

Suicide and the media

[Life](#), [Death](#)



Sensitivity must be used when the media reports on teen suicides. Sounds obvious, but it doesn't always happen. And when it doesn't, you often find copycat attempts in the wake of a teen suicide. How does it happen?

Impulsive teenagers are more prone to suicide. Studies have shown that this, combined with a glamorized account of the details and the nature of the suicide — the method used, and other titillating information — can cause a spike in teen suicide in the local area. And, when a famous person commits suicide, teen suicide rises on a national level. Teens often romanticize adventure and living on the edge. According to Pamela Cantor, president of the National Committee for the Prevention of Youth Suicide, this can be a deadly combination when faced with a suicide. Cantor says, " Kids see that this is a glamorous way to die, a way to get a lot of attention that they couldn't get in life. " In an interview, Loren Coleman, author of *The Copycat Effect*, said, " When the media comes in and does a graphic depiction of it — it doesn't work to scare kids away. " He notes that teens even create a fantasy of what their funeral will look like. They imagine flying over their funeral and seeing how much they are missed. In 2005, one young person in the United States committed suicide every two hours. That's approximately 4, 500 teen suicides! Of those, 100 to 200 teens died in clusters. In many cases, the additional victims were friends of the teen or identified strongly with something about his story reported in the news. In Plano, Texas, where one of the first reported clusters occurred 25 years ago, a teen's suicide was tragically followed by eight more teen deaths, mostly using the same method. Similarly, when a popular teenager in Bergenfield, New Jersey, ended his life in 1987, several of his friends killed themselves six months

later. This was followed by two additional suicide attempts using a similar method. And, when the cluster was studied more carefully, an additional four teen deaths were linked to this first suicide. Copycat and cluster suicides are played out on a national level when a famous person commits suicide. Media coverage of the event is nonstop, which often leads to more tragedy. For example, according to the New York Magazine article "A Dying Trend," when Marilyn Monroe took her life in August 1962, the suicide rate in the following month rose by 12 percent, which was an additional 197 suicides. This phenomenon is not limited to the United States. In 1986 in Tokyo, Japan, 18-year-old Okada Yukiko, a popular Japanese singer, took her life. Her widely reported death resulted in a staggering 31 teen suicides in the following two weeks, a phenomenon that the mass media in Japan called "the Yukko syndrome." So what can be done? Research has shown that the way the media handles the reporting of suicides can be critical in reducing copycats and clusters. A study was conducted in Vienna. Between 1984 and 1987, there were a large number of suicides by people who jumped in front of trains. The media coverage was overly dramatic and graphic. A campaign urging the media to change its coverage of these tragedies resulted in an 80 percent decrease in incidents of this type of suicide. According to the Suicide and Mental Health Association International's report on Suicide Contagion, the media should not sensationalize the event or glamorize the victim or act. Describing the method used should also be kept to a minimum. Another - important step the media can take is to focus on the mental health aspects of the suicide. Just saying that the victim was "stressed" or "under pressure" makes it too easy for other teenagers to identify with the victim.

Those who commit suicide often have long-standing mental health issues that are often ignored in the media coverage, which is a huge mistake.

Teenagers need to see that they are not "just like" the teen who committed suicide. Suicide is caused by many factors; it is not acceptable for the media to be one of them.