Economy, Suicide and the Media

A number of recent stories in the media have highlighted tragic suicide deaths in the context of the current financial crisis. Although it is true that such stressors can precede a suicide, the issue of causation is much more complicated. In fact, more than 90 percent of people who die by suicide have an underlying psychiatric disorder at the time of their death, most often depression. It is important to note that when people have recovered from their depression, the stressful events look different to them, and because they are thinking more clearly they can find better solutions to their problems.

Since the most recent statistics on suicide rates are from 2005, it is nearly impossible to determine the effect, if any, that the recent economic downturn has had on the nation's suicide rate. And while historically, there have been reports about suicide rates increasing during past economic recessions, direct cause and effect has not been studied or determined (see a recent article by ABC News, "Economic Depression Suicides A Myth?").

Therefore, it is important for the media to avoid sensationalizing recent news of suicides by linking them to the economy when the statistics are not available and facts are limited. Instead, the media could educate the public about suicide warning signs, symptoms of depression and provide the public with information on how and where to seek help if they or someone they know is in trouble.

In addition to providing inaccurate information, highlighting stories about suicide deaths can run the risk of contributing to suicide contagion, also known as copycatting. Certain ways the media reports about this issue, such as oversimplifying and sensationalizing suicide, can contribute to contagion or in the very least can amplify more misinformation about suicide. Nationally recognized recommendations for reporting on suicide are available at www.afsp.org/media.

AFSP urges the media to refer to these recommendations for any and all future reportings on suicide, and consider adding into their coverage helpful resources for individuals in suicidal (1-800-273-TALK) and/or financial crisis.