

Celebrity suicide deaths – preventing “contagion”

By the Canadian Mental Health Association’s Centre for Suicide Prevention

In our culture, we are mostly silent about suicide. But when celebrities die by suicide – as Kate Spade and Anthony Bourdain did last week, the issue becomes front-page news. Anyone who has lost a loved one to suicide can attest to its utter devastation. This devastation becomes widespread when famous people die, as evidenced by the waves of social media posts and tributes to Spade and Bourdain. We try to make sense of celebrity suicides and we turn to the media for details. Robin Williams’ death in 2014 was widely publicized, and when Marilyn Monroe died in 1962, her death was glamorized in the media, including details of the method. The deaths of these two famous people led to an increase in suicides. That’s because sensational reporting can create “contagion,” where the suicide becomes the tipping point for people who are already at-risk.

On the other hand, responsible media portrayals can reduce this contagion. Following Kurt Cobain’s suicide in 1994, his partner, Courtney Love, gave a public statement encouraging people to seek help, and she did not release photos of the scene. The media worked together with her for more sensitive coverage.

Responsible media coverage of Spade and Bourdain’s deaths can help erode the silence about suicide and encourage thoughtful conversation.

Of course, it’s not only celebrities who are dying by suicide. 12 Canadians die by suicide every day. Suicide is caused by deep, psychological pain. Whether we are trying to comprehend a celebrity suicide, or that of someone close, the belief that one “big, bad thing” thing causes a person to die by suicide is inaccurate and harmful. Most people get to that place of hopelessness after struggling internally for a prolonged period of time, and not because of a single life event. It is a struggle that may come with warning signs including a marked change in behaviour, references to suicide and giving away possessions. We can help by sitting with those who are struggling, and by listening without trying to offer solutions. If you see the signs, you can ask directly, ‘Are you thinking of suicide?’ If the answer is yes, sit with them, and listen to them. Remain calm, open and non-judgmental and then connect them to help by calling Crisis Services Canada at 1-833-456-4566.

If you are in crisis, call 1-833-456-4566, text 45645 or chat at crisisservicescanada.ca. First Nations people and Inuit can also call 1-855-242-3310 or chat at hopeforwellness.ca.

To learn more about suicide prevention, visit Centre for Suicide Prevention at www.suicideinfo.ca.