

Speaking Safely About Bridge Barriers in Suicide Prevention: Guidance for Advocates Updated November 2024

Sharing information publicly, through news and media, can be an effective and empowering tool for change when it comes to suicide prevention. However, research shows us that it is critical to only share personal stories about suicide in a safe way, especially when depicted in the media. This is because widely discussing certain details (particularly suicide methods or “means”) could be harmful for any audience members who might be at risk for suicide, or could inadvertently normalize suicide as a response to a life experience and lead to suicide contagion -- which is the concept that one suicide or suicidal act within a community increases the likelihood of further suicides or attempts in that community.

For these reasons, AFSP recommends against revealing the method of any particular suicide as much as possible. However, in the case of advocating for installing a suicide deterrent bridge barrier, it is nearly impossible to avoid talking about or revealing the method of suicide. Therefore, AFSP offers the following guidance and talking points to help you safely discuss, share information, and update your community on the need for and development of suicide deterrent bridge barrier advocacy through news and social media platforms.

Know the Facts

- Suicide deterrent barriers save lives.
 - In comparing all potential interventions to prevent suicides at bridges, including signs and telephone hotlines, research has shown that barriers that physically restrict access are the most effective form of prevention.ⁱ
- Reducing access to lethal means, such as bridges, is a proven, research-supported component of suicide prevention.
 - A summary report of thirteen studies found a 91% reduction in suicide at publicly accessible areas of height where barriers were installed.ⁱⁱ
- Most individuals who are prevented from making a suicide attempt via one method typically do not go on to attempt with another method.ⁱⁱⁱ
 - One study found that 62% of individuals would not choose another place to jump from after being deterred by a barrier.^{iv}

When speaking publicly about your efforts to install a suicide deterrent barrier on a bridge in your community, whether through interviews with news outlets or in posts and chats on social media, it's important to keep these helpful **“Dos”** and **“Don’ts”** in mind:

Don't:	Do:
Don't Share Sensationalist Details Don't share personal stories with explicit details related to attempts or losses on specific bridges as much as possible, because research shows that news stories	Do Share Only What's Necessary If you are sharing a personal story related to an attempt or a loss, do only focus on the necessary information to get your message across. This will vary by situation,

<p>that do so can be harmful for audiences who might be at risk for suicide, and who might identify with an individual's experience. A person's suicide story can spark suicide contagion, meaning that the likelihood of suicides and/or suicide attempts in a community that has experienced a suicide could increase, often by the same method.</p> <p>Graphic details include depictions of someone attempting suicide, quotes from anyone in distress, mention or details of a suicide note, etc.</p>	<p>but could include the person's name and age, profession and/or impact on the community, or other notable personal attributes or relationships.</p> <p>Do emphasize the way someone lived over the way someone died; these can be important details to include.</p> <p>Do talk about the mental health challenges they were experiencing prior to their attempt, if they are known, to illustrate that suicidal crisis is a medical condition with existing proven treatments.</p>
<p>Don't List Numbers of Lives Lost at Specific Bridges</p> <p>Don't sensationalize the structure by focusing on how many lives have been lost at a bridge. While it may sound counterintuitive, it is unsafe to share the exact number of lives lost as it shows people at risk for suicide that it is an effective means of death.</p>	<p>Do Focus on Lives that Can Be Saved</p> <p>Do focus the story on how lives are being saved (if not at that bridge then at others). Another way to think about it is to focus on the benefits of installing barriers instead of the problems with the bridge. See our issue brief to learn more about the research behind suicide deterrent bridge barriers.</p> <p>After the barrier has been installed, it can be an opportunity to share positive stories, especially those of resiliency.</p> <p>Research shows that stories of hope and recovery can encourage people to seek help.</p>
<p>Don't Use Identifiable Imagery</p> <p>Don't share imagery of the bridge and barrier in a way that makes the specific location of the barrier identifiable, or paints a picture of what the fall would look like.</p>	<p>Do Use Unidentifiable Imagery</p> <p>If you're including a picture of the barrier, do use a close-up photo, which is recommended so that people don't see the barrier in the context of a fall, or in a way that makes the bridge identifiable.</p>
<p>Don't Use Moralistic Language</p>	<p>Do Use Neutral Language</p>

<p>Don't use phrases like "commit suicide" or "successful attempt". These phrases perpetuate shame and moral judgment. The word "committed" stems from a time when suicide was deemed a crime and sin.</p>	<p>Do use preferred phrases, like "ended one's life" or "died by suicide."</p> <p>Choosing to use this empathetic language helps reduce stigma by removing culpability from the person who has lost their life. This language also helps align talking about suicide with the way we speak about other health outcomes, such as dying from cancer or a heart attack. While there is no single cause for suicide, there are risk factors and warning signs which may increase the likelihood of an attempt including conditions like depression, anxiety, and substance abuse.</p>
<p>Don't Highlight Hopelessness</p> <p>Don't describe suicide as "skyrocketing," an "epidemic," or "dire," or use any other language that overstates or frames the situation as hopeless.</p>	<p>Do Portray as Solvable and Offer Hope</p> <p>Do portray suicide as a serious public health problem that can be solved. Focus on the hopeful message and that many suicides can be prevented. According to research, sharing stories of individuals who are doing well or thriving, and/or offering ways in which individuals with lived experienced have coped with a suicidal crisis can have a protective effect on those at risk for suicide. For example, do tell stories of individuals who were saved by barriers and their healing journey.</p> <p>Do always share support resources for seeking help such as the 988 Suicide and Crisis Lifeline at 988, the Crisis Text Line (text TALK or AYUDA to 741741), or afsp.org.</p>

Examples of Social Media Posts

AFSP advises against posting about or sharing detailed stories of loss on specific bridges but understands that social media can be a key tool in advocacy efforts around implementing suicide deterrent barriers. Below are some examples of safe social media posts that can be shared throughout your advocacy efforts:

1. Studies show that suicide deterrent barriers are the most effective tool to prevent suicide on bridges. DM me to join in advocating to have barriers implemented in our community! #AFSPadvocacy

2. I'm fighting to get suicide deterrent barriers installed at a bridge in our community to help save lives! Reach out if you're interested in learning more and getting involved. #AFSPadvocacy
3. Help make bridges safer for everyone! Reach out to me to learn how we're working to get barriers installed on bridges in our community and get involved. #AFSPadvocacy

Additional Resources

- To learn more about the effectiveness of suicide deterrent bridges barriers, view our Architectural Barriers [Issue Brief](#)
- To learn more on how you can advocate for suicide deterrent bridge barriers in your community, view our [Bridge Barriers Advocacy Tipsheet](#)
- If you are contacted by media regarding your advocacy efforts, please share this media guidance specific to reporting on suicide deterrent barriers and suicides related to structures
- For AFSP'S general guidance on safe reporting please see afsp.org/safereporting/
- For questions related to bridge barrier advocacy, please email the AFSP Public Policy Office at advocacy@afsp.org
- For further guidance and support regarding media outreach, please email the AFSP Public Relations Department at pr@afsp.org

ⁱ Public Health England. (2015). Suicide prevention: suicides in public places. Retrieved from <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/suicide-prevention-suicides-in-public-places>

ⁱⁱ Reisch, T., Schuster, U., & Michel, K. (2007). Suicide by jumping and accessibility of bridges: results from a national survey in Switzerland. Retrieved 1/11/24 from <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/18275374/>

ⁱⁱⁱ Yip, P., Yousuf, S., Chang, S., Caine, E., Chien-Chang Wu, K., & Chen, Y. (2012). Means restriction for suicide prevention. *Lancet*, 379(9834), 2393-2399. [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0140-6736\(12\)60521-2](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0140-6736(12)60521-2).

^{iv} Yip, P.S.F, Yousuf, S., & Chang, S., et al. (2018). Means restriction for suicide prevention. Retrieved from <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC6191653/>