



**SPRC** SUICIDE PREVENTION RESOURCE CENTER

## Developing Strategic Communication to Prevent Suicide: Let Science Be Your Guide

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**SPRC** One Definition: "Health Communications"

"The study and use of communication strategies to inform and influence *individual and community decisions* that enhance health."

-- *Making Health Communication Programs Work*, aka the "Pink Book"




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### Messaging Environment





 3 

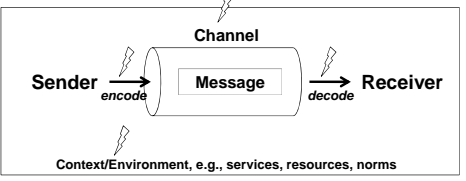
**SPRC** Communications = one tool in the suicide prevention toolbox 



Communication (alone) **cannot**: ("Pink Book," p. 3)

- Compensate for lack of access to health care services
- Produce sustained change in complex health behaviors without the support of a larger program for change
  - 2009 review of depression/suicide "campaigns": none increased care seeking or decreased suicidal behavior (Dumesnil & Verger)

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**SPRC** (Simple) Communication Model



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**SPRC** Mandatory Acronym and Abbreviation

- GAB
  - Goals
  - Audience
  - Behavior
- Three S's
  - Solutions
  - Safety
  - Synergy

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**SPRC** Goals

- Overall goal is suicide prevention
- How can messaging contribute?

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**SPRC** Science of the Problem & Its Solutions

**The Public Health Approach to Prevention**

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**SPRC** Identify Specific Research-Based Goals

*(not a complete list)*

- Increase “help-seeking” by Service Members and Veterans
- Increase knowledge and skills of friends, families, supervisors, and others to identify individuals at risk of suicide and refer to appropriate services
- Increase access to high quality behavioral health care
- Decrease prejudice, discrimination, and public humiliation of individuals who are responsibly addressing emotional, psychological, relational, and behavioral issues
- Restrict access to lethal means
- Increase life skills, effective coping, and resiliency
- Promote social connectedness

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**Communications Planning Model**  
Source: “Pink Book,” p. 11

**First:** think broadly about effective solutions

**Then ask:** how can communications advance these goals?

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**SPRC** (Simple) Communication Model

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**SPRC** Audience & Behavior, con’t

Working from goal(s)....

- Target audience = what specific audience(s) do you need to reach with messages?
- Behavior = What do you want each audience to do (sometimes also *know, believe, feel*)?
  - “Raise awareness” is not specific enough:
    - What do you want to change, exactly?
      - Increase knowledge of available services
      - Increase motivation to seek help for a friend
      - Increase skills of family member to encourage help-seeking
      - Increase caring communications by supervisors

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**SPRC** Conduct Audience Research

Affected by: attitudes, beliefs, values, norms, behaviors

Sender → encode → Message → Channel → Audience → decode → Behavior → Goal

Context/Environment, e.g., services, resources, norms

- Essential background for message design (“encoding”) & selecting channels
- Helps refine audience “segments”
- (See Pink Book for helpful how-to’s)

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**SPRC** Developing Your **Message**

- ❖ Work from Goal + Audience + Behavior + audience research
- ❖ “Call to action”
  - ❖ What TO do (rather than what not to do); “modeling” is good
  - ❖ Promote actions acceptable to the audience
- ❖ Include content that will increase the likelihood that THIS audience will perform THIS behavior, e.g.
  - Address beliefs, attitudes, or barriers *that are impeding the behavior*
  - Enables the desired behavior
  - Motivates the audience to take the desired action
    - Emphasize *benefits* of acting that the audience cares about
    - “Scare tactics” may backfire

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Feeling lost, lonely, desperate?

If you feel trapped... If you feel you have no one to turn to... If you've been feeling down for a while and you're not exactly sure why...

It's important to talk to someone. You can talk to someone **right now** by calling the Lifeline. Help is available at any time of the day or night—and it's completely free and confidential. We're here to listen and to help you find your way back to a happier, healthier life.

**When it seems like there's no hope, there is help.**

If you feel trapped... If you feel you have no one to turn to... If you've been feeling down for a while and you're not exactly sure why... It's important to talk to someone. You can talk to someone **right now** by calling the Lifeline. Help is available at any time of the day or night—and it's completely free and confidential. We're here to listen and to help you find your way back to a happier, healthier life.

If you or someone you know is thinking about suicide, call the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline: 1-800-273-TALK (8255) With help comes hope.

SUICIDE PREVENTION 1-800-273-TALK

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH AND HUMAN SERVICES

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**SPRC** Characteristics of Good Messages/Media

- Appealing
- Culturally appropriate
- Understandable language
- Attention-getting
- **Clear -- don't trade cleverness for clarity**
- **Visuals/sounds match and support the message**

**Pre-test with the audience to be sure!**

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**SPRC** Channels & Implementation

- Consider a broad range of channels
  - Think creatively!
  - Use multiple channels & repeat the message
- Match to:
  - Audience usage
  - Credibility to audience
  - Complexity of message
  - Where they are in a position to act?

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**SPRC** Summary: Each step builds on previous one

- *Analyze the problem* = identify key contributing factors, prior research on what works →
- *Goals* = reflecting specific **changes** that will make a difference in the problem →
- *Target audience & objectives* -- to carry out goals....
  - Who needs to act & what do you want them to do?
  - Research current actions, beliefs, media use, etc. →
- Using ALL this info → Create messages & reach audience with them
- *Evaluate* effectiveness

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**SPRC** Mandatory Acronym and Abbreviation

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**SPRC**

**Solutions  
(to Stigma)**

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**SPRC** Stigma is Multi-Faceted

- Stereotypes (beliefs-population)
- Prejudice (attitudes-individuals)
- Discrimination (behavior)

• **Public stigma**

- Perceived public stigma

• **Self-stigma**

- Label avoidance
- Individual, interpersonal, structural

Corrigan, 2004 22 SAMHSA

**Stigma Reduction—Common Messages**


- Stigma is a huge pervasive problem
- We have to get rid of stigma
- If you need help, don't feel stigma

**Examples**

**ERASING STIGMA AGAINST SEEKING HELP KEY TO SUICIDE EPIDEMIC -- As ...**  
Jan 16, 2010 ... As military and veteran suicides continue to climb, seeking ... Military suicide response hinges on erasing stigma against seeking help ...

Community

**Mentally ill still face stigma**



Stop The Stigma Of Mental Illness

- "There is no shame in seeking help."

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**SPRC** Approaches to Challenging Stigma

- Protest
- Education
- Contact

(Corrigan and Gelb, 2006)

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**SPRC** Analyze whether and how stigma is impeding specific goals

**Basic model of help-seeking behavior**  
(Mechanic 1966; Corrigan, 2004)

**NON-stigma factors**

- logistics
- availability
- costs
- perc'd tx efficacy
- svcs not culturally specific

Thanks to Marilyn Downs, Tufts University

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**SPRC**

**Safety = Safe Messaging...**

- Some well-meaning messages may *increase* suicide risk among vulnerable individuals

→ **Safe and Effective Messaging for Suicide Prevention** (for the public)

→ **Also: Recommendations for the Media** (see Appendix)

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**SPRC** Safe and Effective Messaging (for the public)

**Don'ts**

- ❖ Don't "normalize" suicide by presenting it as a common event
- ❖ Don't glorify or romanticize people who have died by suicide
- ❖ Don't focus on personal details of people who have died by suicide
- ❖ Don't present overly detailed descriptions of suicide means
- ❖ Don't present suicide as inexplicable or resulting from stress only

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What impression do these headlines create?

Dramatic Increase Found in Soldier Suicides — Psychiatric News  
by A. Levin, 2007  
Sep 21, 2007 ... Dramatic Increase Found in Soldier Suicides. Aaron Levin. Next Section Better documentation reveals a sharp rise in suicide among U.S. Army ...  
pn.psychiatryonline.org/content/42/18/9.1.full

Army suicide rate hits a three-decade high, officials say - Los ...  
Jan 30, 2009 ... At least 128 Army soldiers took their own lives last year -- an estimated suicide rate of 20.2 per 100,000, a sharp increase from the 2007 ...  
articles.latimes.com/2009/jan/30/nation/na-army-suicides30 - Cached - Similar

Army Grapples with 'Epidemic' of Suicides - 911truth.org  
2 days ago - Army Grapples with 'Epidemic' of Suicides. ... One third who commit suicide have never served in combat; another third commit suicide while in combat. ...  
www.911truth.org/article.php?story=20100406174537823 - Cached

Home Front Hearts: Despite Efforts, Troop Suicide Rate up  
Mar 12, 2010 - ... and the U.S. military is using a battle to stem an epidemic of suicides in its ranks. ... Christopher Philbrick, the deputy director of the Army Suicide ... While the military's suicide rate is comparable to civilian rates, ...  
www.homefronthearts.org/news.../despite-efforts-troop-suicide-rate-up/ - Cached

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**SPRC** Safe and Effective Messaging

**Do's**

- ❖ Do emphasize help-seeking
  - ❖ Promote positive behaviors that others have taken
- ❖ Do provide information on *how* to find help
- ❖ Do emphasize prevention
- ❖ Do list the warning signs of suicide
  - ❖ Specifically, AAS Consensus Warning Signs (see Appendix)
- ❖ Do list risk and protective factors
- ❖ Do highlight effective treatments for mental health problems

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Strengthen Prevention/Treatment Stories

Could use improvement...

Dallas Contact Crisis Line forum to raise awareness of military ...  
Dallas Morning News - David Tarrant - Mar 25, 2010  
Graham is scheduled to speak about military suicides at a luncheon today in Dallas. Contact Crisis Line, the nonprofit 24-hour suicide prevention hotline, ...

Suicide prevention training planned  
The Ranger - Brandy A. Santos - 23 hours ago  
The American Foundation for Suicide Prevention found that between ... in training community members, the military and school districts. ...

Mental wounds treatable, but most veterans don't complete care ...  
Mar 24, 2010 - Every night, after work, he and a few fellow Marines would get together to ... Veterans issues; Mar 3 - U. prof says military's mental health stigma leading to ... Health Care System don't receive the recommended course of treatment ...  
www.slttrib.com/news/ci\_14751038 - Cached

Suicide prevention continues to elude Army leaders (1/12/10 ...  
Jan 12, 2010 ... Return to Article: Suicide prevention continues to elude Army leaders. By Katherine McIntire Peters kpeters@govexec.com January 12, 2010 ...  
www.govexec.com/mailbagDetails.cfm?aid=44376 - Cached

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**Provide Information Needed To Act** (example)

Caveat: warning signs are not arranged according to the two "tiers" recommended by the consensus warning signs (see Appendix).

*Military suicide response hinges on erasing stigma against seeking help*  
By Bruce Alpert, Times-Picayune  
January 15, 2010

**GETTING HELP**  
The National Suicide Prevention Lifeline has a toll-free number for people feeling suicidal: **1.800.273.TALK (8255)**. It operates seven days a week, 24 hours a day.

**Here are signs the Department of Defense says could mean a person is vulnerable to suicide:**

- ▶ Talking or writing about death and ways to die
- ▶ Showing sudden changes in mood or behavior
- ▶ Sleeping or eating changes
- ▶ Exhibiting reckless or risky behaviors
- ▶ Expressing hopelessness about the future
- ▶ Preparing a will
- ▶ Giving things away
- ▶ Making arrangements for pets to be cared for
- ▶ Unusual spending
- ▶ Withdrawing from others

THE TIMES-PICAYUNE 31

**SPRC** "Do's" + Effective Communications

Remember, Do's are (condensed)

- ❖ Emphasize help-seeking ; prevention; effective treatments
- ❖ Provide information on how to find help
- ❖ List the warning signs of suicide, risk and protective factors

→ Create messages to support specific strategies & desired actions.  
→ Tie to research-based goals

Examples (can be adapted to different levels)

- Promote *specific* efforts to increase help-seeking (e.g., promote new services and policy changes, give multiple, specific sources of help)
- Correct misperceptions that hamper desired actions
- Provide specific realistic actions that people in different roles can take to help reduce suicide
- Tell success stories of people who acted and how it paid off

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**Success Stories** — can describe sources of help, desired behavior & how it led to the right outcomes; may reduce stigma

"General's story puts focus on stress stemming from combat"  
Tom Vanden Brook, USA TODAY, 11/25/08

The stress of his combat service could have derailed his career, but Ham says he realized that he needed help transitioning from life on the battlefields of Iraq to the halls of power at the Pentagon. So he sought screening for post-traumatic stress and got counseling from a chaplain. That helped him "get realigned," he says.....

There clearly is a part of Army culture that says, 'Tough it out. You just work your way through it.' That's clearly where I thought I was. I didn't think I needed anybody to help me. It took the love of my life to say, 'You need to talk to somebody.' I'm glad that she did that, and I think she's glad that I did that."

[http://www.usatoday.com/news/military/2008-11-24-general\\_N.htm](http://www.usatoday.com/news/military/2008-11-24-general_N.htm) 33

**SPRC** Synergy

- Messages reinforce specific goals of suicide prevention
- Messages work in sync with other efforts (policies, services, etc.)
- Consistent messaging across "levels"
  - With needed adjustments
- Cohesion across the message environment

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**SPRC** In Summary


- GAB
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**SPRC** Appendices

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**Recommendations on Safe Reporting for the Media**



**At-a-Glance: Safe Reporting on Suicide**


Research indicates that the way suicide is reported in the media can contribute to additional suicides and suicide attempts. Conversely, stories about suicide can inform readers and viewers about the likely causes of suicide, its warning signs, trends in suicide rates, and recent treatment advances. The following recommendations have been developed to assist reporters and editors in safe reporting on suicide.

**At-a-Glance:** [www.sprc.org/library/at\\_a\\_glance.pdf](http://www.sprc.org/library/at_a_glance.pdf)

**Full document:** [www.sprc.org/library/sreporting.pdf](http://www.sprc.org/library/sreporting.pdf)

Coming in April! [www.reportingonsuicide.org](http://www.reportingonsuicide.org)

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**Consensus Warning Signs**

**AAS Consensus Warning Signs (Rudd et al. 2006)**

- Distinguish warning signs from risk factors
  - WS indicate heightened risk for suicide *in the near-term* (i.e., within minutes, hours, or days)
  - RF suggest longer-term risk (i.e., a year to lifetime.)
- 2 tiers
  - Tier 1: Seek immediate help
  - Tier 2: Seek help
- Often it is a *constellation* of signs that raises concern (absent direct statements or behaviors)

One-page summary:  
[http://www2.sprc.org/sites/sprc.org/files/AASWarningSigns\\_factsheet.pdf](http://www2.sprc.org/sites/sprc.org/files/AASWarningSigns_factsheet.pdf)



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**Consensus Warning Signs (paraphrased)**


**Tier 1: Seek immediate help** if someone is:

- Threatening or talking of wanting to hurt or kill him/herself
- Looking for ways to kill him/herself by seeking access to firearms, available pills, or other means
- Talking or writing about death, dying or suicide, when these actions are out of the ordinary for the person

**Tier 2: Seek help** if someone displays


- Hopelessness
- Rage, uncontrolled anger, seeking revenge
- Acting reckless, risky activities (seemingly w/o thinking)
- Feeling trapped - like there's no way out
- Increased alcohol or drug use
- Withdrawing from friends, family and society
- Anxiety, agitation, unable to sleep or sleeping all the time
- Dramatic mood changes
- No reason for living; no sense of purpose in life

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