with the ever changing conversation around mental health

The way society talks about mental health has drastically changed in the past few decades, and even in recent years. However, different news organizations are using different language and reporting practices, leaving the question of what the most ethical practices are.

Mental health is a broad topic that overlaps into news constantly: from rising mental illness and suicide during the pandemic, to conversations around mental health related to mass shootings. There is some guidance in both AP Style and in some organizations' individual ethics codes, but as those in the field will mention, the written rules aren't always enforced or considered important.

“For instance, after the extensive and detailed reporting of the Robin Williams's suicide, there were an estimated 1800 extra US suicide deaths (beyond expected) in the short period afterwards. Tragic,” said Dr. Ayal Schaffer, a researcher of media and suicide at the University of Toronto, in an email interview.

It is also important for journalists to recognize how mental health and suicide are linked.

“Around 90% of people who die by suicide have some mental health condition. We assume that people influenced by media reports of suicide have some underlying mental health vulnerability, which combined with reading of media reports leads to the increased suicidal behaviours,” said Schaffer.

The ethics of reporting on mental health cannot be discussed without also including the connection between news and suicide.

### **CURRENT GUIDELINES**

[The AP Stylebook](#) has a short section titled “mental illness.” It includes guidelines such as not discussing someone's mental illness unless the story requires it, avoiding wording that “connotes pity” and not generally associating mental illness with violence.

There is also a section on suicide that mostly explains when to include the method of suicide in a story, which it advises to not include unless it is publicly announced by law enforcement or the family.

Drusilla Moorhouse is the Copy Chief at BuzzFeed News who helped work on “[Buzzfeed's Style Guidelines for Writing About Mental Health](#).”

“Suicide guidelines are pretty recent and not embraced by newsrooms the way they should be,” Moorhouse said in a live video interview. “They are finally starting to be important, especially with the pandemic.”

It is easy to see what Moorhouse is talking about, as the suicide of figures like Kate Spade were commonly reported with the method [included](#) even in the headline.

She added that BuzzFeed News is more strict about discussing the method used than most organizations including AP, almost never bringing it up unless it is essential to the story. For example, BuzzFeed News’s ethical guidelines specify that they will never use the method in the headline, but the AP Stylebook does not. She said that most mental health stories they publish include lengthy conversations on what to include.

Neither The Washington Post’s nor The New York Times’ ethics codes make any mention of mental health or suicide.

Buzzfeed News is one of the few news organizations with specific and detailed mental health guidelines. The guidelines emphasize ending stigma, using person-first language, and separating emotions from actual disorders.

“I don’t think an editor has ever changed the language in my work. I always try very hard to be inclusive,” said Allie Volpe, a freelance writer who often writes ‘pop psychology’ articles for outlets including Vice and The Washington Post, in a phone interview.

Volpe uses online guidelines from advocacy organizations when she needs help deciding on mental health language, but she follows no set guide and has never been told to use one from any of the news organizations that have published her.

This further emphasizes Moorhouse’s point that sensitive language surrounding mental health is not enforced enough.

Many mental health and suicide prevention advocacy organizations release tip sheets and guidelines for journalists to follow in hope of preventing suicide contagion, the phenomenon where one suicide influences others to follow suit. One is the American Foundation for Suicide Prevention.

“Suicide is a public health issue and we implore newsrooms across the country to play an active role in limiting the risk of contagion by acknowledging and abiding by the various [reporting on suicide prevention resources](#) compiled by leading experts,” said Ali Walker, AFSP National Capital Area Chapter Board Chair, in an email interview.

AFSP focuses its ethics on preventing suicide, even if that means withholding some of the truth like the method of suicide, which has been a detail proven to cause suicide contagion.

Still, even the strictest outlets like BuzzFeed News will mention the method used if they find that public knowledge outweighs the risk of contagion.

## **DECISION MAKING**

Moorhouse doesn't anticipate having to make changes to the BuzzFeed News guidelines anytime soon, but she admits there is a lot of nuance to the rules they have made.

"There is this identity versus person-first language, especially with autism. I don't think anyone with like schizophrenia for example would want to be called a schizophrenic," she said. Moorhouse is explaining a large debate in the language around mental health. Many news organizations are emphasizing person-first language, for example saying 'people with depression' instead of 'depressed people.' This puts the person first, highlighting that they are not defined by their disorder, but it is just a part of them.

This is important to journalists because it is an easy way of respecting the stakeholders in the story and causing less harm by reducing mental health stigma. However, some people with mental disorders, like autistic people, have pushed back, saying that their autism is a big part of their identity, and they would prefer to have it labeled first, according to Moorhouse.

A good practice is always asking the people you talk to what they prefer, according to Moorhouse. But she still enters tough conversations when speaking about mental disorders generally.

One important decision is speed versus accuracy and sensitivity, according to Volpe. "Hard news people just get wrapped up in getting it out there," she said. Volpe has noticed that this leads to a lot of language that is not considerate of the groups being discussed.

Moorhouse admits that she gets pushback on her decisions from people "who aren't aware" of the research on the impacts of reporting on mental health topics. The pushback is sometimes related to the loss of clicks, for example when she and colleagues chose not to report the method of suicide in the [Kate Spade](#) and [Anthony Bourdain](#) stories "within days of each other."

After intense discussion, BuzzFeed News established their policy not to specify the method. But before that, some colleagues were concerned about the realistic financial loss when they choose not to report a detail that it seems every other outlet is.

## **DO JOURNALISTS DO ENOUGH?**

When asked if journalists do enough to be ethical reporters of mental health and suicide, Walker didn't have a clear answer.

This is understandable, because according to both Moorhouse and Volpe, the quality of mental health reporting varies widely from newsroom to newsroom.

“The New York Times does a good job. SELF too. I also find that women's magazines are good at it,” Volpe said. This may be true since women are disproportionately affected by mental health issues, with more than one in five [women](#) facing a mental health condition in the United States.

“Local is lagging behind,” Volpe added. [Local](#) news audiences are dropping with financial effects which may contribute to a lack of resources or time to report on mental health ethically.

When asked the same question, Moorhouse turned the focus. “I think journalists need editors and rely on editors,” she said. She thinks it is the responsibility of editors to make sure their journalists know how to report on mental health ethically.

“Broadcast and radio drives me – you know the word,” Moorhouse said. BuzzFeed News has also decided to stop using words like ‘crazy’ to destigmatize mental illness, something Moorhouse admits she is still working on herself.

“In my experience, health journalists are generally more aware of the nuances and take greater care to avoid blatantly problematic aspects of a story. However crime or entertainment reporters appear less sensitive to these issues,” Schaffer said.

## **HOW TO IMPROVE**

“When covering suicide carefully, we have not only the opportunity to prevent further contagion, but the ability to change public misperceptions, correct myths and encourage those at risk to seek help,” said Walker.

Plenty of resources are available for covering mental health and suicide in a positive way. Like Moorhouse said, improving comes down to editors and journalists enforcing the rules even when a story needs to be published quickly.

“There is something known as the Papageno effect, which has been shown in numerous studies. The Papageno effect is that when media reports focus on stories of resilience in the face of a suicidal crisis, and introduce the reader to the idea that most people who experience intense emotional distress can find ways to cope and get better, that there is a significant reduction in suicide deaths after such reports,” said Schaffer.

Telling the story of overcoming mental health and suicide crises can actually lower suicide rates, but to Schaffer, reporters often focus more on the crisis itself than how it has been overcome.

One example of this is this [New York Times article](#) that discusses Demi Lovato’s addiction and mental health crisis in explicit detail, but, although it mentions her rehab, doesn’t go into nearly the same detail about her recovery. Framing stories like Lovato’s to be more focused on ways to get better can have immense positive impacts.

“It’s still a battle to destigmatize mental health. We need to paint a more realistic light,” Volpe said.

Moorhouse also stressed the importance of destigmatizing mental health as a goal. This will have positive impacts such as people seeking help if they need it and normalizing the conversation about mental health and illness.

Person-first language as a general starting point is especially important to this, according to both Moorhouse and Volpe. “This is something that people experience,” Volpe said about mental illness. “Person-first language says ‘No, you’re a person.’” It is important to her that her writing doesn’t define individuals only by a single fact about them.

“I’m reluctant to share our internal discussions about specific stories,” Moorhouse said. But she did admit that her and her colleagues talk a lot about how to publish stories about mental health, and collaboration has been extremely helpful in both building their guidelines and learning new points and perspectives.

[AFSP](#) emphasizes avoiding words like “committed” or “skyrocketing” when talking about suicide and suicide rates as they have been proven to cause contagion. They also recommend staying up to date on the latest research and statistics for reporters that often cover the subject.

Both BuzzFeed News and AFSP also mention including a mental health or suicide hotline at the end of related stories, so those particularly affected by the story have an easy way to get help.

“Contagion is certainly not inevitable, and in fact journalists and media reports can have a very positive public health impact. It all depends on the focus on the articles,” said Schaffer. Research

ultimately shows that it is not always the content of the story that poses a threat but the way in which it is presented. Journalists can save countless lives by learning to report on mental health and suicide sensitively, while also not sacrificing their obligation to tell the story to the public in the first place.