

Safe Reporting on Suicide

Transcript of SPARK Talks

Speaker: Dan Reidenberg and Candice Madsen

Dan Reidenberg: I am Dr. Dan Reidenberg, and I am the executive director of SAVE— Suicide Awareness Voices of Education.

The safe reporting on suicide is critically important because we know that how media report on suicide can impact the lives of others. What you report and how you report that story could lead to the death of somebody else. It could also lead to getting somebody to help and recovery.

The reason that's really important for people in the suicide prevention community is to understand that you have a role in this just as much as the reporters and the journalists that are working on this story. But each has a different perspective on it.

The reporter's job is to tell the story about what happened in a very, very short time frame. They may have a minute story that they have to pull together all the information they can in a community in two hours. Very hard for them to do. Their job, ultimately, is to make sure people watch and read.

As opposed to in the suicide prevention community, we're trying to get a message out of hope and of recovery. Often times, these conflict, and we need to do better at helping both sides understand each other and what each other really needs.

Here are a couple things that are really important for a journalist to understand when they're reporting on suicide. One is that suicide is not common. We don't want people to think that this happens all the time.

We know that those that we lose to suicide, most of the time, have a psychiatric illness at the time of their death. There are many reasons that go into all suicides. We never have somebody who dies by suicide just because of one thing. There's always multiple things underlying every suicide.

Candice Madsen: I recently attended a two-and-a-half day seminar with the Poynter Institute in Washington D.C., about how to cover and report on suicide. Dan Reidenberg with SAVE gave a powerful demonstration that really stuck with me. He walked us through how someone reaches that point of despair where they can no longer think rationally, and how news coverage could lead to more suicide. My other big takeaway is the role that mental illness plays in most suicides. You can't really talk about suicide without also addressing mental health.

When I returned to KSL, I had to put into practice all the principles we had just discussed. Scanner traffic was reporting that a man was suicidal because he had lost his job. Buildings were evacuated, and streets were closed, and so this was something we needed to report on. Well the standoff lasted for six hours before the man ultimately killed himself just before the ten o'clock news. I had talked to the reporter on scene earlier, and advised him not to say the man was suicidal just because he lost his job. Instead the reporter said police didn't know why he decided to kill himself, but that mental illness is a factor in most suicides.

Dan Reidenberg: For media that are working in stories about suicide, it's really important that they understand that although they can't control the audience, they can't control what the audience hears or sees in their story, what they say, the language they use, the images that they choose to include in their story does make a difference. You don't have to go into all the very specific details about where it happened, and how they went about doing that death.

Candice Madsen: Another reporter did a story about an officer who saved someone attempting suicide. The problem was the reporter also went into detail about how the hose had been hooked up to the tailpipe. A suicide prevention expert actually called me and asked if we could exclude that part of the story appearing online out of fear that it could lead to a copycat suicide. That kind of feedback is so important.

Normally you would describe how the person died and provide all the details, especially if there's a suicide note. And there's no shortage of emotional interviews. But you have to be so careful about which part of the interviews you choose to use.

Dan Reidenberg: Not only how you report can hurt and be harmful, because it can lead to contagion and copycat suicide, but conversely, if you report on it in a certain way that shows hope and recovery, talks about mastery over crisis, it's called *Papageno effect*. What we know is you can actually reduce the risk of suicide. So, this is new information, that as suicide prevention experts and advocates, we can get to the journalists, and we can help them say, you don't have to just do a story about somebody who died by suicide. Do a story about the new research that's coming out. Do a story about somebody who survived their attempt, and has gone on to lead a very successful life. These are the kinds of stories that can change not just the conversation but to reduce the risk that others might feel after they see a suicide story.

Candice Madsen: Nearly every day in our newsroom in Salt Lake City, Utah, we hear about suicide. As a strong voice in the community, we wanted to do something that could really help families deal with this issue. So the first night of May Sweeps, we aired a half-hour, commercial-free special about suicide and prevention. I was asked to produce it, and I was terrified. I worried if I did it in the wrong way, it could encourage more suicide, and I really struggled with how to tell compelling stories that offered hope instead of just exploited tragedy. And then there was the big question of whether or not people would watch. Well the special aired, and I held my breath, until the phones started ringing. People were calling the station to thank us for our coverage, and they flooded our Facebook page with positive comments. During the special, we had also put up the crisis hotline number, and the director e-mailed me later and said that the night of the special they had seen a significant increase in the number of people calling for help.

Dan Reidenberg: Many reporters don't know that the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline number exists. So you can contact a journalist and say, "Here's a number. If you're going to do a story today, put this number out there; make sure they have that information."

So one of the things that we need to do as suicide prevention advocates and experts is to build relationships with media outlets in a community. We need to form those bonds so that they can trust us when there is a story that needs to be reported on. We need to make sure that we have the information and we're accessible and available to them when they need to have something done.

Conversely, you can be proactive. You can reach out to a journalist and say, "There was a suicide in our community. Here's an opportunity for you to do a story about this that can help save somebody else's life."

Candice Madsen: When I was producing our second special on suicide, there happened to be a string of suicides and suicide attempts at the high school. My news director asked me why I wasn't devoting more attention to this school, and even leading with it in our special. And I told her it's because I had been in

contact with the suicide prevention expert working with the school, and he advised me not to hype the numbers out of fear that it could lead to a contagion. Instead he wanted us to focus on suicide prevention experts at the school, so that's what we did.

Dan Reidenberg: So when the reporters and the journalists can talk about suicide proactively, when they can talk about getting help for mental health, when they can talk about recovery, when they can talk about going on and a living productive, healthy life after treatment, after going through even a suicide attempt—what we can do is, we can change the entire conversation about suicide and about mental health. It isn't something that has to be stigmatized anymore. It becomes a story about hope.