Comment or no comment?

Making the right choice for you, your family and whānau about talking to media after losing someone to suicide

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When the media approaches you

- ✓ **Consider whether now is the right time to tell your story. Take your time**
- ✓ **Talk with family and whānau and try to come to a shared decision**
- ✓ **Think carefully about why you want to talk and what you want to say**
- ✓ **Appoint a family/whānau spokesperson**
- ✓ **Go "off the record"**
- ✓ **Get more information from the journalist about who they are and what they want to know**
- ✓ **Choose some nice photos of the person you have lost**

When someone you know has died by suicide the media may approach you wanting comment or an interview. This may happen immediately following the person's death or several months or even years later.

If you do receive media attention, it can be hard to decide whether or not to comment.

Suicide is a deeply private loss, but it is also a public health and social issue. The media have the right to report on it. Some families/whānau find this painful, others are glad to have the chance to share their story.

This guide will help you work out whether you want to talk with the media and how much you are willing to discuss with them. It can help you make the right decisions for you and your loved ones – including the person who has died.

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Before you make a decision

Things to consider

Is now the right time to talk?

Many people who have lost someone to suicide recommend waiting to share your story until some time has passed. Take your time. It's hard to think and communicate clearly when your grief is raw.

Has everyone who needs to know been told about your loss?

If a death is very recent, remember that a story can go online or be broadcast very quickly – especially through social media. If you have friends, family/whānau or employers who do not yet know of your loss, ask the media to wait to publish their accounts until all the people who should be told have been notified.

Why do you want to share your story?

Do you want to help prevent future suicides? Do you want to honour the memory of your loved one? Do you want to set the facts straight? Or do you want to show others there is no shame in losing someone to suicide? Thinking about why you want to tell your story will help you decide if and how to tell it, as well as who might be the best person to tell it to.

Whose story is it?

Sometimes, families/whānau can be divided about whether or not to talk to the media about a suicide loss. There can be many reasons for this. Talk to your family/whānau and try to reach a decision you are all comfortable with. **Consider the person who has died and what they might have wanted.** Sometimes, the media will talk to different family/whānau members and friends. Once you've shared your story, the journalist (and their editors) will decide which parts they want to use and how they want to tell the story.

Are you comfortable with losing control of your story?

Media stories can take on a life of their own. Once you've told your story, you may lose control of how it's used by the media. Quotes and images given to one journalist can be picked up by other media organisations or used again in different stories on different mediums. You might talk to a journalist for a print story and later see your quotes or photos used online, on the radio or on television.

Before you make a decision

Things to do

Find out about the journalist

Find out a bit more about the journalist who wants to talk with you. Ask them:

- who they work for
- for copies of other articles or stories they have produced
- why they're interested in your story and what they want to know
- who else they've spoken to or intend to speak to
- how they found out about you
- where they expect to publish or broadcast your story
- when the story will be published or broadcast.

Appoint a spokesperson

Media attention can be overwhelming. You might like to speak to the media yourself, or you might find someone you trust, such as a friend, another family/whānau member or a church leader to be your spokesperson or media handler. **This means that person will talk to the media on your behalf and will handle all media enquiries for you.** Let your friends and family members know that they should refer all media to the chosen spokesperson.

Go 'off the record'

As soon as a journalist approaches you and identifies themselves as a member of the media, you are 'on the record'. This means the journalist can publish anything you say to them. In most cases, it's a good idea to ask to **have an 'off the record' conversation first** although this may not always be possible.

Provide a photo

Even if you decide not to talk to the media, it can be a good idea to have a spokesperson give the media one or two approved photos of your loved one. This gives you some control over how your loved one will be presented to the public and can stop the media using potentially unflattering or undesirable photos that they have found through other sources, such as social media.

Be aware that even videos and comments on posts can be taken from social media and reused.

Comment

Things to do before you share your story

Wait until you are ready

Journalists are often under pressure to file stories by certain deadlines, and sometimes that urgency can put pressure on you. **Tell your story in your own time.**

Prepare your story

You can ask the journalist to give you a copy of the questions they want to ask you before the interview to help you prepare your story.

Practise sharing your story with someone you trust or write it down and read it to yourself out loud. It's easy to say things in the heat of the moment you might regret later. Take out anything from your story that feels too private. **Take out everything you wouldn't want children, family/whānau members, neighbours, current or future employers or anyone else to find out.**

Think about how you want your loved one to be remembered

It's understandable to want the person who has died to be remembered in the best possible way.

You might also consider sharing the struggles they faced or warning signs that might have been missed to prepare other families/whānau to help their own loved ones who are struggling.

Think about some key messages

Think about what you want people to know or do after hearing or reading your story, and emphasise those points. If you're advocating for a change or investigation, be clear about why you support that change or investigation. If you would like other people to know how to get help in a similar situation or how to cope with grief, make this the key focus of your story.

Get support for yourself

This will be a difficult story to tell. Consider having a trusted friend or loved one sit with you while you talk to the journalist.

Set some ground rules

Before you talk with the journalist, tell them how you would like to share your story – What would you feel happy talking about? Do you want to be asked questions or simply narrate your own story? Do you want to be

filmed or taped or would you prefer the journalist to hand write your comments? Would you like to meet in your own home, in a café or in a quiet meeting room?

You can ask not to talk about certain things, and you can ask the journalist to share a draft of their article with you before it is published. Remember though that it's up to individual journalists and editors whether they will agree to this or to any changes you suggest from reading their draft.

Things to do after you've shared your story

Stay in touch

Ask the journalist to stay in touch while they work on their story and take a copy of their contact details – email and phone. This allows you to contact them if you want to rephrase anything, add something you have forgotten or respond to information they have received from other people.

You can ask to see the story before it is published or ask the journalist to read your quotes back to you, but remember, they do not have to do this.

Understand it's out of your control

Due to time and space constraints, much of what you share may not be included in the journalist's final report. Once you've told your story, you can't control which parts the journalist will use (although you can let them know what message is most important to you) or what additional information they include.

Most journalists will want to tell the story responsibly and well, but that doesn't mean you will always like what they say. If you are unhappy with the story, you can contact the journalist or their editor or make a formal complaint.

Find out the publication date in advance

Some people want to read, see or listen to the story as soon as possible; others want to avoid it completely. Knowing when the story will come out allows you to decide which option is right for you. It also allows you to tell your family/whānau and friends and give them the chance to prepare for its release, too.

No comment

If you decide not to share your story, here are some things to keep in mind.

Things to consider

You are entitled to your privacy

You do not have to share your story, and **you shouldn't feel guilty for saying no**.

No response doesn't mean 'no comment'

Journalists are persistent. Be prepared for them to try to contact you in person, on the phone and via social media. Ask your spokesperson to let all journalists know very clearly that you don't want or are not ready to talk.

There are laws and guidelines governing what journalists can and cannot report on

Journalists cannot report on the method or location (if it suggests method) of your loved one's death. However, they do not need your permission to publish your loved one's name, address, occupation and the fact their death is a suspected suicide.

Consider issuing a written statement

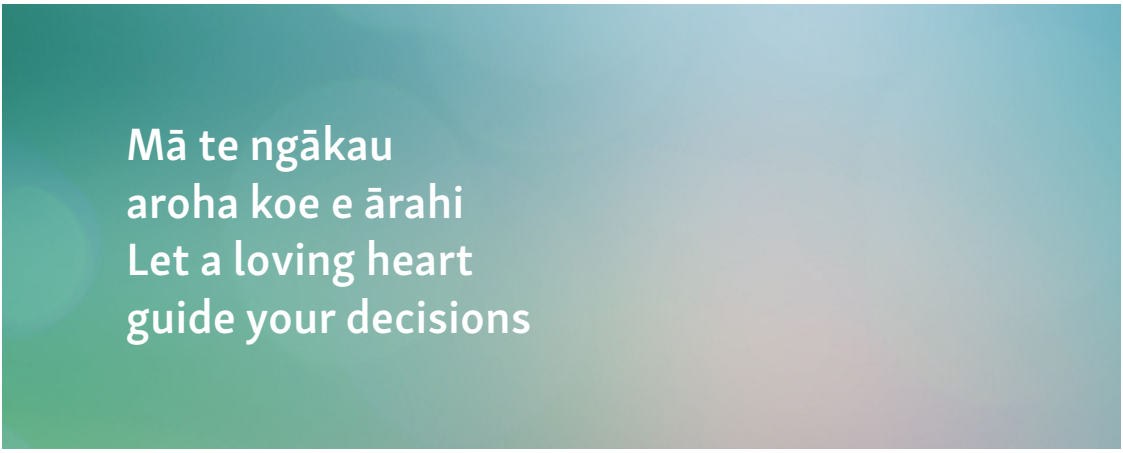
This allows you to maintain some control over any media report about the death. Your statement can simply ask for privacy or share a brief outline of what happened. You might also like to share details of the support services that have helped you so that the information can be made more easily available to others in your area.

'Not now' doesn't have to mean 'not ever'

You may decide you would like to share your story some time in the future. You can ask a journalist to contact you again after a fixed period of time (e.g., six months or a year) or ask for their contact details so you can get in touch if and when you're ready.

Media attention may increase again

The media may approach you again for your comments at various times, for example, when the coroner opens an investigation or releases their finding or a similar event occurs. You can continue to decline to comment or you might change your mind and feel ready to share your story. The choice is yours.



Helplines:

1737
Need to talk? Free call or text 1737 any time for support from a trained counsellor.

Lifeline
0800 543 354

Samaritans
0800 726 666

Youthline
0800 376 633 or free text 234

0508 Tautoko Suicide Crisis Helpline
0508 828 865
for support if you're in distress, or worried that someone may be at risk of suicide or for those who are grieving a loss.

For more support and information visit www.afterasuicide.nz

Mental Health Foundation
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www.mentalhealth.org.nz

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