

# Suicide Prevention: Messaging Matters



Funded by counties through the voter-approved Mental Health Services Act (Prop. 63).

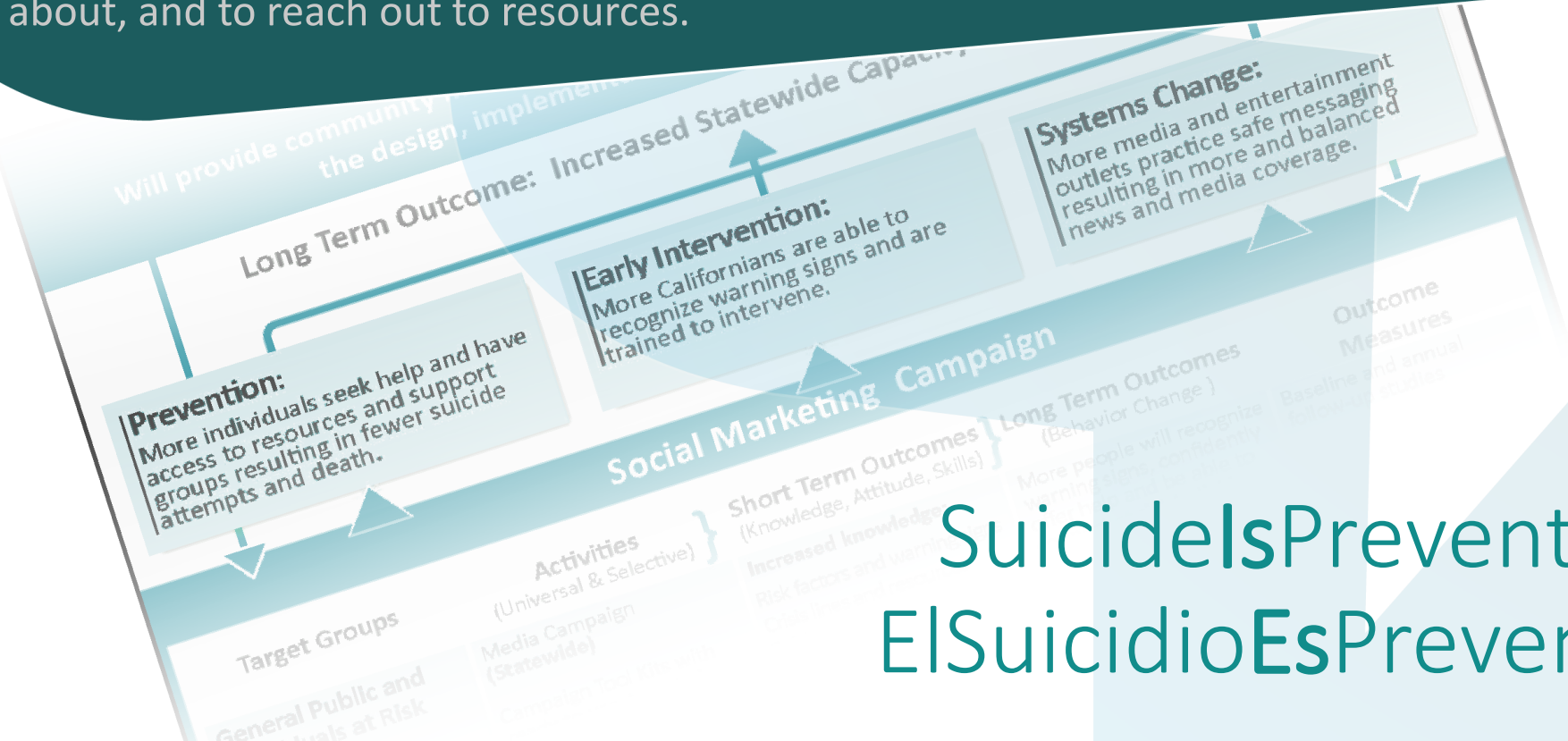
Know the Signs is a statewide suicide prevention social marketing campaign with the overarching goal to increase Californians' capacity to prevent suicide by encouraging individuals to know the signs, find the words to talk to someone they are concerned about, and to reach out to resources.

# KNOW THE SIGNS

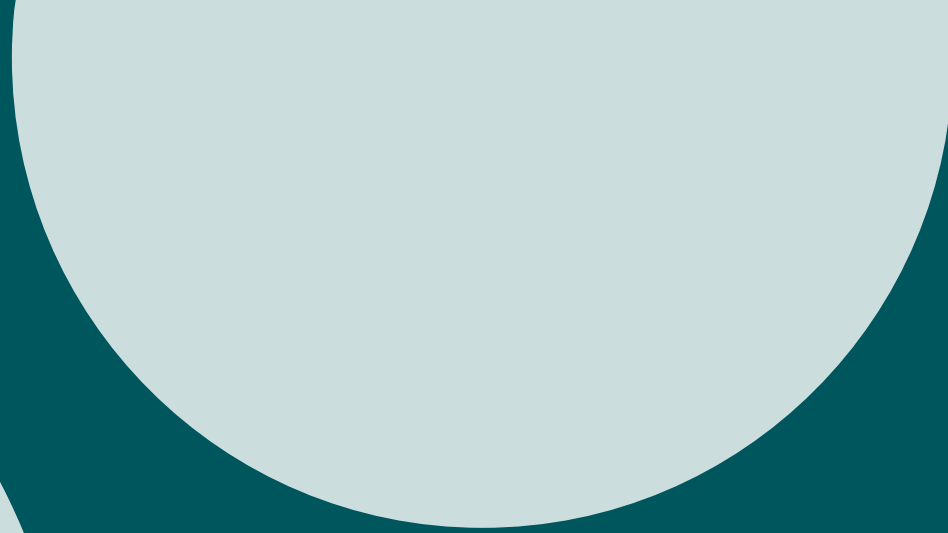
50%

Californians were exposed to the Know the Signs campaign that was rated by an expert panel to be aligned with best practices and one of the best media campaigns on the subject.

"The results provide further evidence that the Know the Signs campaign is making Californians more confident in their ability to intervene with someone at risk of suicide."  
(RAND Corporation, 2015)



[SuicideIsPreventable.org](http://SuicideIsPreventable.org) (public)  
[ElSuicidioEsPrevenible.org](http://ElSuicidioEsPrevenible.org) (public)



# Background and History

# National and State Guidance for Improved Messaging

2012 National Strategy for Suicide Prevention:  
GOALS AND OBJECTIVES FOR ACTION

A report of the U.S. Surgeon General  
and of the National Action Alliance for Suicide Prevention



2

STRATEGIC  
AIM

**GOAL 7: INCREASE USE OF BEST PRACTICES FOR REPORTING OF SUICIDE AND PROMOTE HEALTHY USE OF SOCIAL MEDIA AND TECHNOLOGY**

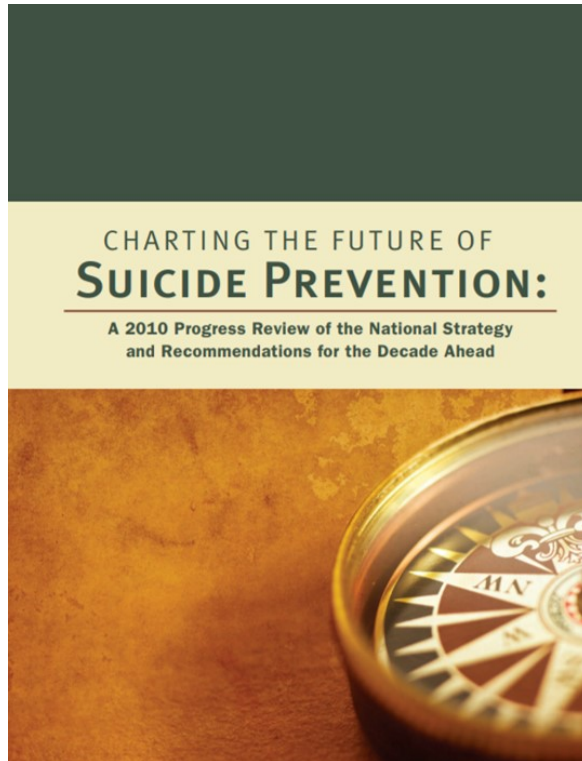
**Desired Outcome** ✓ Reduce events referred to as “suicide clusters,” when multiple suicides occur within a particular time period or location, especially among youth.

**Short-term Target** 🎯 By 2025, all counties are conducting activities to increase awareness of best practices for reporting suicide to local media partners. Activities could include offering informational sessions, posting information online, and holding informational sessions.

**Objective 7b** Increase awareness of best practices for reporting on suicides by collaborating with journalism associations and organizations to disseminate information and resources to journalism and media partners.

[Striving for Zero: California’s Strategic Plan for Suicide Prevention 2020-2025](#)

# Charting the Future of Suicide Prevention



According to polling conducted by a national health research firm:

- **94%** of Americans believe that many **suicides are preventable** with appropriate research, interventions, and services. (*AFSP / Harris Poll*)
- **94%** would **take action** to help someone close to them who was thinking about suicide. (*AFSP / Harris Poll*)
- **86%** of the population believes that it is **important to invest in suicide prevention**. (*Charting the Future*)



# Need for a change in suicide prevention messaging

## National Action Alliance for Suicide Prevention Expert Panel responses to current messaging:

- Emphasis on problem severity, not prevention
  - Collectively, creating a “negative narrative” about suicide
- Too few stories of hope, recovery, resilience
  - Stories of suicide deaths are common
  - Protective: news stories about coping with adversity without suicidal behavior <sup>8</sup>
- The field lacks a core message or frame

We can be more proactive in shaping the conversation



# The cultural theory and model of suicide

## Culturally Specific Suicide Risk:

- Cultural Sanctions:
  - Acceptability of suicide as an option
  - Shame associated with life events
- Idioms of distress:
  - The way suicide is expressed
  - Chosen methods or means for attempting suicide
- Minority Stress:
  - Acculturation, discrimination, social disadvantages
- Social discord:
  - Conflict, lack of integration
  - Alienation from family, community or friends



“We need to get people other than the choir to sing. We need journalist associations, employee assistance programs, chambers of commerce, defense lawyers, pediatricians, family practitioners, and others to get involved. They see people every day that may be at risk and we need them to partake in the conversation.”

*-Key Informant (Charting the Future of Suicide Prevention)*





# “Werther” vs. “Papageno” Effect

How we communicate about suicide may influence a vulnerable person towards suicidal behavior.

But **positive messaging** about suicide prevention such as coverage of positive coping in adverse circumstances, or information about resources may have **protective effects**.

# Framework for Successful Messaging

## Papageno vs. Werther

### POSITIVE OUTCOMES

- Increased help-seeking
- More awareness of resources, warning signs
- De-stigmatization of mental illness and suicide

### • UNINTENDED CONSEQUENCES

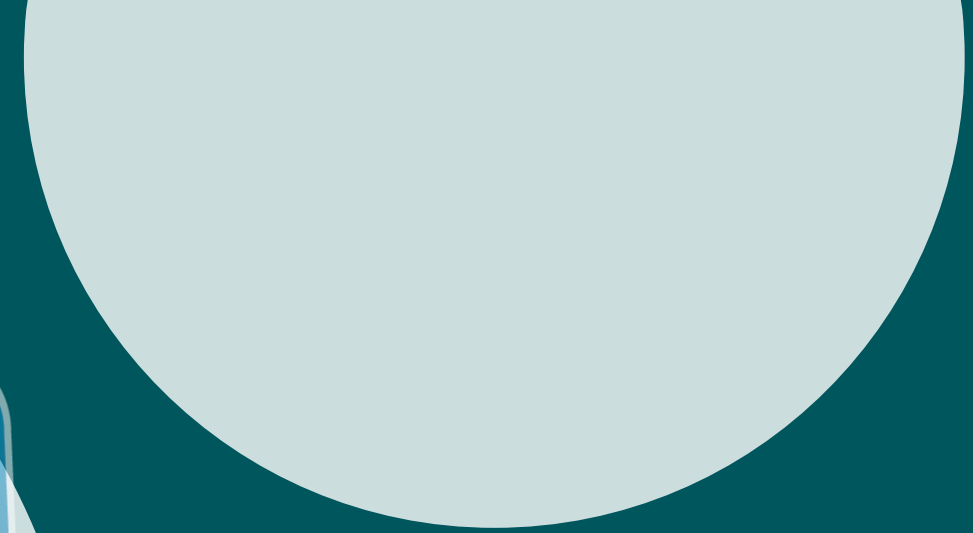
- Imitative behavior
- Reinforcing problem behaviors
- Inaccurate and/or stigmatizing perceptions
- Stereotypes
- Negative “narratives”
- Omitting critical information

# Framework for Successful Messaging



Four considerations when developing messages:

1. Strategy
2. Safety
3. Positive narrative
4. Guidelines



Strategy

# Start with Strategy



- What is your strategy for reducing suicide?
- How does messaging fit into your efforts?
- Decide “why” before “how”

# Message Development Frameworks

1.	Set the <b>CONTEXT</b>
2.	<b>WHY</b> message?
3.	<b>WHO</b> to influence?
4.	To <b>DO</b> what?
5.	<b>WHAT</b> to say?
6.	<b>HOW</b> to reach them?
7.	<b>SO WHAT?</b>

**“How”  
decision is  
here**

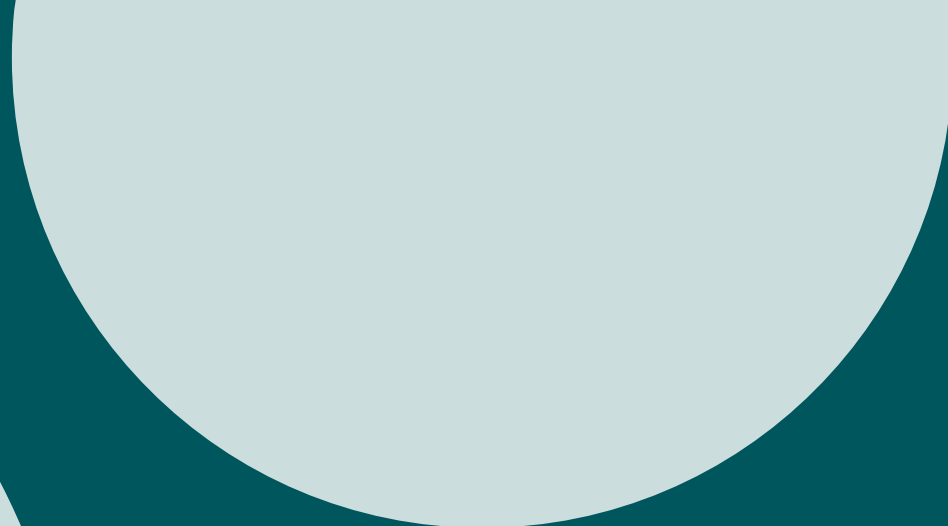
1. Analyze your situation

2. Identify and understand your audience

3. Develop your message

4. Create/implement your strategy

5. Evaluate your plan



# Safe and Effective Messaging





“Reporting on suicide, like reporting on sexual abuse, is one of the areas in which we favor not saying all that we know. However, in some versions, we also gave out more information about the method of death than required. If police, prosecutors or family members announce publicly that a suicide was by pills, hanging, gunshot or other means, let’s keep such details to a minimum and not make it the lead of our stories on the deaths.”

- John Daniszewski, AP Vice President for Standards  
*“How and When We Report on Suicide”*

# Recommended Language

## USE

*Died by suicide*

*Attempted  
suicide*

## DON'T USE

- *Committed suicide*
- *“Successful” or  
“Unsuccessful”  
attempts*



# Safety

Unsafe messages can influence vulnerable people to imitate risky behaviors

**Safety** is avoiding content that is unsafe or undermines prevention.



Provide a  
Resource

Providing a suicide prevention resource is one of the most important components when messaging about suicide or suicide prevention.



**CRISIS TEXT LINE |**

**Text HELLO to 741741**

**Free, 24/7, Confidential**

# Examples

## Lifeline calls in California

13

Lifeline-affiliated centers currently in California

California Lifeline Call volume has increased **60 %** since 2016

60 %

In 2019, the Lifeline received nearly **2.3 million** crisis calls across the United States

**2.3 million !**

**290,619**

calls were from California

**199,192**

calls were connected to crisis centers in state



Of the 290,619 callers, 58,649 pressed "1" to be transferred to the **Veterans Crisis Line**

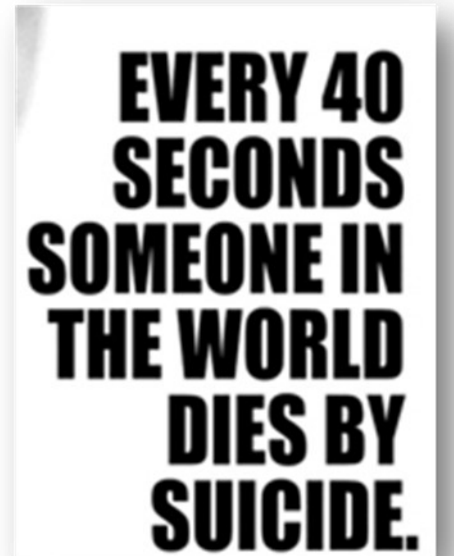
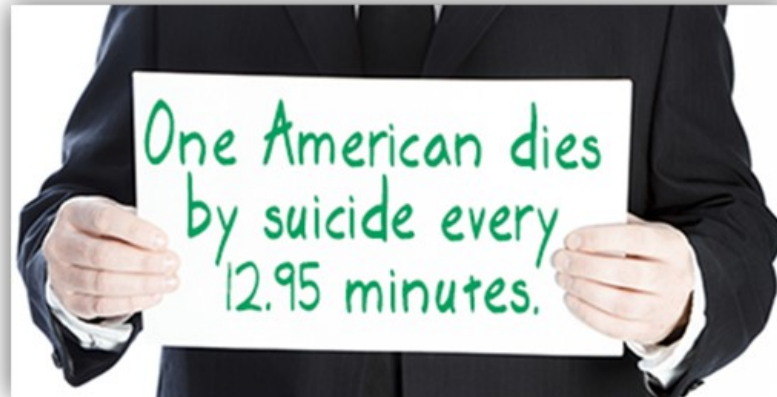
and 7,607 pressed "2" for the **Spanish Language Line**



- Normalizing of help-seeking
- Promotion of resource

## Avoid “Normalizing” Statements

- Don't normalize suicide by presenting it as a common event (e.g., epidemic, skyrocketing)
- Most people who consider suicide do not act on those thoughts.
- Presenting suicide as common may unintentionally remove a protective bias against suicide.



# Examples

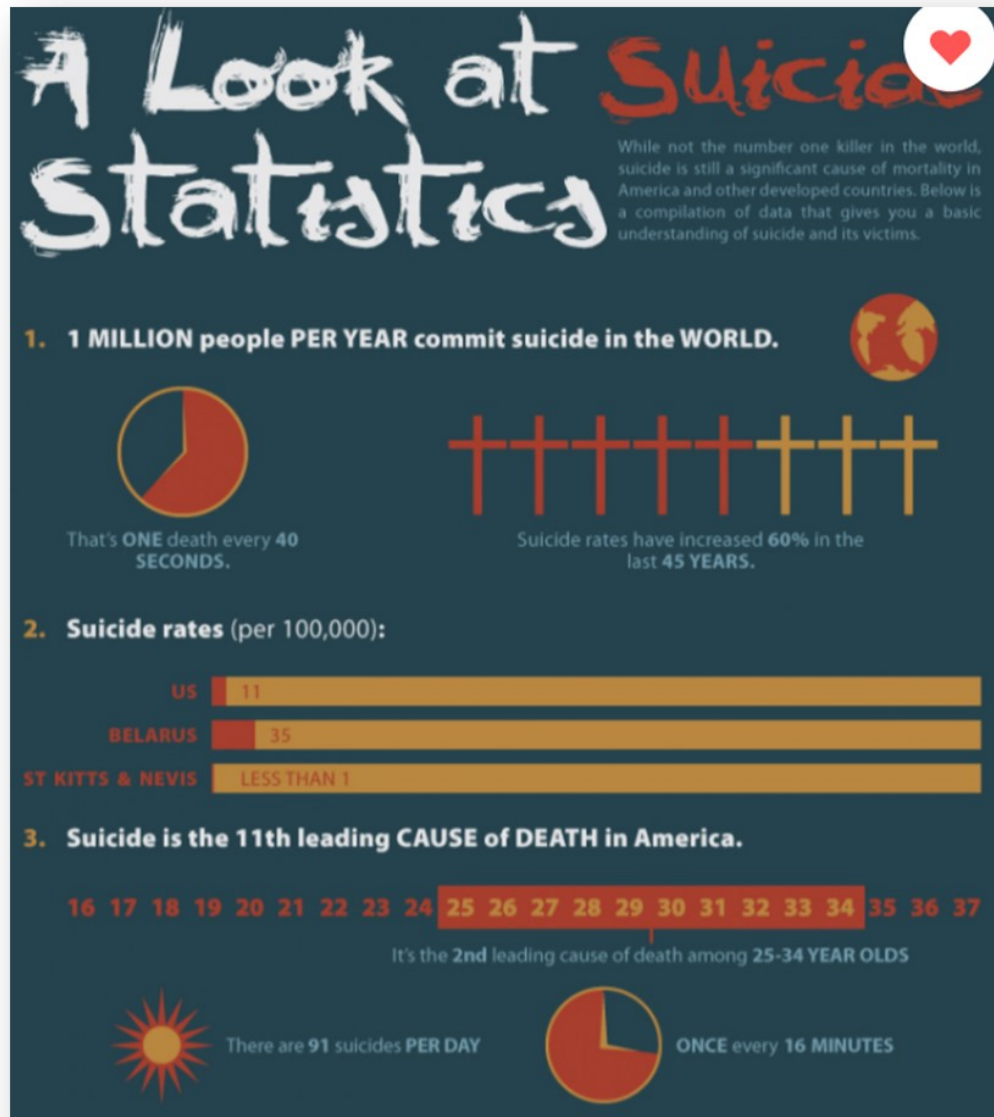
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- Undefined audiences and goals
- No call to action
- Oversimplification of causes
- Language



# Examples



- Focus on severity of problem, not on prevention
- No call to action
- Dark images and colors
- Language and use of data



## Avoid Describing Methods

Avoid sharing details about how the suicide was carried out such as specific details about weapon or means used, location of wound, or the location of the incident.

**Grim details of Robin Williams' death released by investigators**

**Rashaan Salaam, Heisman Trophy winner and former Chicago Bear, committed suicide with gunshot to head**

# Examples



- Images of means/methods
- Focus on severity, no prevention message
- Language

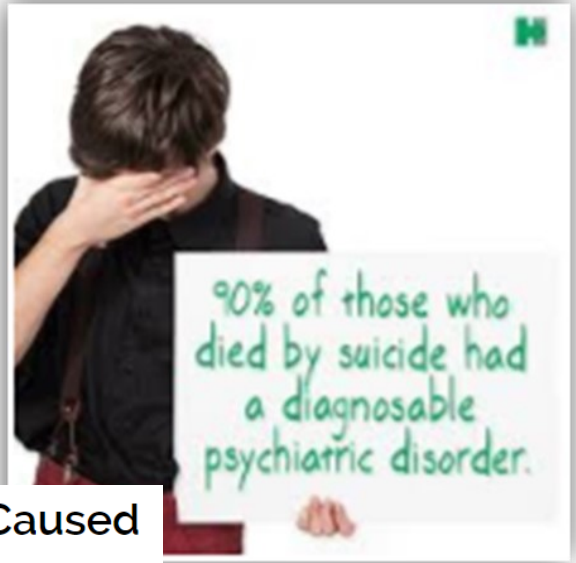
What “causes”  
suicide?



Avoid  
Oversimplifying  
"Causes"

Rather than offering single reasons for suicide (breakup, job loss, etc.), frame suicide as a complex issue influenced by multiple factors.

Oversimplification of suicide can mislead people to believe that it is a normal response to fairly common life circumstances.



Robin Williams, depression and the complex causes of suicide

While many people who kill themselves have been experi

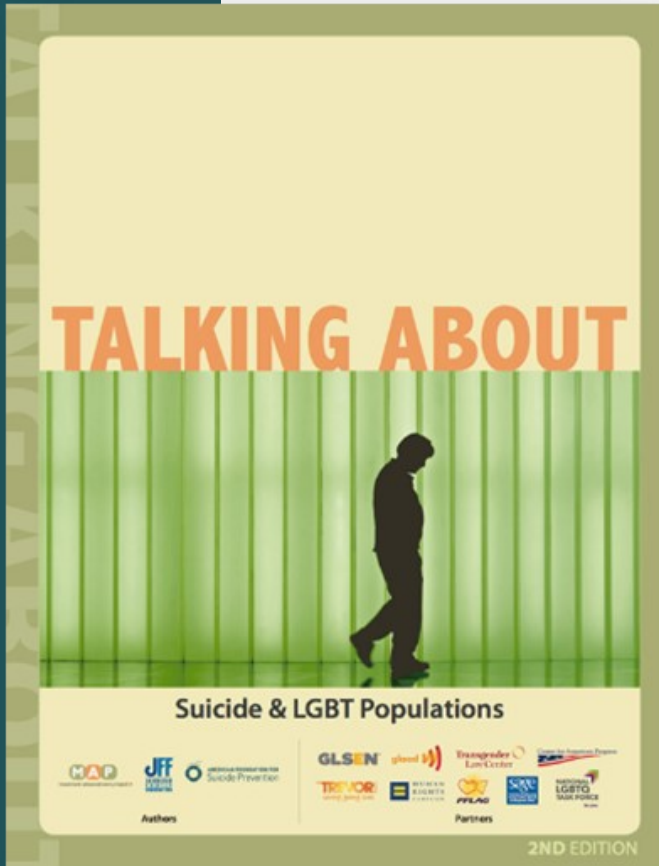
Was Junior Seau's Suicide Caused By Head Trauma?

Was Seau's death the result of a brain injury or mental health?

Like 28

HEALTH

*Robin Williams's Widow Points to Dementia as a Suicide Cause*



Suicidal behaviors in LGBT populations appear to be related to “minority stress”, which stems from the cultural and social prejudice attached to minority sexual orientation and gender identity. This stress includes individual experiences of *prejudice or discrimination, such as family rejection, harassment, bullying, violence, and victimization*. These negative outcomes, rather than minority sexual orientation or gender identity per se, appear to be the key risk factors for LGBT suicidal ideation and behavior.”

*Talk About Suicide and LGBT Populations*



# LGBTQ2S YOUTH SUICIDE

LGBTQ2S YOUTH ARE ESPECIALLY  
**VULNERABLE**

to mental health concerns, and face increased risk of physical & sexual exploitation, substance use & suicide.



**SUICIDE - 2<sup>ND</sup> LEADING  
CAUSE OF DEATH FOR  
YOUNG PEOPLE (AGES 10 - 24)**

**TRANSPHOBIA IS DANGEROUS AND LEADS TO SUICIDE  
TRANSPHOBIA KILLS**

The TransPULSE study (2010) investigated the health needs of trans people across Ontario, and they found:

**77%** SERIOUSLY CONSIDERED  
SUICIDE

**45%** ATTEMPTED  
SUICIDE



**SUPPORTIVE ENVIRONMENTS  
ARE KEY TO MENTAL HEALTH**



Youth who identify with and are connected to the LGBTQ2S community have significantly less internalized homophobia than youth who are not connected to their community.

Family acceptance of LGBTQ2S adolescents is associated with good mental and physical health in LGBTQ2S youth.

**LGBTQ2S YOUTH  
= 14X THE RISK  
OF SUICIDE  
THAN STRAIGHT  
CISGENDER YOUTH**

**WHY ARE LGBTQ2S  
PEOPLE AT HIGHER RISK?**

**STIGMA  
DISCRIMINATION  
REJECTION  
VIOLENCE  
TRAUMA  
PREJUDICE**



**RISK OF SUICIDE DECREASES BY**

**93%** ↓

**WITH STRONG FAMILY SUPPORT**

Written by Dr. Alex Abramovich (2016) SOURCES: Benegal, M. (2011). Mental health challenges and resilience in lesbian, gay and bisexual young adults: Biological and psychological internalization of minority stress and victimization. Concordia University, Montreal; The Trevor Project (2016). Facts about Suicide; Travers, R., Bauer, G., Pym, J., & Bradley, K. (2012) Impacts of Strong Parental Support for Trans Youth. A report prepared for Children's Aid Society of Toronto and Delisle Youth Services; TransPULSE (2010). Bauer, G., Boyce, M., Coertzen, T., Kay, M., Scartoris, K., Travers, R. (2010). Who are trans people in Ontario? Toronto: Trans PULSE E-Bulletin. Report No. 1/1.

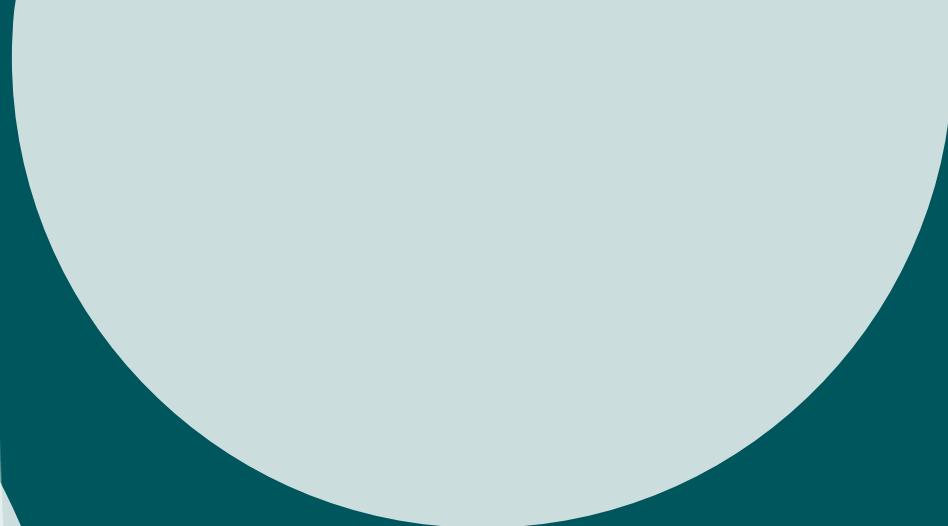
#ENDYOUTHHOMELESSNESS

INFOGRAPHIC DESIGN BY  
LIGHTUPTHESKY.CA



- Positive: highlights protective factors (supportive environments, family support) and risk factors
- Focus on severity and misuse of data
- No resource





# Positive Narrative

# Positive Narrative



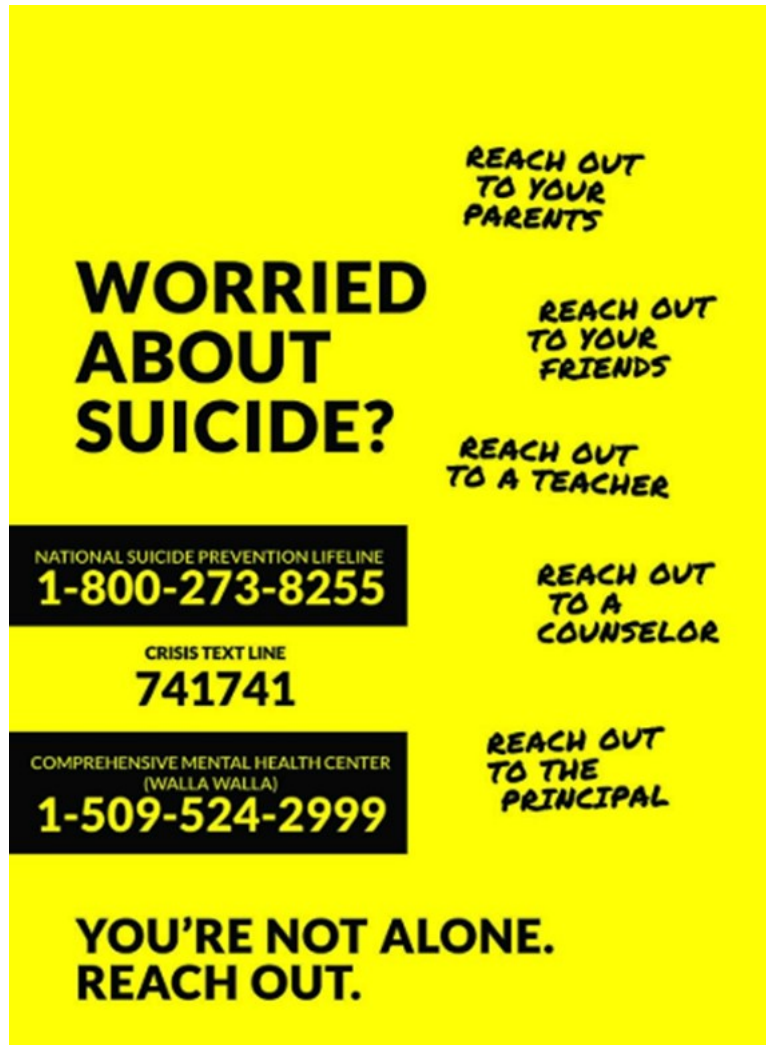
- Counter the “negative narrative”
- In every message: Help the public to *envision* prevention.
- Highlight resources

# Positive Narrative



- What we know about successful prevention
- Stories of people who were helped/  
Your own story
- Concrete actions people can take
- Program successes

# Examples



Poster

- Action Oriented
- Prevention Focused
- Gives option for support

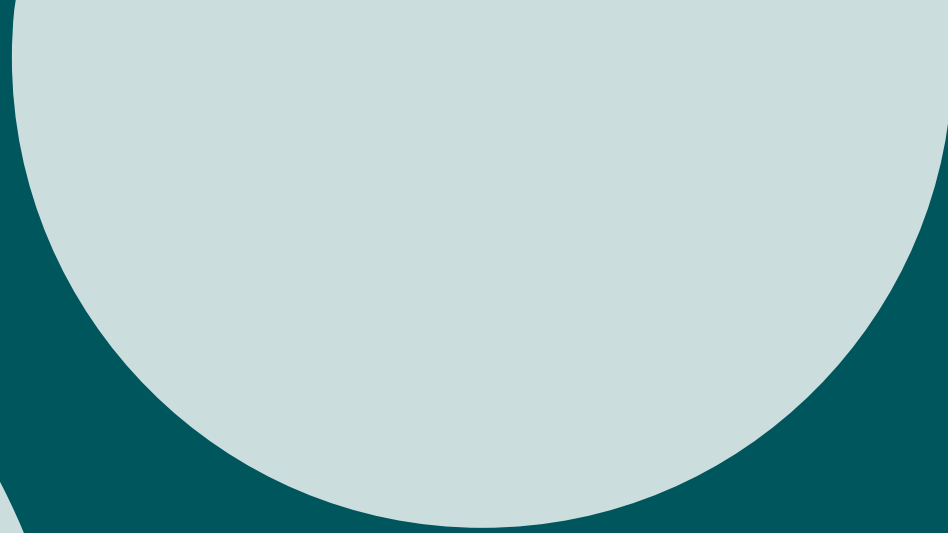
# Framework for Successful Messaging



For more successful messages:

Use all 4 elements:

- Strategy: Define goals, audiences & actions, integrate with other efforts, etc.
- Safety: Avoid “don’ts”
- Positive narrative: Stories of coping & resiliency; programmatic successes; actions audience can take; available resources & services, etc.
- Guidelines: Use message-specific best practices



# Review

# What's most important to focus on?

- If you only do ONE thing, include the crisis line number
- When possible, educate about warning signs
- Avoid details about method
- Quote experts
- These are recommendations (not guidelines, not rules, not standards)



# Working with Media as Partners

- “US” vs. “THEM”
- Have a Plan
- Simplify the Process
- Help Them Help You
- Be Gracious

# Tips for Success

- Always provide the Recommendations—  
email and hard copy
- Don't accept every opportunity that arises
- Stand up for telephone interviews
- Use the reporter's name during broadcasts
- YOUR TIPS?

# Social Media



NATIONAL SUICIDE PREVENTION LIFELINE 1-800-273-TALK (8255)

GET HELP LEARN GET INVOLVED PROVIDERS & PROFESSIONALS

1-800-273-8255 CHAT  
En Español | For Deaf & Hard of Hearing

## Support on Social Media

For over 10 years, the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline has worked with social media platforms and digital communities to establish recommended best practices in suicide prevention for social and digital media.

### Safety Processes on Social Media

If you are worried about someone on social media, you can contact safety teams, who will reach out to connect the user with the help they need. \*Note: Tumblr no longer directly responds to reports of suicide or self-harm.

SHARE [Facebook] [Twitter] [Email]

## Support on Social Media

Safety Processes on Social Media

Download the Social Media Toolkit

How to Engage on Social Media

Contact Us

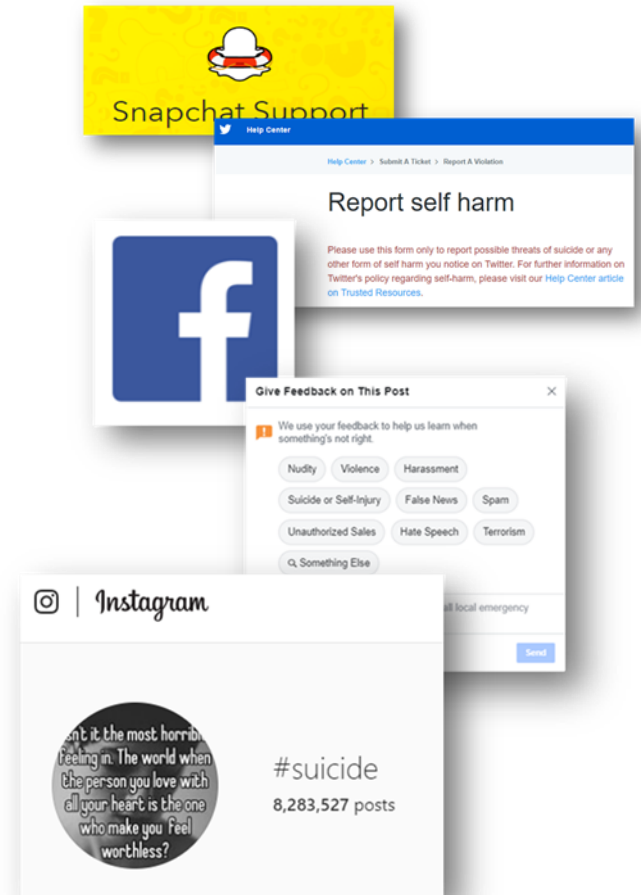
Facebook Twitter Instagram Snapchat YouTube Periscope

### Facebook

The Lifeline has worked with Facebook to develop their supportive community tools, which include resources, messages for you to use, and directly contacting Facebook.

[Facebook] Report Suicidal Content

From Reporting to Supporting

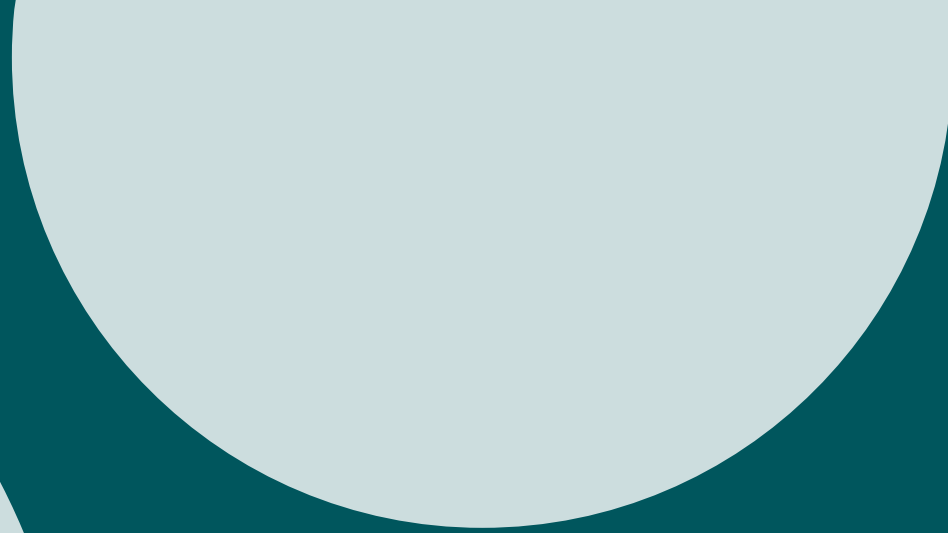


Snapchat Support

Report self harm

Give Feedback on This Post

#suicide 8,283,527 posts



# Resources



“A much better job needs to be done in the public health and suicide prevention community in terms of tailoring messages for specific audience segments.”

*-Key Informant (Charting the Future of Suicide Prevention)*

# ReportingOnSuicide.org

## reporting on suicide

Recommendations

Online Media

Examples

Find an Expert

Research

About

Other Languages

reporting  
on suicide

### Best Practices and Recommendations for Reporting on Suicide

#### Media Plays an Important Role in Preventing Suicide

1. Over 100 studies worldwide have found that risk of contagion is real and responsible reporting can reduce the risk of additional suicides.
2. Research indicates duration, frequency, and prominence are the most influential factors that increase risk of suicide contagion.
3. Covering suicide carefully can change perceptions, dispel myths and inform the public on the complexities of the issue.
4. Media reports can result in help-seeking when they include helpful resources and messages of hope and recovery.

#### Partner Organizations

These recommendations were established using a consensus model developed by SAVE. The process was led by SAVE and included leading national and international suicide prevention, public health and communication's experts, news organizations, reporters, journalism schools and internet safety experts. Collaborating organizations include:

American Association of Suicidology • American Foundation for Suicide Prevention • American Psychoanalytic Association • Annenberg Public Policy Center • Associated Press Managing Editors • Canterbury Suicide Project • University of Otago, Christchurch, New Zealand • Centers for Disease Control and Prevention • Crisis Text Line • Columbia University Department of Psychiatry • ConnectSafety.org • International Association for Suicide Prevention Task Force on Media and Suicide • Medical University of Vienna • National Alliance on Mental Illness • National Institute of Mental Health • National Press Photographers Association • The Net Safety Collaborative • National Suicide Prevention Lifeline • New York State Psychiatric Institute • The Poynter Institute • Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration • Suicide Awareness Voices of Education • Suicide Prevention Resource Center • Vibrant Emotional Health

**Recommendations:** Following these recommendations can assist in safe reporting on suicide.

#### AVOID...

- ✗ Describing or depicting the method and location of the suicide.
- ✗ Sharing the content of a suicide note.
- ✗ Describing personal details about the person.

#### INSTEAD...

- ✓ Report the death as a suicide; keep information about the location general.
- ✓ Report that a note was found and is under review.
- ✓ Keep information about the person general.

## Recommendations for Reporting on Suicide

Suicide is a public health issue. Media and online coverage of suicide should be informed by using best practices. Some suicide deaths may be newsworthy. However, the way media cover suicide can influence behavior negatively by contributing to contagion, or positively by encouraging help-seeking.

Download in English

See in Other Languages

# Guidelines



## Populations



## Channels



## Messengers

MAKING HEADLINES  
GUIDE TO ENGAGING THE  
MEDIA IN SUICIDE PREVENTION  
IN CALIFORNIA

And more...





**Save.org** and **Cisco** have joined forces to **support journalists and content creators** to reduce the risk of suicide contagion that happens when reporting best practices are not followed. In fact one study found that there was a **13% increase in deaths following reporting on celebrity suicides**.

Verify

Copy and paste your article here

## Suicide reporting guidelines

*Disclaimer 1* This tool cannot detect implicit blame, so please ensure that you avoid inadvertently **implicitly placing blame on a single factor**.

*Disclaimer 2* Excluding the method of suicide is the single most impactful way to reduce suicide's contagion effect; please ensure your article **omits implicit and explicit text and images** regarding the suicide method.

1. Exclude suicide method

2. Use appropriate language

3. Avoid blame

4. Include Education and Help

[reportingonsuicide.cisco.com/](https://reportingonsuicide.cisco.com/)

# Guidelines



Real Stories An initiative of the National Action Alliance for Suicide Prevention

## National Recommendations for Depicting Suicide

Guidance to help content creators craft stories about hope, and healing—aimed at saving lives and restoring



Convey that suicide is complex and often caused by a range of factors, rather than by a single event.

Show that help is available.

Portray characters with suicidal thoughts who do not go on to die by suicide.

### Depiction Recommendations

Avoid showing or describing the details about suicide methods.

Portray characters with suicidal thoughts who do not go on to die by suicide.

Depict the grieving and healing process of people who lose someone to suicide.

Use nonjudgmental language.

# Know the Signs Materials and Resources

**KNOW THE SIGNS** GET HELP NOW

Know the Signs >> Find the Words >> Reach Out

## PAIN ISN'T ALWAYS OBVIOUS.

Every day friends, family and co-workers suffer from the invisible wounds of emotional pain. Talking about this pain, feelings of suicide or the need for help may be too difficult and although their pain may go unseen most people thinking of suicide show some type of signs. They may be subtle, but they are there. By recognizing those signs, finding the words, and reaching out you have the power to make a difference, and the power to save a life.

RECOGNIZE THE WARNING SIGNS [Read On >](#)

LEARN HOW TO HAVE A CONVERSATION [Get Started >](#)

REACH OUT FOR ADDITIONAL RESOURCES [Learn More >](#)

SPREAD THE WORD [f](#) [t](#) [s](#) Media | About | Contact Us

[SuicideIsPreventable.org](http://SuicideIsPreventable.org)

Reconozca las señales >> Escuche y Dialogue >> Busque Ayuda **OBTIENGA AYUDA AHORA**

## RECONOZCA LAS SEÑALES

El sufrimiento no siempre se nota, pero la mayoría de las personas suicidas muestran algunas señales de lo que están pensando. Si observa aunque sea una de estas señales, actúe o diga algo inmediatamente ahora para informarse de lo que tendrá que estar preparado para ayudar a un amigo en un momento crucial como este.

Escoja una categoría

**"Un amigo decía cosas como: "No aguanto más, quiero acabar con todo."**

Expresan el deseo de morirse o de suicidarse

Dicen cosas vagas o sutiles.

1 2 3

COMPARTA LA INFORMACIÓN [f](#) [t](#) [s](#) Medios de Comunicación | Sobre Nosotros | Contáctenos | Resource Center | English

[ElSuicidioEsPrevenible.org](http://ElSuicidioEsPrevenible.org)



# The Directing Change Program

Sign up as a judge for the Directing Change Program to practice your messaging skills:

- As a judge you'll:
  - Screen and score ten 60-second films
  - All judging is done online
  - Takes about two hours
  - Occurs in Spring 2022

For more information, email:  
[Devin@DirectingChange.org](mailto:Devin@DirectingChange.org)





Q&A

# Thank you for attending!

For questions: [info@suicideispreventable.org](mailto:info@suicideispreventable.org)

To access the toolkit online:  
[www.suicideispreventable.org/prevention-kit.php](http://www.suicideispreventable.org/prevention-kit.php)



Funded by counties through the voter-approved Mental Health Services Act (Prop. 63).