

Telling Your Own Story

Best Practices for Presentations by Suicide Loss and Suicide Attempt Survivors

Sharing one's story with the public through presentations and media interviews is an important way to educate people about suicide. But care needs to be taken when discussing suicide. Experts recommend making the following considerations before sharing your story.

Consider whether you're really ready to speak.

If you don't want to tell your story, you don't have to. While some people feel it's important to share, that isn't true for everyone. Give yourself time to heal in order to gain perspective from your experience. It may be several years before you're ready to speak publicly – and that's okay. Consider consulting with a mental health provider or other clinician to assess whether you're ready to speak publicly about this.

Talk with your loved ones.

Before you go public, you may want to speak to your family members to understand how they may feel about you telling the story of a loved one's suicide, or your own experience with a suicide attempt. In the end, this is your story, and it is your decision to make. However, you may want to consider what impact telling your story publicly will have on them.

Consider the ramifications of going public.

Given the instant and widespread access to information through the Internet and social media, consider the long-term ramifications of going public with your story, now and in the future, for your business and personal life. You always have the choice about how public you want to make your story. You are free to set limits on any recording that might take place at your presentation. Some people find it easier to present to groups they don't know due to the perceived level of anonymity it affords. Others prefer to speak only to people they know as they feel more comfortable and assured they will receive support.

Incorporate resources to provide support.

Consider collaborating with suicide prevention experts in your community to get feedback about the content of your presentation. They can also point you to local suicide prevention resources to include in your presentations. Consider inviting mental health workers, guidance counselors, and public health workers who are knowledgeable about suicide to attend your presentation. They can be available to help provide support for you and your audience and also to field questions.

Focus on how to get help. Focus on how to get help if they're concerned that they (or someone they know) might be at risk and give specific details about available resources. Although it's understandable to want to implore students not to consider suicide because of the pain it will cause their families, that's not a safe or effective suicide prevention message. Highlight affordable and/or free resources for audience members who might be in need of support. Mention (preferably at least twice) the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline, 800-273-TALK (8255) a free national suicide crisis hotline available 24/7 and emphasize that it is for those who need help and for those who care about someone who needs help.

You don't need to have all the answers. If you're asked a question that you prefer not to answer, it is perfectly acceptable to decline to answer, saying something like, "I appreciate your interest/concern/curiosity, but I hope you understand that I don't feel comfortable discussing that publicly." And if you don't know the answer to a specific question, it's okay to tell the audience that. You can let that audience member know that you will attempt to get an answer and email a response at a later date.

Carefully consider the audience mix. It can be challenging to mix attempt and loss survivors in a single discussion. For example, loss survivors may accuse attempt survivors of acting selfishly for not considering the pain that his/her suicide would cause. Conversely, attempt survivors may criticize loss survivors who focus on their own pain or culpability for not having prevented the suicide rather than the pain of the person who attempted.

Give the audience an out. Remind the audience before you begin that it is an emotional topic, and they can feel free to leave the room at any time. Coordinate with the mental health workers who are attending the presentation to look out for anyone who might become upset by the topic.

Adhere to safe messaging guidelines.

It is very important to stick to the Safe Messaging Guidelines. They're based on the best available research and address the complexities of talking publicly about suicide and the steps for doing so safely. <https://sprc.org/keys-to-success/safe-and-effective-messaging-and-reporting/> Help the audience understand that suicide results from a combination of factors including underlying depression and life circumstances. Statistics have shown that up to 90% of all people who die by suicide have a diagnosable and treatable psychiatric disorder at the time of their death (National Center for Health Statistics, 2005). Avoid contributing to the myths that suicide is inexplicable or the result of a single event such as losing a job. Although it's generally acceptable to mention the method (such as gunshot or overdose), further detail (especially any graphic description) should generally be avoided. If you are going to mention the method, clearly explain your purpose for doing so.

Speaking to the Media

Speaking to the media can be an opportunity to educate reporters about suicide.

- Read the media recommendations (<https://reportingonsuicide.org/>) and follow all the recommendations in this document when speaking to reporters.
- Provide media representatives with the media recommendations prior to speaking with them (don't assume they already know about it).
- After you speak with a reporter you might second guess something you said. If the piece hasn't been aired or written, you can contact the reporter and provide additional clarification. You can request the reporter accurately captured the spirit of what you were saying. Not all reporters will agree to let you see the article before it is printed, but you can always ask for the opportunity to review it.

Self-Care

Sharing your story can take a toll. Before your presentation, make sure that you've put the supports in place that you need.

- **Have a support system of your own** in place following your presentation. This can include a mental health professional, family member, friend, clergy, or a colleague who is a fellow presenter who understands the nature and personal impact of your work as a public speaker.
- **Debrief after your presentation.** It may help to talk out your feelings, the stories you've heard, and the heartache you may have been exposed to during your speech with members of your support team. You may encounter loved ones who are angry or who blame others. Others might want to share all the details of their

loved one's suicide or attempt, or their own attempt with you. People may want to ask you additional questions or share additional time with you. These kinds of conversations can take a toll. Remember that you are always free to set limits.

- **Schedule some downtime following your presentation.** Plan to rest or take a break from talking about mental health and suicide prevention topics. Maintaining a healthy balance in your own personal life is critical.

A Final Word

It is through the personal stories of the suicide bereaved and suicide attempters that public awareness about suicide moves forward. We encourage you to follow these recommendations to help strengthen the movement so that we continue to battle the stigma that surrounds suicide and help more people receive the support they need. You might consider ending your presentation by discussing the link between increased awareness about suicide and the need for the community to join the cause, volunteer, work with a non-profit, advocate, or join a local suicide prevention task force.

Key Resources

- [988 Lifeline](#): Free, 24/7 support.
- [Safe Messaging Guidelines](#)
- [Media Recommendations](#)
- Local mental health and crisis resources

Resources:

[American Association of Suicidology](#)
[American Foundation for Suicide Prevention](#)
[988 Lifeline](#)
[Suicide Awareness/Voices of Education](#)
[Suicide Prevention Resource Center](#)

This handout was informed by experts and organizations in the suicide prevention community including the American Association of Suicidology, AFSP, NSPL, NAMI NH, SAVE, and more.