Suicide Contagion
The day before Robin Williams’ suicide, the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline received about 3,000 calls on its hotline, a number it called “fairly typical.” The day after his suicide, the number of calls rose to 7,375, the most the organization had ever received. The surge in calls helps explain why suicide professionals were alarmed by a tweet from the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences on the evening of August 10, the day Williams committed suicide. “Genie, you’re free,” it said. In the words of Christine Moutier, chief medical officer at the American Foundation for Suicide Prevention, “Suicide should never be presented as an option. That’s a formula for potential contagion.”

Shortly after publication of Goethe’s wildly popular novella *The Sorrows of Young Werther* in 1774, news accounts proliferated of young men taking their own lives in emulation of the book’s lovelorn hero. This so-called “Werther effect” is no literary myth. A recent article in *Lancet Psychiatry* reports that clusters of suicides are more likely than individual suicides to be preceded by news reports on suicide. The link between news and future suicides was strongest when the media reported on the suicide of a famous person.

The research findings further indicate that the way in which suicide is reported can increase the likelihood of follow-on suicide clusters. “[T]he more sensational the coverage of the suicides, and the more details the story provides, then the more likely there are to be more suicides,” said researcher Dr. Madelyn Gould of the New York State Psychiatric Institute. Providing details about the method of suicide, for example, increases the likelihood of a suicide cluster.

Concern about suicide contagion is among the reasons that Dr. Dietz has taken the media to task for decades about their coverage of suicide by mass murder.

Earlier this year, French telecom giant Orange S.A. experienced a rash of 10 employee suicides, most of which were described as “explicitly related” to work. The spate of suicides recalled a wave of 46 suicides at the company from 2008
through March 2010, many of which involved notes blaming management decisions or work-related stress. The suicides received wide publicity.

Communications around suicide, whether it is multiple suicides or an apparently isolated act, are occasions for extraordinary sensitivity. Some audiences—family, friends, co-workers—are heartbreakingly apparent. Others are less visible, but include people vulnerable to the suggestion that suicide is an option.

Sources