

# Safe Messaging around Suicide

## A GUIDE FOR PUBLIC HEALTH AND PREVENTION ORGANIZATIONS

Communicating about suicide can help raise awareness and support of suicide prevention efforts, and identify those who may need extra support and connect them to services.

However, it is important to use care and caution when talking about suicide. Talking about suicide carelessly can increase the risk of an individual at risk of suicide. It can also increase stigma around suicide and mental health, making it less likely those in need will seek help when they need it most.

This guide aims to provide practical tips for public health and other professional organizations to talk about suicide in a way that mitigates risks, promotes help-seeking, and respects all individuals.

## What is safe messaging?

Certain ways of talking about suicide can alienate members of any community, sensationalize the issue, or even contribute to suicide by presenting it as a glamorous, or even preferred, way of dealing with problems.

Those who are at risk of suicide, or those who are close to a person who died by suicide, can be particularly affected by the messages we use.

Safe messaging avoids harmful messages that might increase suicide risk in individuals or undermine suicide prevention goals. Safe messaging reduces stigma and encourages help-seeking. The heart of the messaging is respectful and places emphasis on care and concern.

## What language should I use?

The language we use not only helps prevent suicide, but also shapes our perceptions around the issue of suicide.

## Do's and don'ts of suicide language

Do use	Do not	The problem
Neutral words Examples: "Died by suicide" "Took his or her life"	Associate with crime or sin Example: "Committed suicide"	Associating suicide with a crime or sin.
Speak neutrally and factually Examples: "Suicide death" "Died by suicide" "Ended his/her life" "Attempt to end his/her life" "Nonfatal self injury"	Imply suicide was desired Examples: "Successful suicide/attempt" "Completed suicide" "Failed or unsuccessful attempt"	Presenting suicide as a desired or positive outcome.

Do use	Do not	The problem
Non-sensational words Examples: “Increasing/decreasing rates” “rising” “higher”	Sensationalized words Examples: “suicide epidemic” “skyrocketing rates” “alarming”	Makes suicide seem like a sensational topic.
Words of empathy and care Examples: “concerning suicide rates” “this trend is worrisome”	Negative words that blames and adds stigma Examples: “troubling suicide rates” “problematic” “disturbing trend”	Adds blame and increases stigma.
Talk about suicide in an appropriate context “she died by suicide”	Use the word suicide to describe a quick decline or the self-ending of something other than life. Examples: “social suicide” “career suicide”	Minimizes seriousness of suicide.

## Building a narrative of hope and resilience

Public communications help create stories or narratives about suicide and suicide prevention. This narrative can influence how people think, feel and act regarding suicide and suicide prevention.

Too often, public messaging conveys negative narratives about suicide; for example, suicide is a common, acceptable, or inevitable response to stress and/or depression.

Public messaging often focuses on the problem of suicide and depression. This can discourage people from help-seeking behaviors – no one wants to add to the problem.

Building a narrative of hope and resilience can help change public perception to one that believes suicide is preventable, recovery is possible, and help is available.

Focusing on the positive does not mean hiding the tragedy of suicide or never talking about suicide as a problem. Rather, the goal is increase the likelihood that the public will also receive positive and helpful messages of suicide prevention. No single message alone creates a narrative, but every message adds to it. By including positive messages of suicide prevention, we can help shape the public’s views and response.

## How can I contribute to a positive narrative?

A positive narrative is an overarching theme, not a predefined message or particular language.

Positive narratives might include:

- Helplines and information on support services and programs.
- Concrete and realistic actions that a particular audience can take to prevent suicide.
- Examples of effective suicide prevention efforts or program accomplishments.
- Personal stories of coping, resilience, and recovery.
- Stories of people reaching out for help and receiving it.

## Imagery

Like the words we use, images and design choices can shape the narrative. Images associated with suicide often focus on the problem and convey hopelessness, despair, and inevitability.

A better practice is to focus on people enjoying life or connecting with others for help. Think of this as showing the *positive result* of suicide prevention efforts. People enjoying life or getting help can remind audiences of what is trying to be achieved, or where they can go.

### Don't use

- graphic images of suicide or the location where someone has died by suicide.
- images of isolation, stress, or depression.
- images of common methods of suicide.
- dark, threatening, worrying colors and branding.
- sensational images.

### Don't use – examples



### Do use — examples



## Preventable deaths of suicide and substance use

The United States has seen a rise in deaths from opioids, alcohol, and suicide. The phrases “Deaths of Despair,” “Diseases of Despair and Disconnection,” and other like phrases have been used in the past to describe the relationship between these three conditions. MDH conducted a qualitative research study and found that this phrasing did not resonate with communities. It added barriers to connecting with them, and left community members feeling hopeless.

Instead, MDH recommends using the phrase “preventable deaths of suicide and substance use,” or similar language emphasising preventable deaths. Our hope is that by focusing on prevention we can build a positive narrative and call to action for suicide and substance use prevention.

## Public vs. Private messaging

The call for positive messaging pertains only to public messaging, and does not extend to non-public communications.

### Public Communications

- Education/awareness campaigns and materials
- Websites and blogs
- Newsletters
- Fundraising appeals
- Event publicity
- Social media
- Press Releases, media interviews
- Public Presentations
- Publicly available publications
- Any public-facing messages or materials

### Non-public communications

- Private conversations
- Doctor/patient interactions
- Interactions with people in crisis
- One-on-one conversations with legislators or policymakers
- Talking in therapeutic settings
- Training to professional audience

## Crisis resources

Always include crisis resources. In Minnesota, there are three main resources to provide:

- [National Suicide Prevention Lifeline 1-800-273-TALK\(5255\) \(https://suicidepreventionlifeline.org\)](https://suicidepreventionlifeline.org) – The Lifeline provides 24/7, free and confidential support for people in distress, prevention and crisis resources for you or your loved ones, and best practices for professionals.
- [State Mobile Crisis Services \(https://mn.gov/dhs/people-we-serve/people-with-disabilities/health-care/childrens-mental-health/resources/crisis-contacts.jsp\)](https://mn.gov/dhs/people-we-serve/people-with-disabilities/health-care/childrens-mental-health/resources/crisis-contacts.jsp) – Every county in Minnesota provides Mobile Crisis Services for both children and adults that may be experiencing suicidal feelings or mental health crisis. Crisis services are available within each county 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. County crisis teams are available for phone support as well as face-to-face crisis help.
- [Crisis Text Line \(https://www.crisistextline.org\)](https://www.crisistextline.org) - Text MN to 741 741. The Crisis Text Line provides free crisis support 24/7 for any crisis.

## **Additional resources on safe messaging:**

**[National Action Alliance for Suicide Prevention – Framework for Successful Messaging \(http://suicidepreventionmessaging.org/\)](http://suicidepreventionmessaging.org/)**

The Framework for Successful Messaging is a resource to help people messaging about suicide to develop messages that are strategic, safe, positive, and make use of relevant guidelines and best practices. This is an in-depth resource.

**[Reporting on Suicide \(http://reportingonsuicide.org/\)](http://reportingonsuicide.org/)**

This resource was developed specifically for media and reporters to understand best practices in reporting on suicide. The way media cover suicide can influence behavior negatively or positively.