

## Case Study 1: Teen Suicide

### Student notes

This case study is designed to give students some practice in considering issues associated with reporting and communicating about mental illness or suicide, so that they will be better prepared to deal with such situations should they arise, when they are working as a journalist or public relations practitioner. Mental illness and suicide are 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. However, if students do become distressed as a result of using these materials or because of other problems, and these feelings continue, they should talk to someone they trust such as a lecturer, tutor, or counsellor at their university. Students can also talk 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](http://www.headspace.org.au) and [www.reachout.com](http://www.reachout.com)

Suicide and mental health issues in general are legitimate topics for community and media discussion. However, communication about suicide should be done with great care, especially where that communication is occurring in the media. Journalists are urged to consider the way they report on and discuss suicide in the media. 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 is designed to expose you 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

You will be required to consider how you will liaise with publics and stakeholders, what mechanisms you will use to communicate with various publics, and how you 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. The following Options and Questions provide a guide for analysing the scenario from a public relations perspective. Your lecturer or tutor may ask you to look at all of these questions or a selection only. In considering the scenario and questions, you should refer 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](http://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?



### 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.