

Case Study 4: A Communication Project in Suicide Prevention

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

The Example: Life Communications Project

LIFE Communications is a National Project, funded by the Australian Government Department of Health and Ageing as part of the National Suicide Prevention Strategy (NSPS). The project is managed by Crisis Support Services Inc. a leading professional telephone counselling and training provider.

LIFE Communications aims to improve communication between suicide and self-harm prevention stakeholders in Australia. The project achieves this by providing access to a range of resources and research, including the latest information from national and community based projects in prevention, intervention and postvention. These projects are informed by the *Living Is For Everyone (LIFE)* Framework to shape and guide suicide prevention activity in Australia.

LIFE Communications builds networks in suicide prevention between key stakeholders through a range of strategic and targeted communication activities. The LIFE website is the primary medium of communication. It provides the latest research on suicide, news on developments, as well as opportunities to discuss issues and share knowledge, resources and information.

The project team also promotes stakeholder use of the LIFE Framework and its accompanying research and evidence document, and a set of fact sheets, making it easy for them to access relevant information and apply it to their suicide prevention activities.



The aims of the LIFE Communications Project are to:

1. Provide stakeholders with access to the Living Is For Everyone suite of resources;
2. Provide stakeholders with access to the latest information, activities and resources in suicide prevention;
3. Provide stakeholders with a vehicle to contribute their learnings and draw on each other's expertise;
4. Facilitate clear and effective communication channels across a broad range of suicide prevention stakeholders in Australia.

There is further information about the Life Communications Project in *Handout 4*.

Using the Example

This case-study will allow students to think about the different communication strategies they might employ to promote a Suicide Prevention Resource to a particular target audience. They will need to work through planning and background research for the project, how to reach the target audience, what communication strategies they will employ, whether they will use media and how they might evaluate outcomes. While exposing students to the key components of developing a project or communication strategy, it will also allow students to explore the particular aspects that make suicide or suicide prevention different to other topics they may need to handle in the future.

There are two options for using this case study:

1. Provide students with *Case Study 4A: Developing a Communication Project about Suicide Prevention* and ask them to develop a plan based on the project brief and discussion questions provided. They can do this as a small group or individually. As an optional exercise, you can get students to compare and contrast their approach with that of the LIFE Communications Team (outlined in *Handout 4A: The LIFE Communications Project*).
2. Provide students with *Case Study 4B: Analysing a Communication Project about Suicide Prevention* and *Handout 4A: The LIFE Communications Project*. Using the discussion questions provided, students can analyse the approach taken by the LIFE Communications team. This can be done in a small group or individually.

In considering the example and questions, you should refer students to *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 further reference materials are available on the *Mindframe* for Universities website (www.mindframe-media.info).

This Case Study can be used as the basis for a class exercise in subjects such as Campaign Strategies, Strategic Project Management and Community Engagement.

Case Study 4A: Developing a Communication Project about Suicide Prevention

The Task

Provide students with Student Notes for *Case Study 4A: Developing a Communication Project about Suicide Prevention* and get them to work through the discussion questions provided. The questions provide a guide for developing a plan for how students might manage this communication project. You may ask the students to look at all of these questions or a selection only. Below you will find brief lecturer's notes with suggestions about the types of things you may expect to see in a student's answer to each question.

Research

1. Write a situation analysis and develop measurable objectives for the project.

Students should take the broad aims of the project, provided in the brief, and develop objectives that are measurable – i.e. disseminate 1,000 resources to the target group by a certain date. Refer to Handout 4 for tips on the types of information students are likely to develop.

2. Develop a list of people and professionals who may be among the broad target group to receive and use this resource.

The Primary audience for LIFE Communications are professionals and volunteers who are in a position to help people who are at risk of suicide or self-harm. The target group includes:

- General Practitioners; allied health professionals (counsellors, nurses, pharmacists, psychologists, social workers etc); Indigenous service providers; health professionals in regional areas; blue collar networks such as trade unions.
- People who undertake community-based suicide prevention activities – including health and mental health professionals, non-government organisations, suicide prevention project officers, policy makers, researchers, indigenous community/health workers, people affected by suicide and government agencies.

Other relevant target groups include:

- Coroners, emergency services, funeral director etc; families bereaved by suicide; and media developing stories about suicide or self-harm.

3. How/where might you access these target groups?

Since the target group for this project is diverse, there are a number of different ways each audience may be reached. Some suggested answers that students may identify are summarised here:

- Many professional groups (e.g. GPs, psychologists, social workers, psychiatrists etc) can be engaged through relevant peak bodies. These peak bodies keep databases of their members and other stakeholders and often communicate with them regularly through newsletters, email alerts, their professional website, conferences and professional development opportunities.
- Once audiences are identified, a database (broken up by subgroup) could be developed for ongoing electronic, print or telephone contact.



- Look for opportunities to meet face-to-face with target audiences – for example, meetings with key stakeholders, state-wide networks etc.
- Creation of a website to provide access to the key documents and other networking opportunities.
- Promotion at conferences through presentations, workshops, trade displays and satchel inserts.
- Media coverage about the project may assist in some areas and with some audiences.
- Host events in state or regional areas for the target audience.

4. List the types of research you would need to conduct before developing your communication strategy.

Students may identify the following:

- Determine current awareness and use of the LIFE Framework and resources;
- Determine how stakeholders prefer to access such information;
- Determine what communication channels are currently being utilised by stakeholders and how successful these are.

5. Develop an evaluation plan, outlining how you will measure the success of your strategy.

The evaluation plan outlined by students should relate to the aims and objectives of the project. It should provide a structure for planning and monitoring progress and achievements in the implementation of the program objectives. Accordingly, the Framework should be subject to periodic review where the process of implementation may generate learnings or unanticipated events impact on project strategies.

Communication Strategy

6. Design a communication strategy for the above brief.

There are a range of strategies that students could list here. Some brief information about communication strategies from LIFE Communications includes:

1. Website – the Living Is For Everyone website is the main vehicle for communication with the audience and stakeholders;
2. Events and promotions – the LIFE Communications team will be attending events and undertaking other promotional activities at field days and festivals;
3. Media – Press releases and informative resources will be made available for use by members of the media;
4. Direct Mail – LIFE News will be a quarterly Direct Mail piece that will be sent out to willing stakeholders and recipients.

7. List the important aspects regarding communication about suicide that would you need to consider.

The language used in communication about suicide can contribute to it being presented as glamorous, normal or as an option for dealing with problems. It is important to avoid using language which suggests that suicide was a desirable outcome. For example the term 'took his life' or simply 'died by suicide' can be used instead of 'successful suicide'. Similarly, 'attempt on their own life' or 'suicide attempt' can be used instead of 'unsuccessful suicide attempt'.

It is important that you are familiar with current 'best-practice' in terms of talking about suicide, particularly if using the media as a forum for that discussion. All communication, including media releases, brochures, ministerials, speeches, presentations, website documents and reports should comply with best

practice standards. It is important to be mindful of the use of appropriate language in all situations and contexts. For example, more and more often information is transferred verbally via telephone and consideration must be given to expression of ideas and language in this context as well.

Research shows that detailed description or images of the method or location of a suicide has been linked in some cases to further suicides using the same method or at the same location. This has implications for choices regarding communication about the detail of a suicide. It may also impact on your choice of images or angle for a campaign or communication strategy.

It is important as a public relations practitioner to use reliable sources to get accurate facts, statistics and information. Contacting experts in the field will assist with accurate interpretation of statistics and placing situations or campaigns in context.

8. Develop some key messages for your communication strategy.

The messages developed by students will relate to their specific plan. The messages from the LIFE Communications project are related to the dissemination of the LIFE Framework:

- Download or order a hard copy of the LIFE Framework through www.livingisforeveryone.com.au;
- Sign up to receive LIFE News to keep up-to-date with suicide prevention in Australia;
- Find information, discuss issues and engage with people at www.livingisforeveryone.com.au;
- It's important to base your suicide prevention activities on evidence. Visit the LIFE library to access the latest research.

9. Develop a list of tactics you might employ to achieve your objectives.

A list of tactics are provided in *Handout 4*. Students may come up with additional tactics for the project.

10. Consider how you may adapt your approach to target a specific audience (for example, Indigenous health worker, school teachers, rural health workers etc).

- You would need to tailor your preliminary research to these target groups to determine how their needs may differ based on issues such as access to technology, cultural context, differing needs of clients.
- This information would then need to be considered in all aspects of planning for the project.

Using the media

11. In what circumstances might you engage the media during this project?

Students may identify the following:

- To launch the new resources and website;
- To promote appropriate discussion of suicide prevention – perhaps in association with world suicide prevention day;
- To counter other negative or inaccurate media about suicide prevention;
- To promote the resources to target groups that may not be easily accessed through other mechanisms.

Note – given the potential problems associated with the portrayal of suicide in the media, this medium should be used with caution. Given most of the target groups are accessed through other channels, media engagement would be minimal in a project such as this.



12. How might you use the media as part of your communication strategy?

Media conference, media release, articles and features, one to one briefings, interviews, background briefing materials, video news releases, website, email, photography.

13. What issues will you need to consider if using the media as part of your communication strategy?

Australian and international research shows that reporting and portrayal of suicide in the media can have an impact on vulnerable people. Studies have found that the way suicide is portrayed in the media has the potential to influence rates of suicide in the community. This is not to say that suicide should never be discussed, but that care should be taken to report the issues in a sensitive way and to ensure that accurate information is given.

Media codes of practice state that, in general, suicides will not be reported. However, a death will often be reported if it is considered to be 'in the public interest'. This might include the death of a prominent person, a death in a public place, or a death that is in some way related to other political or social issues, such as a death in custody.

OPTIONAL TASK

Once students have worked through the discussion questions above, provide them with *Handout 4A: The Life Communications Project* and ask them to compare and contrast their approach with that taken by the project team.

Some further discussion questions might include:

1. In what ways did your plans differ from that taken in the actual project?
2. Were you surprised by any of the strategies employed by the project team?
3. What did you learn from looking at the project summary?
4. Were there things about suicide prevention you picked up through reading about the project?

Case Study 4B : Analysing a Communication Project about Suicide Prevention

The Task

Provide students with Student Notes for *Case Study 4B: Analysing a Communication Project about Suicide Prevention* as well as *Handout A: The Life Communications Project* and get them to work through the discussion questions provided. The questions provide a guide for analysing the LIFE Communications project, asking students to consider both public relations skills and the specific suicide prevention focus. You may ask the students to look at all of these questions or a selection only.

Research

- Is there evidence of adequate formal or informal research?
- Did research identify who the key publics or audiences would be?
- Would you have used any other research methods?
- Was there evidence that the need of the client, the challenges it faced and the social, political, legal, cultural and ethical environment were taken into consideration?

Planning

- Were the goals and objectives clearly stated?
- How measurable and achievable are the objectives?
- Was the strategy for engaging with key audiences clearly articulated?
- How were the strategies directed to specific publics?
- Did the strategy promote mutual benefit for both the client and the key publics?
- Could more effective strategies have been used?
- Did the strategies overlook key interests of some of the targeted publics?
- Were the timing and available resources adequate for this project?

Media

- In what circumstances did the project use the mass media?
- Would you have engaged the mass media differently? Why or why not?
- Was there evidence that media strategies incorporated understanding of the sensitivities involved in discussing suicide in the media?

Ethics

- Were the strategies used consistent with ethical practice?
- Were the tactics and messages employed consistent with responsible and appropriate communication about suicide?



Evaluation

- How was success or failure evaluated?
- Was evaluation considered in the initial plan?
- What lessons were learned?
- Do the results suggest further actions?