

TAKE CARE – BE AWARE

**Guidelines concerning the media
coverage on suicide**

**How
Journalists
can anticipate
imitational
suicides**

„The Werther Effect“: What’s it all about?

- Every year, approx. 12,000 people in Germany commit suicide (in comparison: approx. 5,500 people die because of traffic accidents)
- The number of suicide attempts is about 100,000 per year, the number of unknown cases is estimated a lot higher
- Media coverage on suicide can trigger imitational actions

"The Werther-Effect":

Certain kinds of media reports on suicides can provoke succeeding suicidal actions due to imitation. Scientific literature calls this a “Werther-Effect”. After the publication of Johann Wolfgang von Goethe’s famous novel “The woes of the young Werther“ imitational suicides of young men occurred all over Europe. The suicides very much followed the novel’s pattern and model.

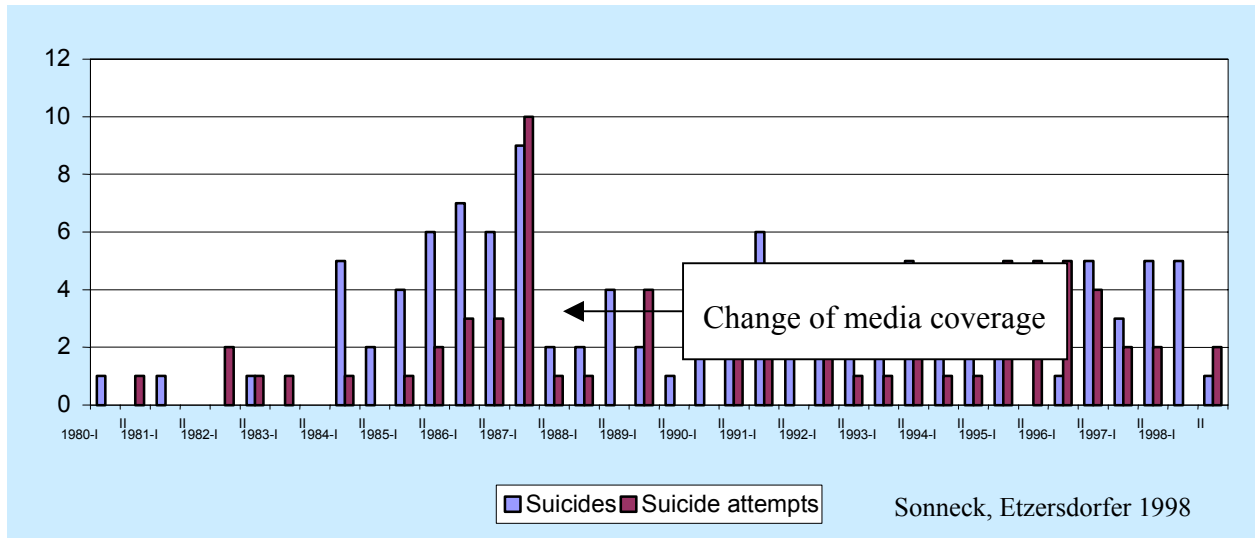
Other countries realized the importance of the effect and the problems. They already implemented guidelines or recommendations for journalists on how to handle the topic suicide sensitively. Funded by the German Federal Ministry of education and science, the “Research Network Depression, Suicidality” for the first time intends to collaborate with journalists on this topic. The major aim by taking certain actions is to reduce the number of suicides and suicide attempts measurably. For these purposes, the following recommendations concerning media reports were prepared.

How important is the "Werther-Effect"?

Suicidal people often do intensively engage themselves in the issue of self-afflicted death. During this time a television- or press report on the topic can influence their decision immensely.

One example is the raise and reduction of the number of subway-suicides since 1984 in Vienna. There, journalists changed their media reports since midyear 1987 considerably. Studies on the trend of this suicide method in Vienna show that consistently to the

beginning of a discrete and conservative media coverage the number of subway suicides decreased for more than 70% and it still can be kept on that level.



By following the guidelines concerning media reports closely, journalists could anticipate probably approx. 6 suicides already only in the first year.

Suicides usually occur in the context of a depression or another mental illness (alcohol- and/or drug addiction, schizophrenia).

80 percent of the suicide cases in Germany are preceded by such illnesses.

Especially people suffering from depression can be considered as a high-risk-group as regards the influence of media reports. In these cases, media coverage is in fact not the primary reason for the suicide, but it can serve as the crucial trigger for suicide during a critical phase of the illness.

The basic principle is:

The more prominent the appearance of a media report on suicide and the greater its luridness and its emotional content, the higher the frequency of imitational suicidal acts.

What's the danger?

- identification
- glorification
- attention
- concrete instructions

How can journalists help?

Imitation requires identification. This danger may rise, if:

- cover stories, captions, photos and other “eye-catchers” attract attention
- the terms suicide, suicidal etc. appear in the headline
- the suicide method is described in details
- an easy to reach place or location is described and even mystified
- the social setting, the identity and the motives are portrayed touchingly
- the suicide is looked upon favourably or romantically and it is glorified
- the suicide is referred to as being out of all reason or as being the only loophole
- the victim is a VIP, a very prominent person.

The danger of imitation can be reduced, if:

- the suicide is illustrated as the after-effect of an illness (e.g. depression) that could have been treated successfully
- alternative problem solving and cases auf successful crises-management are presented
- help lines and help offers / contacts are indicated
- expert opinions are gathered and stated
- background information on the disease pattern of depression are given
- it is reported about the work of professional helpers

Thank you for your cooperation!

These guidelines concerning the media coverage on suicide have been developed in the context of an interdisciplinary seminar for journalists, psychiatrists and communication research students at the Ludwig-Maximilians-University of Munich during the summer-semester 2000.

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