



## The Papageno Effect

For every one person that dies by suicide, 316 people seriously consider suicide but do not kill themselves. These stories of hope and recovery have the power to help others and dispel stigma and myths about suicide. One element of this power is the Papageno effect.

In Mozart's 18th century opera *The Magic Flute*, one of the main characters, Papageno, loses his love and feels the only way out of his pain is suicide. Before he can act on it, three characters show him other ways to solve his problems. Named after this story, **the Papageno effect** is the influence that mass media can have by responsibly reporting on suicide and presenting non-suicide alternatives to crises. Mass media may include news reporting, social media, movies, TV shows, books, blogs, and theatre.

This sheet may help to guide you in using the Papageno effect when talking to the media and telling stories in your local community. Positive examples of healing, hope, and help show people how to get through suicidal crisis and bring awareness to suicide prevention.

---

### Why is it important?

- Research shows that when details of positive coping during moments of crisis are included in media covering suicides, it may have a protective quality for those who may be experiencing thoughts of suicide themselves.
  - Examples of positive coping that may be helpful to you include calling a friend or family member, reaching out to a crisis hotline, or trying different treatment options.
- On the other hand, continuous reporting of the same suicide and the reporting of suicide myths were associated with an increase in suicide rates. This increase has been termed the Werther effect.
  - The Werther effect also suggests that when stories about suicide are seen by more of the population and the headlines are more dramatic, or the stories are more prominently displayed (on the front page of a paper or top of a broadcast for example), suicide rates may increase in that area.

### **How is the Papageno effect being used currently?**

- The Papageno effect can be used in any form of mass media, including news reporting, social media, movies, TV shows, books, blogs, and theatre. Here are some examples of it in action:
  - [Breaking the Silence](#) - In Oregon, local reporters launched an important conversation to help break the silence surrounding suicide in their communities and modeled responsible reporting. Articles included stories of healing and recovery that reduced stigma and encouraged people to speak up about their mental health concerns.
  - [Live Through This](#) - Live Through This collects stories told by suicide attempt survivors and their positive messages of recovery.
  - [Stories of Hope and Recovery](#) - The Lifeline has collected stories from a number of partner organizations of hope and healing.
  - [Moving America's Soul on Suicide](#) - RI International has a film series on the stories of those affected by suicide and their processes of hope and recovery.

### **How can you use the Papageno effect with journalists?**

- For crisis center directors and communications staff:
  - Incorporate stories of hope and healing in your talking points. These could be from local community members, personal stories (if you are comfortable sharing), or other national stories that have been made publicly available.
  - Establish long-term relationships with reporters and editorial boards from your local news outlets.
    - This can help you convey the steps of [responsible reporting](#) to them, give you the opportunity to talk about the Papageno effect, and encourage stories of resilience and help-seeking within media outlets, including school papers.
    - This could include pitching stories to your local papers or encouraging people to share when they feel ready.
    - This might include the chance to create teachable moments when there is an instance of problematic reporting (i.e. not sharing resources in a story about suicide, glamorizing suicide, mentioning the means of a suicide). This could include issuing a press release or retroactively suggesting changes to a reporter.
  - Research on the Papageno effect may be helpful to incorporate in your talking points. Here are some starting points:
    - News articles featuring suicide prevention experts were shown to decrease thoughts of suicide and increase education around suicide prevention within the general public without harmful effects.
    - University students were shown to experience a protective effect on their suicidal cognition when they read articles about a person who they did not personally identify with, who had suicidal ideation, and who spoke of obtaining professional help.

- When media guidelines were presented to a number of newspapers throughout Switzerland, the headline, photos, and text were rated as less sensational and the overall imitation risk was lowered after the intervention.

### **How can you use the Papageno effect on social media?**

- Offer stories of hope and recovery. The [Lifeline's Storytelling Checklist](#) offers some guidance on how to safely share stories.
  - When you share your experience of crisis (or others' experiences, with permission), include what helped during that time and what the experience of recovery was like.
    - Some of this content could also come from existing accounts or feedback from callers (shared with their permission).
  - This can help others see the support and resources that are available and the actions that they can take to help the people in their lives.
- Include relevant resources when needed (i.e. if someone posts online about suicidal crisis). This could include sharing the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline number or your local crisis center number.

### **What are some other ways you can use the Papageno effect?**

- Identify local experts, with lived experience if possible, that can tell the stories in your community from a perspective of hope and recovery.
  - Local experts will be able to carry suicide prevention work forward and reach a larger audience in your local area. These could include but are not limited to teachers, religious leaders, mental health organization leaders, and business owners. These people can advocate for and model the best way to tell stories about suicidality to different groups in your community.
  - These local experts may also be beneficial when talking to press. This could be a person that you refer the press to for future stories of hope and recovery.
- In schools, helping to create programs that connect the community and show people how to tell their stories can be beneficial.
  - Contacting local school counselors, school board members, curriculum creators, or principals may be critical to creating these programs.

### **References**

- Gould, M. (2020, October 23). Suicide Contagion Among Adolescents. [PowerPoint slides]. Colorado School Safety Resource Center.  
[https://cdpsdocs.state.co.us/safeschools/Resources/Virtual\\_Trainings/SSS\\_2020/Gould\\_Contagion\\_CO\\_Safe\\_Schools\\_Oct\\_2020.pdf](https://cdpsdocs.state.co.us/safeschools/Resources/Virtual_Trainings/SSS_2020/Gould_Contagion_CO_Safe_Schools_Oct_2020.pdf)
- Gould, M. (2001). Suicide and the media. *Annals of the New York Academy of Sciences*, 932(1), 200-224.

Michel, K., Frey, C., Wyss, K., & Valach, L. (2000). An exercise in improving suicide reporting in print media. *Crisis*, *21*(2), 71–79.

Niederkröthaler, T., & Till, B. (2020). Effects of suicide awareness materials on individuals with recent suicidal ideation or attempt: online randomised controlled trial. *The British Journal of Psychiatry : The Journal of Mental Science*, *217*(6), 693–700.

Niederkröthaler, T., Voracek, M., Herberth, A., Till, B., Strauss, M., Etzersdorfer, E., Eisenwort, B., & Sonneck, G. (2010). Role of media reports in completed and prevented suicide: Werther v. Papageno effects. *The British Journal of Psychiatry : The Journal of Mental Science*, *197*(3), 234–243.

Till, B., Arendt, F., Scherr, S., & Niederkröthaler, T. (2018). Effect of Educative Suicide Prevention News Articles Featuring Experts With vs Without Personal Experience of Suicidal Ideation: A Randomized Controlled Trial of the Papageno Effect. *The Journal of Clinical Psychiatry*, *80*(1).