

Response 1

The *Response Ability* Project:

Integrating communication about suicide and mental illness into public relations curricula.

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Why should the media consider the ways they cover mental illness?

- Research: media is a primary source of information about mental illness and tends to be portrayed negatively in the mass media.
- This reporting may contribute to negative stereotypes, stigma and discrimination.
- It is important to minimise negative portrayals of mental illness as the presentation of positive images does not appear to balance negative media portrayals.

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Why should the media consider the ways they cover suicide?

- Research shows that in some cases, reporting of suicide has been linked to increased rates of actual suicide.
- Although healthy members of the community are unlikely to be affected, people who are in despair are often unable to consider alternative solutions to their problems.
- People may be influenced by a media report, particularly where they identify with the person in the report (as either someone like them or someone they want to be).
- The way in which suicide is reported is significant, in that responsible reporting may actually help reduce rates.

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What is Response Ability?

- Part of the *Mindframe* National Media Initiative, aimed at addressing the way suicide and mental illness are reported and portrayed in the media.
- Multi-media curriculum resources for the undergraduate training of journalism students and public relations students.
- Based on research evidence about the impact of reporting and portraying both suicide and mental illness – with a focus on professional practice (ie journalism or public relations)

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Why are mental illness and suicide relevant topics for a public relations course?

- These are prevalent issues that may impact directly or indirectly on public relations;
- Considered practice can assist in breaking down stigma and reducing harm to vulnerable people;
- Without consideration, practice could reinforce fear and alienate;
- Consider the potential for conflict between the broader public interest and the needs of your client.

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Development process

- Consultation with public relations educators to inform the development process.
- Resources developed in partnership with public relations educators and practitioners.
- Flexible curriculum design across multiple formats – making it easy to use, adaptable for each institution, and relevant across a range of subject areas.
- Uses scenarios drawn from the “real world” that allow for a problem-based learning approach.
- The case-studies and materials focus on teaching students public relations skills rather than being just about suicide or mental illness.

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What is in the resources?

- All resources are available online with lecturer versions and extra notes available in a password protected area.
 - Core student background document : Issues and Impact;
 - Lecture slides and notes (used in isolation or integrated into existing lectures);
 - Six case studies for use in tutorials or as student assignments;
 - Facts sheets covering background information, facts and statistics.
- Can be used in subjects such as crisis management, issues management, media relations, ethics, event management, campaign development etc

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Response Student perspective ⁹

Pilot of resources in 2009

- The resources were piloted at seven universities or TAFEs in 2009.
- Results from **students** revealed:
 - Information was both interesting and relevant;
 - Website was useful and easy to use;
 - Resources increased their confidence in communicating about mental illness and suicide;
 - The influence of public relations practice on perpetuating stereotypes and stigma associated with mental illness and suicide, was understood.

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Results from **educators** revealed:

- The most commonly used component was the “Discussing Sensitive Issues” document;
- Resources were used as lecture material, tutorial activities, and the basis for an assessment task;
- The resources and website were seen as useful, easy to use, of high quality, and well presented;
- Exposure to the resources increased their knowledge of appropriate communication about mental illness and suicide, and increased their confidence in teaching about these issues;
- Felt supported by the project team;
- All respondents would use the resources again in the future.

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Next Steps?

- Support for all relevant programs to integrate the resources into the curriculum;
- Professional development for lecturers and tutors on using the resources;
- Expansions of the resources with new case-studies and other material;
- Ongoing communication with educators and students;
- Funding of the Response Ability Academic Research Scheme to support research;
- Conferences and industry partnerships.

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