

FAQs – Government accepts suicide reporting proposals

What are the current restrictions on reporting suicide?

If a death appears to have been self-inflicted, unless the coroner agrees, no one can make public any information on how the death occurred until the coroner's inquiry is completed.

If a coroner decides a death was a suicide, the only information that can be made public is the person's name, address, occupation and the fact that the coroner found the death to be self-inflicted.

A coroner can allow additional information to be made public, but only if it is "unlikely to be detrimental to public safety."

These restrictions are set out in the Coroners Act 2006.

Why are the restrictions in place?

Research shows a link between media reporting and copycat suicides. Some evidence also suggests that media reporting may have a role in triggering suicide clusters and may encourage people to see suicide as an appropriate option if they are suffering a life stress.

Restrictions on reporting are intended to help reduce these risks and to prevent suicides by people who are already vulnerable and might be negatively influenced.

Does the current law apply to social media?

Yes. The current law applies to anyone who makes public the details of a suicide death.

The definition of "make public" includes broadcasting, publishing in newspapers and magazines, making sound or visual recordings and posting information on internet sites that are generally accessible to the public.

What law changes to suicide reporting restrictions did the Law Commission propose?

The Law Commission made several recommendations to amend the Coroners Act to clarify and improve the law governing suicide reporting. Rather than the current broad restrictions, its proposals focus on limiting the types of details that are most likely to cause harm. For example, the Commission recommended:

- preventing anyone from making public how a person committed suicide (including where it happened, if the site suggests the method), unless the Chief Coroner grants an exemption

- allowing the Chief Coroner to only grant an exemption if they are satisfied that the risk of copycat suicidal behaviour is small and outweighed by the public interest.
- preventing anyone from describing a death as suicide unless the Chief Coroner has granted an exemption, or a coroner made a finding that the death is suicide
- allowing a death to be reported as a suspected suicide before a coroner's inquiry is completed, if the facts support that conclusion.

What will the penalties be for breaching the restrictions?

The Law Commission has recommended increasing the maximum fine to \$20,000 for a body corporate or \$5,000 for anyone else. The current fines are up to \$5,000 for a body corporate and \$1,000 for anyone else.

However, it is likely that fines would be used only in the most serious cases (for example, if someone deliberately breached the Act on several occasions). In less serious cases, people might be asked to remove details that breach the Coroners Act, or be given a warning by the Police.

When will the proposed law changes come into effect?

The Government plans to introduce a Coroners Amendment Bill this year. The proposed changes will take effect when the Bill is passed.

Is the Government accepting all the Law Commission's recommendations?

Yes. The Commission made 17 recommendations. The Government fully accepts 14 proposals for changing the Coroners Act, and generally accepts 3 recommendations about developing reporting standards.

For example, the Law Commission proposed that the Minister of Health:

- prepare a set of standards for suicide reporting, in consultation with representatives of the media and mental health interests. The proposed new standards would apply to anyone publicly reporting on a suicide death, including mainstream media, blogs and social media.
- implement an ongoing programme to promote and support the implementation of the standards, and evaluate their success in achieving the goal of low-risk suicide reporting.

The Government has already committed to improving information for media as part of the New Zealand Suicide Prevention Action Plan 2013–2016, using existing guidance. It will monitor how the legislative changes are working and consider whether new reporting standards are needed as part of a planned review of the action plan and the New Zealand Suicide Prevention Strategy when they come up for renewal in 2016.

More information can be found at: <http://www.justice.govt.nz/publications/global-publications/s/suicide-reporting-recommendations-and-government-response>

What are the goals of the New Zealand Suicide Prevention Strategy?

The New Zealand Suicide Prevention Strategy 2006–2016 (launched in June 2006) provides a framework for New Zealand’s suicide prevention efforts over a 10 year period. Its overarching aim is to reduce the rate of suicidal behaviour and its effects on the lives of New Zealanders, while taking into account that suicide affects certain groups more than others.

The strategy has seven goals:

1. promote mental health and well-being, and prevent mental health problems
2. improve the care of people who are experiencing mental disorders associated with suicidal behaviour
3. improve the care of people who make non-fatal suicide attempts
4. reduce access to the means of suicide
5. promote the safe reporting and portrayal of suicidal behaviour by the media
6. support families/whānau, friends and others affected by a suicide or suicide attempt
7. expand the evidence about the rates, causes and effective interventions

More information is available at <http://www.health.govt.nz/publication/new-zealand-suicide-prevention-strategy-2006-2016>

What is the Suicide Prevention Action Plan?

The New Zealand Suicide Prevention Action Plan 2013–2016 outlines a programme of actions that the Government will implement over the next few years. It is a cross-government initiative bringing together the work of eight agencies. It builds on the previous action plan covering 2008–2012. Both action plans reflect the goals of the New Zealand Suicide Prevention Strategy 2006–2016.

The Action Plan includes actions designed to:

- address the impact of suicide on families, whānau and communities by strengthening support for family, whānau and communities
- build the evidence base, specifically around what works for Māori and Pasifika
- extend existing services, specifically addressing geographical gaps in the coverage of services
- strengthen suicide prevention targeted to high risk populations who are in contact with agencies.

More information about the Suicide Prevention Action Plan is available at:
<http://www.health.govt.nz/publication/new-zealand-suicide-prevention-action-plan-2013-2016>

What guidance is available to the media on reporting suicide?

Guidelines for journalists are available at www.health.govt.nz/publication/reporting-suicide-resource-media.

They describe issues relating to suicide reporting, suggest areas that journalists should think carefully about, and identify sources of information that journalists may find useful.

The guidelines were developed by key stakeholders including representatives of the news media and mental health professionals. They have been adopted by the Newspaper Publishers' Association and the Media Freedom Committee.

What is the Government doing to address serious bullying behaviour that may provoke a person to take their own life?

The Harmful Digital Communications Bill, which is currently before Parliament, includes a new offence of incitement to commit suicide (where the person does not attempt to take their own life), punishable by up to three years imprisonment.

Currently, it is only an offence to aid, abet or incite suicide if a person attempts or commits suicide.

The new offence recognises the distress such provocation can cause and sends a message that the potential consequences of this kind of harassment are too serious to ignore.

It is one of a range of measures in the Bill to address damaging online communications and ensure perpetrators are held to account for their actions.

Is it okay to talk about suicide?

Yes, it is. However, it is important to be mindful of how we talk about suicide, as certain ways of discussing it are more helpful than others.

In particular, useful conversations may include information about mental health problems; how and where to get support and services in the community; where to find online information and support; and personal stories of hope and healing.

Such information can help people feel more supported and can encourage them to seek help.

Where can people get support and help?

Below is a list of some of the services available which offer support, information and help. All services are available 24 hours a day, seven days a week unless otherwise specified.

- Depression Helpline (8 am to 12 midnight) – 0800 111 757
- Healthline – 0800 611 116
- Kidsline (aimed at children up to 14 years of age; 4 pm to 6 pm weekdays) – 0800 54 37 54 (0800 kidsline)
- Lifeline – 0800 543 354 or (09) 5222 999 within Auckland
- Samaritans – visit the website www.samaritans.org.nz, or call 0800 726 666 (for callers from the Lower North Island, Christchurch and West Coast only) or (04) 473 9739 from all regions
- Skylight (aimed at supporting people facing tough times of change, loss, trauma and grief) – visit the website www.skylight.org.nz or call 0800 299 100 (9 am to 5 pm weekdays; facility to leave a message outside these hours)
- Suicide Crisis Helpline (aimed at those in distress, or those who are concerned about the wellbeing of someone else; 12 noon to 12 midnight) – 0508 828 865 (0508 TAUTOKO)
- Suicide Prevention Information New Zealand – www.spinz.org.nz
- Youthline – 0800 376 633, free text 234 or email talk@youthline.co.nz
- What's Up (for 5–18 year olds; 1 pm to 11 pm) – 0800 942 8787
- www.depression.org.nz
- www.thelowdown.co.nz – visit the website, email team@thelowdown.co.nz or free text 5626 (emails and text messages will be responded to between 12 noon and 12 midnight).