



Take Care – Be Aware

How Journalists can help to prevent copycat suicides

Background

Despite increasing openness in the dialogue around mental health problems, there continues to be social stigma associated with depression with many people endorsing unhelpful attitudes. Suicides usually occur in the context of a depression or another mental illness (alcohol- and/or drug addiction, schizophrenia). About 80-90% of all suicide cases are preceded by such illnesses. Especially people suffering from depression can be considered as a high-risk-group regarding the influence of media reports. In these cases, media coverage is in fact not the primary reason for the suicide, but it can serve as the crucial trigger during a critical phase of the illness.

- Suicide is a major cause of premature deaths in Europe
- More than 54.000 people in the 27 EU Member States die from suicide each year (in comparison: traffic accidents cause approx. 50 000 deaths) (Data: Eurostat, 2011)
- The number of suicide attempts is 10-20 times higher
- The WHO estimates that - worldwide - every year between 10 and 20 million people attempt suicide and about one in ten is completed; this is more than the number of people murdered and killed in wars combined

Guidelines and recommendations for journalists on how to handle the topic suicide sensitively had been developed and implemented in several European countries in the past years.

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The main aim is to cooperate with journalists on this topic in order to decrease the number of completed suicides and suicide attempts, by encouraging media professionals to report on suicidal actions more responsibly.

What is the "Werther-Effect" about?

Certain kinds of media reports on suicides can provoke succeeding suicidal actions due to imitation. Scientific literature refers to this as the "Werther-Effect". After the publication of Johann Wolfgang von Goethe's famous novel "The Sorrows of Young Werther", copycat suicides of young men occurred all over Europe. The suicides very much followed the novel's pattern and model.

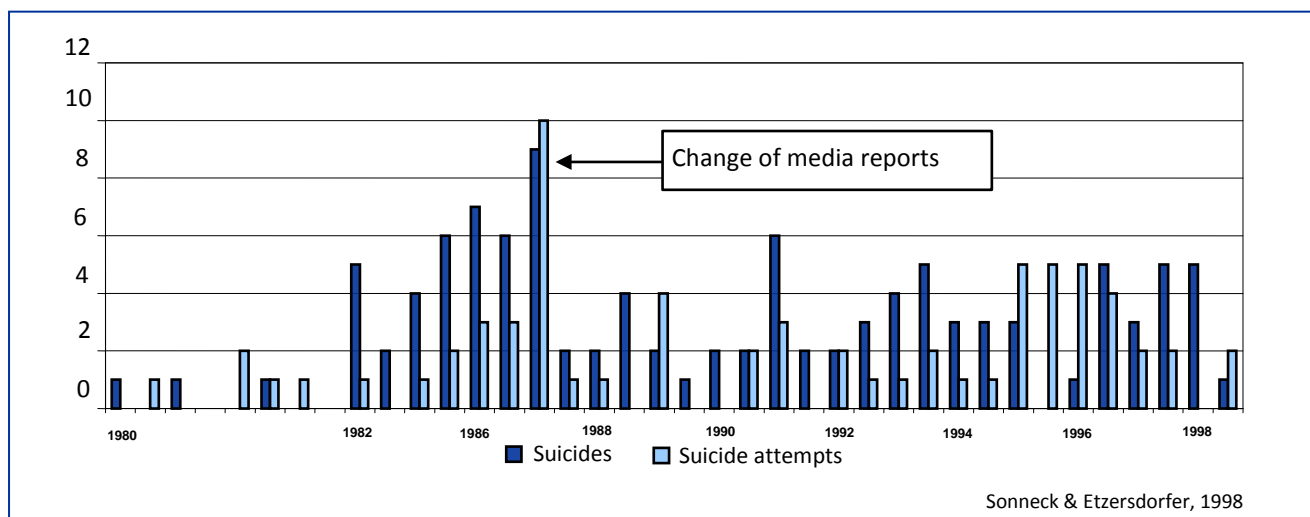


Image 1:
<http://jamesharfordeuro3301.wordpress.com/2012/09/21/seminar-6-epistolary-extremes-goethes-werther>

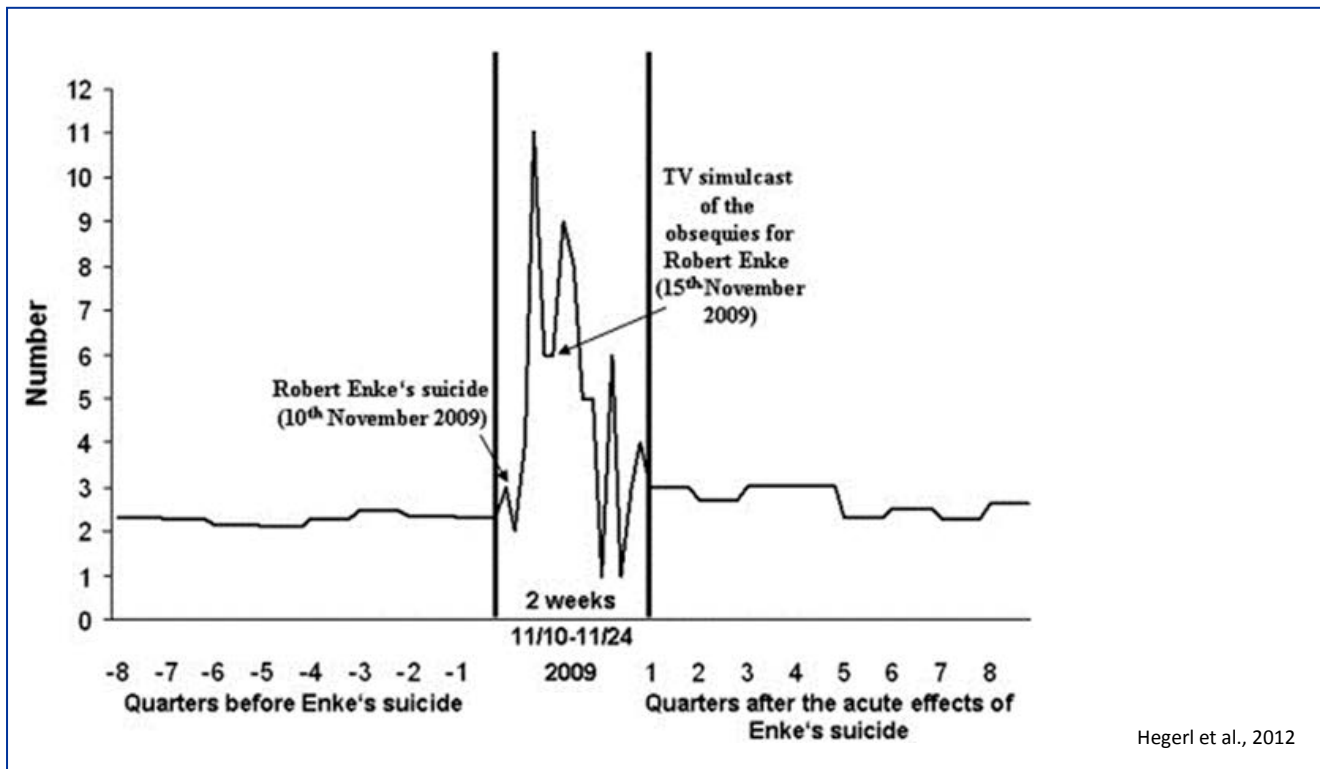
How relevant is the "Werther-Effect"?

Suicidal people often intensively engage in the issue of self-inflicted death. During this suicidal period a television- or press report on the topic can influence their decision immensely.

One example is the raise and reduction of the number of subway-suicides since 1984 in Vienna, Austria. The implementation of the subway system in 1978 yielded in a constant and dramatic increase of subway-suicides. In 1987, media guidelines had been developed and a media campaign launched. Subsequently, the media reports changed markedly and the number of subway-suicides and -attempts dropped more than 80% within this year already, remaining on a rather low level since. By following the guidelines concerning media reports closely, journalists could prevent approx. six copycat suicides in the first year already.



Another recent example of the Werther Effect is the striking increase in railway suicides after the suicide of German goalkeeper Robert Enke in 2009 (Hegerl et al. 2013). This suicide was not only followed by a more than doubling of the number of railway suicidal acts in the following two weeks but also by an increase of railway suicidal acts by 19 % in the following two years.



The basic principle is:

The more prominent the appearances of a media report on suicide and the greater its luridness and its emotional content, the higher the frequency of copycat suicides.

Ask yourself, if the story really needs to be run!

What is the danger when reporting on suicide?

- Identification
- Glorification
- Attention
- Concrete instructions

How can journalists help?

Features that might help to prevent imitation

- No sensationalism
- No front page reporting/prominent placement
- No photos
- No repeated coverage of the topic
- No detailed descriptions of suicide methods
- No names/characteristics of the suicidal persons
- No citing/printing of farewell letters/suicide notes
- Not mentioning
 - online suicide forums/websites
 - suicide pacts
 - location
 - other suicides at the same place (hotspots)
 - suicide clusters
- Not speaking of “series/epidemic of suicides” (contagion)
- Considering the language, e.g. not using the terms “committed suicide”, “a successful/unsuccessful suicide”
- Clarifying myths about suicide
- No simplistic explanation
- Not reporting suicide as understandable solution
- Not glorifying suicide (heroism, romanticism)
- Not paying special attention to celebrity suicides
- Not mentioning positive consequences of suicide
- Reporting suicide within the context of mental illness
- Listing warning signs for suicide
- Not interviewing relatives/people bereaved by suicide
- Referring to possibilities to prevent suicide
- Describing individual coping strategies to master a crisis
- Referring to help in general
- Information on
 - help agencies
 - hotlines
 - self-help groups
- Guidelines for media reporting of suicide should include a section on
 - fictional reporting of suicidal behaviour
 - reporting suicidal behaviour in the new media

Phrases to avoid:

- a successful suicide attempt
- an unsuccessful suicide attempt
- suicide victim
- just a cry for help
- suicide-prone person
- stop the spread/epidemic suicide
- suicide “tourist”

⇒ Useful Phrases:

- a suicide
- die by suicide
- take one’s own life
- a suicide attempt
- a completed suicide
- person at risk of suicide
- help prevent suicide

Media myths ... and facts

People, who talk about or even threaten suicide, aren't really serious and just seeking for attention.

The mention of suicidal thoughts or plans should always be taken seriously! People who finally completed suicide had often told someone about their feelings before. Giving them the attention they need is important to their recovery and may save their life!

People who are suicidal seriously want to die and there is nothing you can do.

One may feel low or distressed for a sustained period, but the actual suicidal crisis is mainly a very short-termed state of mind. Offering appropriate emotional and medical support can help people come through a suicidal period!

Once a person has made a serious attempt, that person is unlikely to make another.

Quite the opposite! Those who have attempted suicide once are 100 times more likely than the general population to do so again.

Only mentally ill persons think or/and commit suicide.

Some people might have thoughts of suicide once or twice in their life, due to personal or philosophical crisis.

Nevertheless about 80-90% of the people dying by suicide had been suffering from a diagnosed mental disease.

Most suicides happen in the winter months.

Suicide is more common in the spring and summer months.

Women are more likely to kill themselves.

More women say they have considered suicide, but far more men than women die by suicide every year.

Talking about suicide is a bad idea as it may give someone the idea to try it.

When someone feels suicidal they often do not want to worry or frighten others and so do not talk about the way they feel.

By asking directly about suicide you give them permission to tell you how they feel.

People who have been through such a crisis will often say that it was a huge relief to be able to talk about their suicidal thoughts.

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References:

These guidelines concerning the media coverage on suicide have been developed in the context of an interdisciplinary seminar for journalists, psychiatrists and communication research students at the Ludwig-Maximilians-University of Munich in 2000. Prof. Dr. Ulrich Hegerl¹, Prof. Dr. Hans-Bernd Brosius², Dr. Walther Ziegler³

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The guidelines have been updated in 2014 by including and adapting information from the following sources with permission:

Media guidelines for reporting suicide and self harm. The Irish Association of Suicidology (2008). (www.ias.ie)

Wahlbeck K. & Mäkinen M. (Eds). (2008). Prevention of depression and suicide. Consensus paper. Luxembourg: European Communities.

Hegerl, U., Koburger, N., Rummel-Kluge, C., Gravert, C., Walden, M., Mergl, R. (2013): One followed by many? Long-term effects of a celebrity suicide on the number of suicidal acts on the German railway net. *Journal of Affective Disorders*. 146: 39-44.

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