

# Reporting Responsibly on Campus Suicide (RROCS)

Tammer Bagdasarian, Georgia Rosenberg,  
Savanna Stewart & Emma Talley

Written in collaboration with Stanford's Center for Youth  
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**Stanford**  
MEDICINE

Center for Youth Mental  
Health and Wellbeing

*Department of Psychiatry  
and Behavioral Sciences*

# A Guide to Reporting on Campus Suicide

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## I. Introduction

**Abstract:** Suicide is a leading cause of death among college students. On university campuses, student-led newspapers often function as the organ of the student community, not only reflecting sentiment on campus but also contributing to it. A phenomenon known as media-influenced suicide contagion is a particularly salient concern for campus newspapers, as contagion is most common among teenagers and young adults. Leading experts in the fields of suicide prevention, journalism, and mental health have developed extensive recommendations to help journalists cover suicide without substantially increasing the risk for suicidal behavior. While helpful, these recommendations are targeted at professionals and do not address the unique role of student journalists covering suicide on campus. Reporting Responsibly On Campus Suicide (RROCS) seeks to provide a set of guidelines and comprehensive education for students writing about campus suicides, as well as suggest effective strategies for covering wellness in the aftermath of crisis.

**Brief:** Today, suicide remains the second leading cause of death among college students despite an increase in the availability of mental health resources.<sup>1</sup> Concerns regarding mental health are growing. One in three young adults between the ages of 18 and 25 reported experiencing a mental, behavioral or emotional health issue in 2021.<sup>2</sup>

Research has shown that media representations of suicide can have an immense impact on suicidal behavior, a phenomenon known as **media-influenced suicide contagion**. Suicide rates tend to rise following an increase in media coverage about suicide or a celebrity death by suicide, and they tend to decline following a decrease in stories about suicide.<sup>3</sup> Teenagers and young adults are most commonly affected by suicide contagion. While this data is troubling, research also suggests that the risk can be mitigated if journalists employ certain strategies that can help prevent media-influenced contagion.

We believe college newspapers have an important role to play in writing about mental health in a safe way. Leading experts in journalism and suicide prevention have developed a number of recommendations based on over 50 research studies to help journalists cover suicide without substantially increasing the risk for suicidal behavior.<sup>4</sup> Specifically, researchers at Stanford University have created [TEMPOS \(Tool for Evaluating Media Portrayal of Suicide\)](#), which allows media professionals, public health officials, researchers and suicide prevention experts to assess adherence to the recommended reporting guidelines with a user-friendly, standardized rating scale.

However, these recommendations are targeted at professionals and do not address the unique role of student journalists writing about mental health on campus. These reporters must balance their unique position as a classmate, neighbor or friend with their responsibilities and ethical duties as journalists. Staff may also lack the years of reporting and editing experience demanded by professional publications. To fill this gap, **Reporting Responsibly On Campus Suicide (RROCS) seeks to provide guidelines and comprehensive education for student journalists writing about suicide on campus.** These guidelines accompany Stanford's TEMPOS tool to meet the unique needs of student journalists.

**Our Story:** We are a group of former editors at *The Stanford Daily* who experienced the challenge of balancing our roles as students with our journalistic responsibilities first-hand. During our time leading *The Daily*, four students died from suicide, forcing a campus-wide reckoning with our culture surrounding student wellbeing. Stanford is not unique; students at colleges and universities across the nation grapple with mental wellness as they navigate academics, extracurriculars, personal challenges and much more.

Fortunately, we did not face this challenge alone. We worked with the team at Stanford Medicine's [Media & Mental Health Initiative](#) (MMHI) to approach storytelling in a way that was safe and helpful to our campus community. Editors received training on media-influenced suicide contagion and TEMPOS. Where national guidelines on suicide reporting fell short, the MMHI team was there to fill in the gaps.

Our conversations at *The Daily* ultimately culminated in the publication of the [paper's first special issue focused entirely on mental health and wellbeing](#) at Stanford.

We sought to tell stories of survival to highlight and destigmatize mental health, while also shedding light on the shortcomings of university resources.

We developed RROCS to make the knowledge and guidance we received available to a wider audience. We seek to educate student reporters about media-influenced suicide contagion and the important role they can play in minimizing harm while destigmatizing conversations about mental health in their own lives. We aim to help student editors develop editing guidelines and policies specific to their campus community to ensure stories about campus suicide and mental health do not increase suicide risk. By sharing our experiences and supporting and listening to one another, we can promote meaningful change and cultivate healthier campus communities. This is just the beginning.

## II. Questions to consider when covering suicide on campus

**For Student Journalists:** Coming up with a plan

### 1. Who do you assign to the story?

At a college newspaper, staff members do not always have the years of reporting experience demanded by professional publications. Reporting on campus suicide requires a deeper understanding of nuance and complexity than reporting on typical breaking news events, as well as an empathetic and respectful attitude towards your campus community.<sup>5</sup> When assigning reporters to cover a crisis, seek out students who have spent time on campus and have a better understanding of the culture, as well as students who have experience writing for your paper.

### 2. Who do you consult?

Campus suicide is not only a news event, it is also a public health issue.<sup>6</sup> College newspaper staff are often quick to turn to professional journalists and journalism faculty for assistance. While both can be great resources, consider reaching out to mental health professionals with experience in suicide prevention/postvention as well.<sup>7</sup> They may be able to assist in making editorial decisions to ensure student reports do not cause more harm to the campus community. Mental health professionals on campus can also serve as a resource for campus newspaper staff as you navigate a difficult and emotionally taxing situation.

### 3. How do you decide what information to release (and to whom)?

Not all information should be released to the public. Withholding specific details can play a large role in preventing suicide contagion and further harm to the campus community. Consult TEMPOS for more information on what kinds of information can be harmful, and what to avoid when making certain details public.<sup>8</sup> Emphasize a person's life and provide resources to those seeking help. Suicide is almost never the result of a single factor, but rather a confluence of multiple factors. Usually there isn't a "why" available to us, even though for many this will be the first and only question many ask. When covering a suicide event, the article should never speculate. Reporting on suicide runs counter to everything we are taught as journalists, namely that we should provide all details quickly and accurately and publish the story as soon as possible. In situations involving suicide, avoiding harmful and potentially devastating errors takes precedence over breaking the story. See item F for more details.

#### **4. How many editors should be involved?**

While it can be helpful to include multiple perspectives when deciding to make tough editorial decisions, too many perspectives can do the opposite. When reporting on campus suicide, student journalists are often forced to make consequential decisions regarding story framing and language very quickly. Senior editors who have exposure to resources such as the TEMPOS tool and appropriate training should be consulted to ensure editorial choices are made quickly, taking into consideration both the campus community and the potential for suicide contagion.<sup>9</sup>

#### **5. How should you manage obituaries?**

When a death occurs on campus, obituaries, or better defined as memorials in the context of a campus paper, can provide a means with which to honor the deceased and their legacy within the community. When writing a memorial, it is crucial to minimize attention to suicide. Refer to TEMPOS for a comprehensive guide on details that should not be included, but in general, the suicide method should not be included in the article. Instead, simply state that the individual died by suicide and focus the majority of the article on the person's legacy and their role within the community.<sup>10</sup> Euphemisms for death by suicide, such as “took their own life,” should be avoided and providing clear, direct, factual statements such as “died by suicide” is recommended. Remembering a person's life can be accomplished by speaking with relatives and close friends. Approaching these individuals during a period of intense grief requires empathy and understanding. Thoroughly communicating that a family is not obligated to speak with you is recommended. Similar to all coverage of a campus suicide, avoid any speculation or sensationalizing language regarding the circumstances of a person's death, including mental health challenges they may have faced previously.<sup>11</sup>

#### **6. How do you balance breaking the story with being accurate and empathetic?**

As journalists, we often strive to be the first to report on breaking news; however, when it comes to coverage of suicide and mental health crises, reporting accurately and empathetically should be your first and foremost concern. In these situations, it is especially important to ensure that your coverage abides by best practices and is both accurate and respectful. When tragic events occur on college campuses, rumors tend to spread. It is vital that your coverage does not amplify these rumors, but rather provides the community with accurate information that does not violate privacy, stigmatize mental health issues or contribute to suicide contagion.<sup>12</sup> In this context, reporting safely and accurately takes precedence over breaking the news and potentially making harmful mistakes.

## **7. How do you balance crisis coverage with regular coverage?**

While a suicide-related event and mental health topics may be at the forefront of the campus conversation, remember that you should not focus all of your coverage on these issues. Strive to continue regular coverage to the best of staff ability while continuing to report on stories and issues surrounding the event. Remember that focusing explicitly on the crisis could equate to sensationalization.<sup>13</sup> Additionally, placing large pictures of the person on the front page, or placing the article as the lead story on the front page, can also contribute to sensationalism or even romanticizing their death. It is important to balance celebrating a classmate's life with potential harm coverage could cause. As you continue your regular coverage, also remember that staff members may be processing the event in different ways; it is important to give them the opportunity to step away from their responsibilities and prioritize their mental health.<sup>14</sup>

## **8. Should you look to professional news outlets for examples?**

As college journalists, we often turn to professional news outlets to guide our work. While this can be a valuable starting point in most areas, it is important to remember that unfortunately, many professional newsrooms are not abiding by best practices when it comes to reporting on issues of mental health and suicide.<sup>15</sup> Keep this in mind if you decide to consult professional outlets for coverage guidance and examples. When it comes to these issues, it is likely in your best interest to start with evidence-based tools and consult mentors first before turning to professional outlets.

### III. Considerations during the reporting and after publication

#### 1. How should you use pictures in reporting?

Most media platforms highly encourage the use of images. However, these photos can have unintended consequences, especially if they portray a person who has died by suicide. Photos have the potential to give rise to thoughts of suicide in others and may make suicide seem more realistic by suggesting methods of self-harm. Posting or reposting images, photos, videos, or animations that depict the method of suicide or the location where it occurred should be avoided.<sup>16</sup> Images of family and friends grieving or at memorials also should not be posted. It is acceptable to share the time and place of memorial services with consent from those organizing but avoid publishing photos or videos or elaborating on what happened at the service.<sup>17</sup> It is also recommended that editors avoid prominent coverage, including a front page or lead story placement in a print paper or online, or prominent photos of the deceased or loved ones.<sup>18</sup>

#### 2. How do you manage your own mental health as a reporter or editor covering suicide?

Check in with reporters' regularly about how they are doing **outside** of reporting. Avoid letting the coverage of a campus suicide dominate your conversations/relationship with a reporter. Reiterate the resources available to them, as well as the importance of their own mental health above the importance of deadlines.

#### 3. How should you manage conflicts of interest?

At a campus newspaper — particularly on campuses with small student bodies — it is likely that reporters and editors will know or have personal relationships with the people they cover. To an extent, this is unavoidable, but it is crucial to keep in check with all coverage and **especially** with coverage of sensitive topics. Conflicts of interest can seriously impact the objectivity of reporting by influencing a reporter to include/exclude certain sources or portray a subject in a certain light. When covering a campus suicide, the reporter assigned to cover the story should not be a personal friend, a significant other, or a family member of the deceased, nor someone with serious personal conflict with the person. The same applies to editors overseeing the coverage. Covering campus suicide is already an emotionally taxing, difficult job, without personal feelings and past experiences affecting both journalists' own mental health/wellbeing and the quality of reporting.

#### 4. Should you cover vigils and celebrations of life?

When considering whether to cover campus vigils or celebrations of life, first consider whether the event is public. If you are unsure, it is best not to cover a private event in which family and friends are grieving, unless you are explicitly asked to attend by individuals close to the deceased. Always defer to close family and friends if you are considering coverage — even if the event is public — and remember to respect boundaries and private grieving spaces.<sup>19</sup> If you do choose to attend, read the room. Remember that attendees are not there to be interviewed by you — they are there to grieve and process the event in their own way. Avoid publishing photos of the memorial or elaborating on what happened at the service.<sup>20</sup>

#### 5. How should you respond to campus pushback to your reporting?

Pushback is an important element of any journalistic exchange and should be taken with a grain of salt, but taken seriously, nonetheless. Understand that emotions are likely high across campus and that criticism of a reporter or publication is often an outlet for that sadness and frustration. Find a way to differentiate between genuine, valuable criticism of journalistic decisions and misdirected emotional outpourings. For both, campus publications may benefit from finding a way to provide an outlet or safety valve for that emotion and energy on campus through the coverage that follows. Keep in mind many readers may not be aware of contagion or reporting guidelines surrounding them. Consider publishing a statement along with the article, transparently explaining why you made the decision you made. Maintain a united front and make decisions in groups including editors and writers so that no singular person bears the brunt of campus pushback. If one person does, make sure to check in with them regularly about their mental health and remind them that they are supported and that they have a team behind them as coverage continues.

#### 6. How should you manage personal social media usage?

After a tragedy on campus, many students may take to social media as a method of processing grief. Reporters should use best judgment when using social media following a campus suicide and follow all of their organization's policies. Because most platforms require the use of images, see “How should you use pictures in reporting,” for further guidance.

#### 7. What should you consider when writing headlines?

Keeping the guidelines of the TEMPOS tool in mind, **avoid sensationalizing headlines**. Much of journalism is about how many reads an article gets, but it is far more important to produce an accurate, intentional and thoughtful article. Do not use

sensational language, stigmatizing language, or language that glamorizes suicide in the headline, sub head, or photo captions that appear in the initial report and all subsequent coverage<sup>21</sup>. Avoid using quotes from law enforcement officers, family, friends, etc. that are intended to be graphic or provocative.

#### **8. When and whom should you ask for support?**

Writing about death on campus and the aftermath can take a toll on reporters and editorial staff. Student journalists covering campus suicide often learn more details than the general public because campus publications choose to withhold certain information that could be harmful or contribute to contagion. Be sure to take care of yourself and encourage your staff to do the same. **Do not be afraid to ask for help.** Reach out to your faculty mentors or mental health professionals on campus for assistance. Seek mental healthcare if you need it. Also, consider the role of your college newspaper in the lives of your own staff. Student journalists often cultivate strong, meaningful relationships with fellow staff members. As you navigate collective grief, lean on your friendships, and consider hosting a group grief counseling or unwinding session for staff.

## IV. How to cover campus mental health after crisis

### Looking Forward

*While suicide is not always the direct result of a diagnosed mental health problem, suicidal events can expose mental health challenges and degrade the wellness of surrounding community members, especially on tight-knit college campuses. In the aftermath of crises and beyond, it is vital that student newspapers continue to shed light on mental health issues, both by uplifting stories of hope and perseverance while holding university leadership accountable for inadequate resources.*

#### 1. Cover stories of resiliency and recovery

When covering campus mental health, it is pivotal to balance coverage that holds administrators accountable and chronicles student struggles with stories of hope and inspiration. Remember that telling these stories is not “skewing the narrative”; rather, these are true stories that occur every day, and it is vital to uplift them, especially in the aftermath of crisis. At a time in which conversations around mental health and support typically spike, it is important that you consider telling stories of hope, which could have the effect of encouraging readers who are struggling to seek support.

#### 2. Don't denounce campus resources

Find a balance between service journalism — stories that direct students and community members to resources that they can use — and articles that critique those resources and constructively push for change. Remember that student publications have a large impact on the campus attitude toward these resources and can discourage people from accessing them. Remember that this does not mean that you cannot also produce coverage that holds the university accountable and highlights problems with existing support systems and resources.

Below are additional resources you may want to consult during the reporting process. These guidelines, while best practices, are frequently not followed. Often, your reporting will diverge from stories published by professional outlets. It takes journalistic integrity, courage and awareness to set aside the templates and models we've been taught and prioritize student safety.

The Society of Professional Journalists cites minimizing harm in their widely referenced code of ethics<sup>22</sup>. The organization writes, “Ethical journalism treats sources, subjects, colleagues and members of the public as human beings deserving of respect.” We hope these guidelines will provide you with the education and resources you need to confidently cover suicide-related events while minimizing harm.

As young reporters, you are the future of journalism. We hope you take these guidelines with you on the next leg of your journey. The industry, and the way it characterizes both suicide and mental health, needs to change. We encourage you to be that change. Start the conversation.

## **V. Additional Resources**

### **Tool for Evaluating Media Portrayals of Suicide (TEMPOS)**

*Stanford Center for Youth Mental Health and Wellbeing*

Website: <https://med.stanford.edu/psychiatry/special-initiatives/mediamh/tempos.html>

### **Suicide Prevention Resources**

*World Health Organization*

Website: [https://www.who.int/health-topics/suicide#tab=tab\\_1](https://www.who.int/health-topics/suicide#tab=tab_1)

### **Recommendations for Reporting on Suicide**

*SAVE*

Website: <https://reportingonsuicide.org/>

### **#ChatSafe**

*Orygen*

Website: <https://www.orygen.org.au/chatsafe/Resources/International-guidelines>

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