

Case Study 1: Teen Suicide

Lecturer notes

A note for lecturers

This case study is designed to give students some practice in considering issues associated with reporting or communicating about mental illness and suicide so they will be better prepared to deal with such a situation, should it arise, when they are working as journalists or public relations practitioners. Mental illness and suicide are very sensitive and complex issues, and it is natural that some people may feel uncomfortable talking about them. Usually, these feelings are temporary and do not cause serious distress. Talking about mental illness or suicide in an educational and supportive environment provides lecturers with an opportunity to advise students about counselling and other services available on campus, and to encourage students experiencing problems to seek professional help by talking to a GP, health professional or call a crisis counselling service such as:

- Kids Helpline 1800 55 1800 (5-25 years)
- Lifeline 13 11 14
- Suicide Call Back Service 1300 659 467

For online information visit: www.headspace.org.au and www.reachout.com

For further information and advice about preparing your class for this case study, you should refer to the document 'Discussing sensitive issues' which can be found on the *Mindframe* for journalism and public relations education website at www.mindframe-media.info

Suicide is a legitimate topic for community and media discussion. However, communication about suicide needs to be approached with great care, especially where that communication occurs in the media. Journalists are urged to consider the way they report on and discuss suicide. Similarly, people who may provide information to the media must also consider the potential impact of a story on vulnerable members of the community. This case-study will introduce students to the complexities and challenges of managing communication where a death by suicide has occurred.

The Scenario

The case study presents a scenario in which the body of a teenage boy has been found at a local park. The body has been found by two boys walking home from school. A news reporter is sent to the scene to conduct interviews with police and witnesses. The reporter discovers that the dead boy is the son of the Mayor. The boy's mother is also well-known in the community for her work in charity fundraising. The video provides footage from an interview with the policeman at the scene.

From the brief footage, the following points can be determined:

- The boy appears to have taken his own life;
- This is the second son that the mayor has lost, with speculation about whether the first son also took his own life;



There is mention of the fact he was in his school uniform and smelled of alcohol. One of the youths who discovered the deceased boy had a phone, which he used to immediately post an update to his Facebook page about what he had witnessed. His post read:

OMG just saw a dead body. Loser Lomas hung himself. Crazy.

The boy's Facebook privacy settings were such that this information was visible publicly.

The journalist, having witnessed the boy posting the mobile update, searches for and accesses his page later that day. Within hours, other young people from the school have initiated a "memorial page" to the student who has died and posted various tributes, condolences and personal anecdotes.

Using the Scenario

Students are required to consider how they will liaise with publics and stakeholders, what mechanisms they will use to communicate with various publics, and how they will manage the media, whilst keeping in mind the potential for further harm that could be associated with this tragic event if communication is not managed well. This scenario can be used as the basis for a class exercise in subjects such as issues and crisis management, media relations, ethics and law or introductory subjects in public relations. In considering the scenario and questions, you should refer students to the document *Issues and Impact: Communicating mental illness and suicide*, for an overview of key ethical and public relations issues involved in managing communication about suicide. This resource and additional reference materials are available on the *Mindframe* for Universities website (www.mindframe-media.info).

Class Exercise

To further explore the complexities and challenges of this situation, students can be allocated to one of the following four options. Allow students time to discuss the questions in small groups and then compare and contrast the approach of each group. Alternatively you could ask groups to consider options 1, 2 and 3 simultaneously and consider the different organisations in relation to each question.

Option 1a

You are employed in the public relations unit of the Department of Education. The principal of St Hughes High School has contacted you to inform you of the death of the young person and to inform you that he has already had one phone call from the media as well as two distressed calls from parents. It is Department policy for the public relations unit to manage such crises on behalf of individual schools.

Option 1b

You are employed as the Public Relations liaison for the collection of schools comprising St Hughes' College. The principal of the Raden campus has contacted you to inform you of the death of the young person and to inform you that he has already had one phone call from the media as well as two distressed calls from parents. It is College policy for the Public Relations officer to respond on behalf of the College and campus, under the instruction of the campus Principal.

Option 2

You are in charge of public relations for the mayor's office. You receive a call from the mayor's personal assistant to inform you of the tragic death of the mayor's second son and to let you know that reporters have already made contact with the office. In addition, the personal assistant overheard other staff speculating about whether the mayor would resign after this second tragedy. The mayor and his wife are both grief stricken and undecided about what to do.

Option 3

You work for a local suicide prevention organisation and have just applied for funding to develop youth specific programs in the local area. This tragic incident may provide an opportunity to promote the importance of your service and lobby for the funding you need. Staff are divided about whether they should get involved in this incident.

Discussion Questions and Exercises

Identifying the issues

1. Identify who your key stakeholders and publics will be. Consider both internal and external stakeholders and publics.
2. Identify the key roles that will need to be in place and who might fill these roles
3. Will there be a spokesperson nominated? What issues should this person be briefed about prior to speaking with the media?
4. Identify what further information you might need to know before making a response. How would you go about obtaining it?
5. Brainstorm some of the key issues the media, or other publics, may focus on or want information about.

Responding to the situation

1. What kind of preparation from a public relations perspective should have already been in place to help deal with this situation?
2. What kind of resources will you need to manage your response (for example, staffing)?
3. How will you communicate with your publics and stakeholders? What specific tactics might you use? What kind of communication and tactics should be avoided?
4. Will your response be different for each communication platform that is involved in this situation? Why or why not?
5. Consider whether your organisation should release a statement or make comment to the media regarding the event. Things you will need to consider include:
 - The implications for officially releasing or confirming information given the detail that is readily available via social media about the death;
 - The news values associated with the story and the likelihood that the media will report the story regardless of a response from your organisation;
 - What specific tactics you would use to involve and communicate with the media;
 - What sensitivities do you need to be aware of and include in your response in order to adhere to the *Mindframe* guidelines and principles of *Mindframe* for Universities?
6. In responding to this situation, what are some of the ethical considerations that arise in this situation?
7. How might you manage the impact of this situation within your organisation?
8. In a crisis situation it is generally best to be proactive with the media and provide an immediate response. How does this change in a situation where a death by suicide has occurred?
9. How will you manage possible risks to the community?



10. How will you monitor and continue to manage the interests of your client, both around the incident and for their organisation long term?

11. How will you measure the success of your response plan and its implementation?

Related fact sheets are available online at www.mindframe-media.info

Assignment or Individual Task

Allocate students to one of the three options outlined above. Then ask them to develop one of the following:

A. **A plan for managing the crisis**; outlining what systems you will put in place, resources and expertise you will draw on, how you will identify and communicate with stakeholders and publics and any other ethical considerations that you think may be important.

B. **A Media Relations Plan**; including an outline of what media response you will provide, what research you may need to do, the timing of communication, how the issue will be handled, which platforms and media you will engage with, who will be the spokesperson or spokespeople, and how these people will be briefed. You may also want to include an outline of the specific ethical considerations posed by this scenario.

Assessment Tip

Use the lecturer's notes above to assist in assessing the task. Ensure students have considered good public relations planning as well as the ethics.

Discussion Questions & Lecturer's Notes

Identifying the issues

1. Identify who your key stakeholders and publics will be. Consider both internal and external stakeholders and publics.

- For the Department of Education this will include: the school community – teachers and other school staff, students and parents; the general public; other services such as police, the mayor's office, mental health and suicide prevention services etc;
- For the mayor's office this will include: the party leaders and other council members; the general public; other services – such as the police and emergency services;
- For the suicide prevention organisation this will include: Staff and volunteers within the local branch and at a national level where appropriate; the general community; online communities; young people; the school community and potentially council staff who may be affected by the death.

2. Identify the key roles that will need to be in place and who might fill these roles?

- Spokesperson;
- Public Relations advisor;
- Legal;

- Human resources;
- Debriefing – school, students, mayor’s office staff

3. Will there be a spokesperson nominated? What issues should this person be briefed about prior to speaking with the media?

Students should indicate the relevant spokespeople for their organisation and also consider providing this person or people with:

- Enough background information about the situation;
- A list of information the organisation is happy to discuss or release;
- Clear information about the potential risks of talking about suicide in certain ways and via various platforms – with instructions not to discuss method or location of deaths;
- Notes on the critical issues that the media may ask about – e.g. the claim of alcohol use / youth suicide – and the agreed response to those questions;
- Prevention information that could be included in their comments – how people can care for each other, common risk factors and warning signs etc;
- Information about support services that could be promoted to assist people who are distressed or affected.

4. Identify what further information you might need to know before making a response. How would you go about obtaining it?

Some issues to consider are:

- Has the boy’s identity been confirmed and relevant people notified? You would not want to make a response and reveal the boy’s identity if people have not been notified. This information may be sourced from the police or potentially the mayor’s office;
- What other details about the boy and his family would need to be considered. Should the death of the first son be mentioned?
- Should details of the death be released? International research evidence suggests that giving details about a method or location of suicide could lead to further deaths when that is communicated through the media. Consider what information the media and other stakeholders already know and how you might manage the flow of information;
- Given the above point, consider the information that is available via social media. Would you access it? How would you go about accessing it? Will you make use of it? If not, why not?
- Contacting relevant experts in mental health and suicide prevention to give accurate background information about youth suicide, current trends, and what types of suicide prevention messages should be communicated at this time;
- What internal and external supports are available for people affected by this incident? For example, there may be Employee Assistance Programs available for staff. For the wider community, telephone counselling services may need to be promoted. Organisations may decide to use online platforms such as Facebook to promote help seeking information.

5. Brainstorm some of the key issues the media, or other publics, may focus on or want information about.

For the Department of Education this may include:

- The young man had been drinking. Did this take place on school grounds?



- The incident happened during school hours so should the school have been aware of his disappearance?
- What kind of emotional support programs does the school have in place currently to help prevent this type of tragedy?
- Facebook, privacy and student welfare issues.

For the mayor's office this may include:

- Links between the deaths of the mayor's two sons;
- Personal comments relating to the family and their children;
- Questions about whether the mayor and his wife were good parents;
- Whether the government is doing enough about suicide prevention.

For the suicide prevention organisation this might include:

- The types of local issues that might have contributed to the death (e.g. drugs, bullying, identity issues such as sexuality, lack of opportunity for young men etc);
- Whether there are adequate local services; online risks for young people; whether more funding is required;
- Facts and statistics about suicide in the area; what they think could be done to prevent more suicides etc.

Public response via social media could potentially become the focus of media attention more than the incident itself. This may change the nature of reporting about the incident, and the handling of detailed information.

Responding to the situation

1. What kind of preparation from a public relations perspective should have already been in place to help deal with this situation?

Answers might consider the following:

- Crisis management plan and crisis management team with clearly identified roles and responses;
- Additional Crisis Management plans might be required specifically for the potential impact of social media communications (for your organisation / client AS WELL AS vulnerable populations);
- A list of key spokespeople that can be drawn on if a public response is required;
- Lists of key contacts in certain areas, for example, within the organisation;
- Links with mental health and suicide prevention organisations that could be drawn upon for advice.

2. What kind of resources will you need to manage your response (for example, staffing)?

Answers might consider the following:

- Staffing;
- Information technologies, telecommunications;
- Funds for external contractors or services e.g. counsellors.

3. How will you communicate with your publics and stakeholders? What specific tactics might you use? What kind of communication and tactics should be avoided?

Answers may consider the following (depending on the specific option students are working on):

- Parents and students may be contacted by mail, telephone, a school assembly or meeting, classroom discussion, the school website (although this is public so information will need to be monitored);
- Strategies that the Department of Education, and specifically the school, might employ to communicate appropriately with staff and students and ways to support both of those groups, through information, counselling etc. The school may also want to consider information they can give parents to talk about the incident with their children, special support that may be required for close friends. Should the school investigate whether they breached any duty of care and how they might change policies and practices to try to prevent another death?;
- Staff within each organisation may be contacted by email, letter, a staff intranet (that is not publicly available), staff meeting, telephone;
- The mayor's office will need to consider how to communicate with staff to keep them informed and provide support for those who may need it. They will also need to consider how the mayor is supported to return to work and what skills and support all staff may need to ensure this is done in the most appropriate way;
- The broader community can be reached through the media (although consideration would need to be given to whether this is a good idea), through websites etc;
- Consider the impact of social networking sites such as Facebook. What might be the implications for students or individuals posting messages on these sites, given media and other vulnerable people may get access to the information. How might it be moderated?;
- The suicide prevention organisation will need to consider whether staff should be talking about this incident outside of their organisation, how they communicate responsibilities to staff and generate ideas for how their expertise may be used to support the school, the council and other stakeholders;
- The social media forums may provide alternative modes for delivering your message to your target publics (e.g. you may wish to use the Facebook page to role model more responsible language use).

4. Will your response be different for each communication platform that is involved in this situation? Why or why not?

Consider the following:

- What does the evidence say about communicating about suicide via mainstream media? What does it say about social media? There is a dearth of evidence about the impact of social media communication about suicide on vulnerable audiences or publics. As such it is important to consider ways to minimise potential harm, such as focusing on help-seeking information and avoiding communication of detailed information such as method and location;
- The way people engage with each different communication platform, and the messages they take from these, varies;
- Information exchanged via social media or user-generated platforms circulates very rapidly in comparison to traditional forms such as print media;



- When is it better to “strike at the heart of the crisis” and engage directly with consumers or publics, such as via social media?
- Consider the speed of circulation relevant to platform:
 - If reported as offensive, Facebook posts can quickly be removed;
 - Twitter is limited to 140 characters, however once circulated information is much harder to remove;
 - If there were images (e.g. of the death) these would be more likely to circulate via handheld devices such as mobile phones and MMS.

5. Consider whether your organisation should release a statement or make comment to the media regarding the event. Things you will need to consider include:

- The immediate availability of information and speed of social media circulation (i.e. before police confirmation or statement) could impact management of communications or implementation of communications plans;
- The implications for officially releasing or confirming information given the detail that is readily available via social media about the death:
 - Releasing information and detail about the death of the young man could have an impact on others - such as risk of copycat suicide by other students, distress it could cause to the family, friends, and school community;
 - Appropriate use of language to ensure any potential for further harm and distress is minimised.
- The news values associated with the story and the likelihood that the media will report the story regardless of a response from your organisation:
 - This story has many news values making it likely to be reported – it is local, happened in a public place, to a young person, who is the son of the mayor. It makes for a dramatic and emotional story. Given that information is readily available via Facebook, and if the media will report the story anyway, it may be better to provide information to the media that ensures that the angle, context and content are responsible and unlikely to cause further harm. Students should consider what information they would include/exclude from a media response.
- What specific tactics you would use to involve and communicate with the media?
 - What sensitivities do you need to be aware of and include in your response in order to adhere to the *Mindframe* guidelines and principles of *Mindframe* for Universities?;
 - Students should indicate when they would make a response – i.e., immediately or in time;
 - Who would they nominate as spokespeople, and what type of media would they work with?
 - Would the organisation take the opportunity to explain to journalists the importance of treating the story with great care – noting the need to refrain from discussing location and method, and the importance of highlighting available supports for people who are distressed?

6. In responding to this situation, what are some of the ethical considerations that arise in this situation?

- People who have been directly affected by a suicide death can be experiencing grief and the effects of trauma. They may not be in an optimal state to make an informed decision about media involvement;
- People who have lost someone to suicide in their close circle of friends or family are themselves at further lifetime risk of suicide, just by being exposed to the death. The period directly after the event, and then critical times like anniversaries, birthdays, Christmas can be particularly distressing for people;
- Many people believe that by telling their story (in all its detail) they could help others to prevent the same thing happening. This may or may not be the case. News reporting and communication that is just about the death is more likely to increase the chances of other deaths, rather than be protective. That is not to say that suicide stories should never be covered. However, great care needs to be taken to ensure the message that are promoted are about prevention and likely to have positive outcomes for the audience;
- Media may not handle the interview appropriately, and could add to the guilt and grief of the bereaved;
- Both social media and traditional media can be consumed and contributed to in isolation from other people. In particular, user-generated content on such forums can have considerable risks associated for vulnerable participants.

It is extremely difficult to monitor the wellbeing of individuals contributing to social network pages or other online forums because posts can be misinterpreted, identities cannot be confirmed and the communication exchange is by its nature less conversational;

Ethics - How much of this information is actually communicable according to client rights and interests, practice codes of ethics, guidelines for communicating / reporting?

7. How might you manage the impact of this situation within your organisation?

If there are claims of negligence on behalf of your organisation or individuals within your organisation, then it may seem reasonable to defend those allegations in the media. However, students will need to consider whether more public discussion of the situation will be helpful or potentially harmful to the wider community. Students should also consider the source and or platform upon which such claims have featured, and the likely interpretation of publics viewing this platform.

For the suicide prevention organisation, this may be a great time to advocate for more funding. However, this needs to be evaluated against the potential public risk of having this debate in the media. Are there other ways to achieve this? How could new media technologies be appropriated for this aim?

8. How will you manage possible risks to the community?

A focus on help-seeking options, and promotion of help-seeking behaviours, are the best ways to minimise potential harm in the community. By doing this, students can manage the communication to offer hopeful messages and solutions rather than negative or sensational information. When communicating about suicide, students should always include 24-hour crisis support helplines such as Lifeline, Mensline, Kids Helpline or the Suicide Callback Service. More information about help-seeking information can be found on the *Mindframe* for Universities website. For a quick reference guide to crisis contact numbers, refer to the Student Quick Reference card, available here: www.mindframe-media.info



9. In a crisis situation it is generally best to be proactive with the media and provide an immediate response. How does this change in a situation where a death by suicide has occurred? How is this impacted by social media?

Giving prominence to a report about suicide (i.e. as front page news, as the lead story on television or radio, or as the feature of a talk-back program or current affairs feature) may inadvertently glorify the act for those who are vulnerable, and may be distressing to families bereaved by suicide.

Although one of the organisations listed and/or media organisations may be keen to explain to people why a needless death has occurred, you need to consider whether this actually helps or hinders the community's understanding of suicide. For example, you may inadvertently portray suicide as someone's way of solving their problems.

Students will need to consider if other organisations are responding or making public comment. At this stage, the media can access enough information for extensive coverage. There is a chance that making a quick public response would give them a responsible angle to cover the story.

Your organisation's response may lead to others doing the same – giving the story more traction and profile;

- In considering monitoring and management of the message, attention to online news discussion threads and commentary, as well as issues-based blogs, may also be advised.

10. How will you monitor and continue to manage the interests of your client, both around the incident and for their organisation long term?

Consider:

- What are likely to be some of the long-term interests of your client?
- How will anniversaries of the death be handled?
- How will the organisation's reputation be impacted by this event – will it change the way their publics engage with them?
- What will you monitor to measure these impacts?

11. How will you measure the success of your response plan and its implementation?

Consider the following:

- Revisit the aim of your response plan – have you achieved this aim, in part or in full?
- Look at the plan in terms of individual components. What worked well? What didn't work? What are the reasons for these successes and drawbacks? What you do differently in future?
- Did you include evaluation and measurement of success as part of your planning? If not, how might you do this if you had to do the plan again?
- How do you determine "success"? What kind of response plan "successes" might have ethical drawbacks in terms of responsible communication about suicide?