

## Case Study 7: Death at a Rock Concert

### 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 when 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

A large-scale one-day music festival is being held in your city today. The event is sold out to its capacity audience of 100,000 and is being headlined by international artists. One of the headline bands, appearing at 2pm, is popular band The Removed. The band recently won a Grammy and is the face of a popular youth clothing label. Twenty minutes after their performance, the female lead singer of The Removed, Janie Smithfield, is found dead at the bottom of a lighting tower. Within minutes, individual recounts of the incident are being tweeted and retweeted on Twitter, for example:

*Smithfield just jumped off a tower at Homebound. So sad.*

Some important facts are:

- The death occurred at a large public event and although it happened in the backstage area, the act was still witnessed by several festival goers;
- The band were scheduled for a national tour following the festival;
- There is little to no information available about Janie Smithfield's mental health and wellbeing leading up to the incident;



- Comments have started appearing on the band's Facebook page and a memorial / tribute site has also been established by fans on Facebook within an hour of the death;
- The concert continues to run as scheduled;
- As the day continues and throughout the week, there is considerable traffic on the band's website and a large volume of media interest in and coverage of the incident.

## 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)).

### Exercise A

You are in charge of public relations for the Homebound event. Within minutes of the death (and while paramedics are still tending to the singer) you are called in to manage the situation. It is only mid-afternoon and the event is not due to finish until 10pm.

#### **Address the following:**

1. Identify who your key stakeholders and publics will be. Consider both internal and external stakeholders and publics.
2. Identify what further information you might need to know before making a response. How would you go about obtaining it?
3. Brainstorm some of the key issues the media, or other publics, may focus on or want information about.
4. What will your key messages be?
5. Identify the specific ethical issues related to handling a death by suicide that you may need to consider in your communication.
6. What kind of preparation from a public relations perspective should have already been in place to help deal with this situation?
7. Discuss the impact of social media in this situation – both in terms of prolonging the crisis and managing it.
8. How will you communicate with your publics and stakeholders? What specific tactics might you use?
9. Given the publics that may have been affected by this crisis, what are the other organisations that you will be planning to involve in your response to this incident?

### Exercise B

Members of the band The Removed have a lucrative celebrity endorsement deal with youth clothing brand Threddedbare. The band is featured in several promotional television and print advertisements as well as

catalogues for this line of clothing. You are employed by Threddedbare to manage the Public Relations for their brand, including endorsements.

**Address the following questions:**

1. Identify the key issues for the Threddedbare company, both the immediate issues as well as the longer term issues.
2. Who are the key stakeholders and publics that may be affected?
3. Consider the purpose of this partnership from Threddedbare's perspective. How might this situation impact the partnership?
4. What strategic risks or benefits does this incident pose for Threddedbare?
5. Brainstorm some of the key issues that relevant publics and stakeholders may focus on or want information about.
6. Identify the specific ethical issues related to handling a death by suicide that you may need to consider in your communication.
7. How will you communicate with the relevant publics and stakeholders? What specific tactics might you use?
8. What will your immediate response be? How might use of the promotional materials change?
9. What are the outcomes that your response plan will aim to achieve?
10. What might be Threddedbare's risk scenario for each of their plans or agendas, and what contingency plans could be implemented?
11. What kind of preparation from a brand management perspective should have already been in place to help deal with this situation?
12. Given the publics that may have been affected by this situation, what other organisations might you involve in your response to this incident?

**OPTIONAL QUESTIONS: *Media Relations***

1. What are some considerations for your organisation in engaging with the media regarding the event?
2. Will there be a spokesperson nominated? What issues should this person be briefed about prior to speaking with the media? Would this person engage with social media?
3. How will you manage the interests of your organisation and the possible risks to the community?



## Exercise C

You work for ReachOut, ([www.reachout.com.au](http://www.reachout.com.au)) which is managed by the Inspire Foundation ([www.inspire.org.au](http://www.inspire.org.au)). ReachOut.com is a web-based service that inspires young people to help themselves through tough times, and find ways to boost their own mental health and wellbeing.

ReachOut.com outlines their aims and objectives as follows:

*“Reachout.com offers information, support and resources to help young people improve their understanding of mental health issues, develop resilience, and increase their coping skills and help-seeking behaviour. Anonymous and available 24 hours a day, ReachOut.com is there for young people who may not be comfortable seeking professional help, or who are unsure about where to find the help they need in their community. ReachOut.com aims to break down the stigma attached to seeking help, and connects young people so they can share their stories and provide support to each other in a safe and positive environment. When a young person visits ReachOut.com they experience an online environment that provides engaging and evidence-based resources to help them get through difficult times:*

- **Factsheets, stories and interviews** enable young people to better understand their experience and to reach out for the help they need. New content is constantly being developed by young people, keeping the site relevant and accessible to young people.
- **Community forums** provide a safe and moderated network, made up of ReachOut.com staff and other young people. The forums provide opportunities for young people to connect and share their story with peers, give or receive support and positive reinforcement, and develop strategies for managing adversity and seeking help.
- **Digital storytelling** also enables young people to tell their own stories about getting through tough times and help and inspire their peers.
- **Social media campaigns** allow ReachOut.com to become a part of young people’s landscape. Building loyalty with young people helps reduce the stigma around mental health and help-seeking.”

**Address the following questions:**

1. Devise a pro-active engagement strategy to capture and encourage young people to talk in an appropriate and safe online forum about the issue of suicide and Janie Smithfield’s death via your site.
2. Identify what further information you might need to know before devising this strategy.
3. Identify what other organisations you may need to liaise with to coordinate your activity.
4. Identify some other appropriate organisations or individuals that you may engage to become involved in your strategy. How will you involve them?
5. What strategies might you use to communicate with young people visiting your site about the issue of suicide and the death of this woman?
6. What are the risks are associated with this kind of communication, and how might they be managed?
7. How can your organisation best communicate the services that are available to young people from Reach Out? What specific tactics will you use?