

PREPARING SPEAKERS WITH PERSONAL STORIES FOR MEDIA INTERVIEWS

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How to use: *Telling a personal story of suicide loss can be difficult and extremely sensitive. This tip sheet will provide you with considerations for preparing someone who has experienced loss due to suicide to speak to members of the media. While this document is a helpful tool, comprehensive recommendations for the items listed here can be found in **Making Headlines: Guide to Working with the Media in Suicide Prevention in California** booklet included in this toolkit.*

How to find potential speakers

- Suicide bereavement support groups such as Friends for Survival, Survivors of Suicide (SOS), or others. Many are held at hospitals.
- Crisis centers often have speakers available who can talk about personal stories. These might be more likely to have positive messages than stories of loss alone.
- American Foundation for Suicide Prevention offers suicide bereavement support groups:
http://www.afsp.org/index.cfm?fuseaction=home.viewPage&page_id=FEE33687-BD31-F739-D66C210657168295
- American Association of Suicidology (AAS) has a survivors division with a link to a directory of California support groups: <http://www.suicidology.org/sssg-a-d#CA>

Considerations when choosing a spokesperson

- How recent was the incident? To be sensitive to the needs of the grieving person, it is recommended that at least two years pass after a loss before they speak publicly about their experiences.
- Are they open to being guided in how they tell their story? It can be challenging to persuade people who have lost a loved one to alter how they present their story without causing defensiveness or giving offense. Protests of “I know how to speak,” or “I’ve spoken about this for years” indicate the need for extreme sensitivity.

- Are they familiar with Safe and Effective Messaging? To ensure that news media use appropriate language in their reporting, need to use the right terms. (*Refer to Making Headlines: Guide to Working with the Media, Safe and Effective Messaging*)
- What is their story? Will the emotional power of their experience overtake the prevention message or message of hope? Is their story one of prevention, help seeking, finding help, hope—or only an illustration of loss?
- Are they a minor? Do not have minors speak publicly about loss or their own attempts. Minors may not be able to fully appreciate the implications of how being labeled “suicidal” can follow them for many years.

Preparing the Spokesperson to Tell their Story

- Work with the spokesperson on how much of their story they want to share. Reassure them that the story they will tell is unique and is theirs to share.
- Discuss whether they want to be semi-anonymous and use a first name only. If he/she reveals that they have attempted suicide or felt suicidal and this is reported, the coverage may appear on the internet for a long time—years, decades, or indefinitely. This information could have personal repercussions as they seek employment, for instance.
- Asking the survivor to save parts of their story for a question and answer period may be one way to help them limit what they have to say. Sometimes the audience will be silent immediately after hearing a powerful story; let your speaker know this is not a sign of disinterest.
- Strongly encourage the speaker to have a written outline or notes of their story in hand during an interview or presentation. It will help your spokesperson to have a well thought out story.
- Stress the importance of including suicide prevention messaging. Guide the spokesperson to always think about the goal of their story. What do they want the take away to be? (*Refer to Making Headlines: Guide to Working with the Media in Suicide Prevention in California, Creating Suicide Prevention Messages*)
- Give the spokesperson permission to be honest. Genuineness can have a strong impact on those who hear their story.