

A guide for media reporting on defence and veteran suicide

Defence and veteran suicide and its impact on current and ex-serving members of the Australian Defence Force and their families is an important issue to be reported - including allowing for the voices of those with lived experience and others to be heard. However, the way we report on suicide needs to be considered.

Evidence suggests that some ways of presenting suicide in one-way public communication like the media can increase suicidal behaviour in the community, but there are also ways to mitigate those risks, decrease stigma and increase help-seeking.

This guide aims to provide some practical tips on safe ways to report on suicide, psychological distress and issues that may emerge from the Royal Commission into Defence and Veteran Suicide. This will help to ensure that potential risks for defence personnel, veterans, their families and the broader community are reduced.

What language should I use?

Certain ways of reporting on suicide can impact members of the community, sensationalise or inadvertently contribute to suicide being presented as glamorous or an option for dealing with problems.

People who are at risk of suicide, or bereaved by suicide, can be particularly impacted by language. It is important to use language that is in line with best practice guidelines for media reporting communication (outlined below).

Issue	Problematic	Preferred
Presenting suicide as a desired outcome	✗ 'successful suicide' 'unsuccessful suicide'	✓ 'died by suicide' 'took their own life'
Associating suicide with crime or sin	✗ 'committed suicide' 'commit suicide'	✓ 'took their own life' 'died by suicide'
Sensationalising suicide	✗ 'suicide epidemic'	✓ 'increasing rates' 'higher rates'
Language glamourising a suicide attempt	✗ 'failed suicide' 'suicide bid'	✓ 'suicide attempt' 'non-fatal attempt'
Gratuitous use of the term 'suicide'	✗ 'political suicide' 'suicide mission'	✓ refrain from using the term suicide out of context

What details should I avoid?

- News reports that include descriptions of method and location of suicide have been linked to increased rates of suicide by that method or at the location mentioned. Avoid discussing specific details where possible, and if needed only discuss in general terms (for example: 'local lookout' rather than the specific site or 'medications' instead of detailing the exact brand or quantities).
- Avoid simplifying the situation or death. Suicide is a complex issue and no one factor leads to someone taking their own life.
- Consider any cultural protocols (for example, whether it is appropriate to name an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander person who has died).

How should reporting about defence and veteran suicide be framed?

Suicide is a sensitive and emotional topic for many people. Ensure that your reporting about suicide, including proceedings and findings from the Royal Commission, **inform** rather than **alarm** the community.

- Before reporting, consider the compounding effect of prominent and ongoing reporting on defence and veteran suicide, and other issues impacting on defence personnel, veterans and their families.
- Ensure information is accurate. Communicating unsubstantiated or inaccurate information is unhelpful to defence personnel, veterans, their families and the broader community.
- Where possible, provide information about the full range of factors and experiences that may contribute to suicidal thoughts and behaviours among defence personnel, veterans and their families.
- Ensure that key findings from data or reviews can be easily understood by the community. Avoid technical language or jargon that would not be understood by a general audience.
- Ensure your language does not sensationalise suicide or suggest there is nothing that can be done.
- Look for opportunities to promote stories about recovery, or things that have worked for people with lived experience of suicidal distress.

What else can I do?

- When reporting on suicide, always refer to the *Mindframe* guidelines at www.mindframe.org.au/guidelines
- When reporting on suicide, include information regarding relevant support services to ensure anyone potentially distressed can seek immediate help.
- An example help-seeking card with relevant support services is available with this guide and may be included in news stories or shared publicly.
- Reporting on suicide can be distressing for media professionals and it's important to be prepared to reach out for support if required. *Mindframe* in consultation with the Dart Centre Asia Pacific, has developed information and resources on the welfare of journalists when reporting on suicide, mental illness and other traumatic events - www.mindframe.org.au/need-help/self-care

For further information, please contact the project team on 02 4924 6900 or email mindframe@health.nsw.gov.au