

FACTSHEET DRAMA PORTRAYAL

MEDIA GUIDELINES for Reporting Suicide

SAMARITANS

Background

Suicide and self-harm often feature in storylines for film, television drama and soaps. Care needs to be taken with the way these issues are portrayed as vulnerable viewers may identify closely with certain characters.

Be aware

- Men are much more likely than women to take their own lives; in particular men in mid-life from lower socio-economic backgrounds are at higher risk of suicide. A sensitive, responsible and realistic portrayal of suicidal behaviour of a working class male character could help address a serious public health issue, especially if the character sought help and chose to live.
- Suicide is complex and seldom the result of a single factor, it is likely to have several inter-related causes. Mental health problems can be a factor, as can substance misuse or feelings of desperation and hopelessness.
- Samaritans' press office and its out of hours press line are there to support programme makers and script writers when portraying suicide in drama.

Best practice for dramatic portrayal of suicide

Storyline

- Refrain from using simplistic explanations for suicide and take care not to portray it as being triggered by a single factor such as the loss of a job or the breakdown of a relationship.
- Suicide is an extreme and preventable act, and should never be portrayed as a logical or rational way to solve a problem or a difficult set of circumstances. Avoid any indication that a character's suicidal behaviour is an acceptable response to everyday crises.
- Don't brush over the realities of suicide. Portraying an overdose, for example, as a gentle and peaceful way to die, can be very dangerous and bears no resemblance to the reality of slow liver failure after an overdose.
- Steer clear of portraying a suicide attempt as something that can quickly be recovered from. Don't show the character returning to normal life within hours, days or by the next episode.
- Never show that a suicide or suicide attempt has been 'rewarded'. Avoid a storyline, for example, that shows separated or divorced parents reuniting after the suicide of their child. This can unduly influence a child into thinking that attempting suicide could lead to a happy ending for their family.

- Take care when showing scenes with outpourings of grief. In particular, avoid showing characters who may have ‘contributed’ to the suicide, regretting their actions. Vulnerable viewers who have, for instance, been bullied could be led to believe that suicide is a viable option, for getting back at their bullies and making them feel sorry.
- Think carefully about the selection and use of music with the portrayal of a suicide. Emotive music could be interpreted as over-dramatising or sensationalising a death.

Choice of character

- Take extra care when portraying suicidal behaviour in young or sympathetic characters. These are the characters that vulnerable viewers are most likely to identify with. Remember that young people are the most likely group to be influenced by the media and therefore at high risk of ‘copycat’ behaviour.

Portraying a suicide method

- Use as little detail as possible about the suicide method in any dramatic portrayal, to avoid unduly influencing the behaviour of vulnerable people. For example, never show the type, quantity or packaging of tablets a character may have taken in an overdose.
- Avoid portraying any methods of suicide that are easy to imitate particularly if the materials are readily available. Try not to show the technical details of the suicide method such as sealing up windows, or connecting a hose to a car exhaust.
- Never indicate that a suicide method is quick, easy, painless and/or certain to result in death, as this is information that suicidal people seek when considering suicide.
- Avoid introducing new or uncommon methods into the public conscious.
- The moment of death should never be broadcast and, if possible, entirely avoid showing the act of suicide – allude to it only.

Additional factors to consider

- Take extra care about how films or programmes are promoted. Make sure that departments or agencies responsible for producing trailers are aware of guidelines on reporting suicide. This will help prevent over-dramatisation when publicising a programme.
- Direct viewers and listeners to sources of help, such as Samaritans, following a broadcast featuring suicide.

For general tips on best practice consult Samaritans and IAS’ Media Guidelines for Reporting Suicide at: www.samaritans.ie/mediaguidelines

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