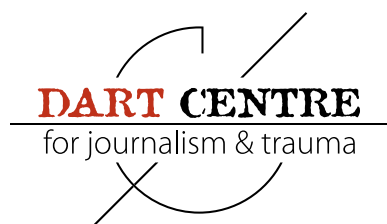


TRAUMA & JOURNALISM

A Guide For Journalists, Editors & Managers



Compiled and edited by Mark Brayne



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INTRODUCTION

Road accidents and plane crashes. Natural disaster. Famine and war. Crime and murder. Floods. Riots. Child abuse and torture. Rape and sexual violence. Genocide.

And the aftermath of all of those things. Loss. Bereavement. Extreme human distress.

Trauma is at the heart of news — and of the human condition. How it's reported gives those who weren't there their first understanding of what a traumatic event means. Personally. For their families and loved-ones. For their community and their nation. Indeed, for the world as a whole.

The journalism of trauma matters, and journalists have a profound responsibility to tell the story well. Their work can reflect, reinforce, and calm — or exacerbate — the grief and distress that ripples out from death and injury.

Covering trauma, whether major international stories or events much closer to home, can also have an impact on those who do the reporting.

Like the police, the fire and medical services, like military personnel and rescue workers, journalists are professional first responders to crisis and disaster. But they're among the last of those groups to recognise the psychological implications of that responsibility.

Just as sports reporters and financial journalists don't open a notebook without a professional knowledge of their field, neither should those who report violence and tragedy.

This handbook is the fruit of a Dart Centre consultation with journalists across the world, and it distils the expertise of the best international trauma experts. We hope it will contribute to a better journalism of trauma, and to the wellbeing of those who report it.

Journalists are professional first responders to crisis and disaster. But they're among the last of those groups to recognise the psychological implications of that responsibility.

WHAT IS TRAUMA?

As products of evolution, human beings are programmed to be both fascinated and affected by violence and tragedy.

Well before the advent of news and journalism, our response to traumatic experience helped determine how we survived and prospered as a species on this planet.

The experience of trauma is, in other words, as old as the human race, well described in literature from the Bible and the Ancient Greeks (indeed, the very word “trauma” itself is Greek, meaning a *piercing* or a *wounding*), to Shakespeare and the English poets of World War One.

The science of trauma, however, is much more recent — developing from the late 19th century through the two World Wars to the formulation of the diagnosis of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) in 1980.

So, before going into the implications for journalism and self care, it’s useful to consider the basics of what might be considered traumatic as opposed to simply stressful.

In its widest understanding, a psychologically traumatic event or critical incident can be described as:

Any event to which a person is connected, that is unexpected, outside that person’s usual range of human experience, and that involves some form of loss, injury or threat of injury, whether actual or perceived.

More narrowly, PTSD is currently defined by the American Psychiatric Association as the distress that can follow from:

Direct personal experience or the witnessing of an event involving actual or threatened death or serious injury, or other threat to a person’s physical integrity; or learning about unexpected or violent death, serious harm, or threat of death or injury experienced by a family member or other close associate.

In this definition, the person will have experienced intense fear, helplessness, or horror. The symptoms on which a diagnosis of PTSD can be based, if they continue for more than a month, can include:

- Recurrent and intrusive recollections, such as flashbacks or nightmares;

- Emotional numbing, and avoidance of people and places that are reminders of the event;
- Persistent physiological arousal, which may include irritability, poor concentration, sleep disturbances, physical symptoms such as stomach cramps or sweating, and an exaggerated startle response.

Some critics argue that PTSD is a Western political construct, of marginal relevance to people from other cultures. And while it’s true that different cultures handle trauma differently, most trauma specialists in most countries now recognise that human beings are more similar in their inbuilt emotional responses to trauma than they are distinct.

Yet it’s important to keep trauma in context. When you’re reporting or dealing with extreme human distress, remember first that most people recover naturally from trauma, and also, if they don’t, that PTSD is a less likely outcome than depression and anxiety, relationship breakdown, and alcoholism or substance abuse.

Most trauma specialists in most countries now recognise that human beings are more similar in their inbuilt emotional responses to trauma than they are distinct.

REPORTING TRAUMA — THE JOURNALISM

Trauma and the deep physiological survival responses set off by the witnessing or fear of injury or death can significantly affect individuals' perception and judgement — whether they're victims or survivors themselves, or eyewitnesses or reporters.

It's the brain's job to filter, interpret and make personal sense of the mass of information it's getting from the five senses. That's true even at the quietest of times. But when faced with traumatic stress — and depending on a host of other factors — this system can switch rapidly into alarm and survival mode. People can suddenly feel and behave very differently from their normal selves.

That's why eyewitnesses to traumatic events are notoriously unreliable. It's also why even seasoned journalists at moments of high emotion can sometimes get it wrong.

Bear that in mind if you're witnessing violence or disaster yourself, or if you're editorially responsible for publishing or broadcasting a report that quotes someone — whether an eyewitness or a colleague — who is under stress.

GETTING THE STORY

Half the journalists I dealt with acted with incredible empathy and understanding. It worked both ways — I gave them a much better story. Likewise I had a lot of bad interviews. In every case a bad experience triggered re-traumatisation — through loss of trust and loss of control. — Dr Mary Self, whose story of recovery from terminal cancer was international front page news in 1999.

Good journalism — and above all being accurate and fair — matters whatever the story that's being reported. When it comes to the journalism of trauma and extreme human distress, these principles matter even more.

Observing them will get you a better story, and help ensure that your reporting doesn't make things unnecessarily worse for those whose story it is that you're telling.

The following suggestions recognise that sometimes there will be intense time pressure, confusion or danger. But the principles are as valid for covering crime or tragedy in the local community as they are for reporting on war or global-scale catastrophe. They are as relevant to those in the business of daily journalism as they are to those who have more time to work on a story, such as investigative journalists or documentary film-makers.

Making the Approach & Setting the Context

- Whenever you're confronted with trauma or its aftermath — in public or in private — stop, look and listen. Take the scene in. Compose yourself. Breathe. Prepare to take time, and be patient.
- Where individuals are in obvious distress, accept that you may sometimes need to offer help and support before you can report. You're a human being first, after all, and a journalist second. At the same time, remember that you're not there professionally to rescue, and that you can help by getting the story.
- Be prepared for the widest range of responses. Victims and survivors, people who've been violently bereaved, witnesses, and those "merely" confronted with the aftermath, can all react in ways that can surprise and even shock. Some may seem super-cool, rational and calm. They may show dignity and sometimes astonishing composure.
- On the other hand, people may be intensely emotional. They may be overcome with grief and despair. They may be angry and bitter. They may be confused and distracted, unable to take new information on board. They may seem frozen, unable to talk. Their emotional defences have been breached, and they may feel vulnerable, raw and numb.
- Whatever the manifestation, bear in mind the emotional impact of what has happened. Approach people with care, respect and kindness. Take a moment to introduce yourself, make eye contact and explain why you would like to talk to them. Take it slowly and don't rush — however chaotic the circumstances. Don't just stuff a microphone in someone's face and expect an interview.

- Those you speak to may be going through the worst experience of their lives. Later, they may not be able to remember either what you asked or what they said. So, let them decide whether to talk to you. It may seem obvious, but don't pressure them with offers of reward, or by insisting that an interview will help others.
- If you are working with a team, take a moment before an interview to introduce your team and explain each person's role in the process of reporting a story.
- Victims, survivors, families and friends will often be struggling to regain control after their world has been turned upside down. An interview with such people is very different from an interview with a politician or an expert — so do what you can to give them a sense of control of the conversation.
- However urgent your deadline, however impatient your editors, allow the people you're interviewing to set the pace; to take breaks; to end the interview. If you're recording, you might agree a non-verbal stop signal — raising a hand for example — for them to tell you they need to pause.
- Don't intentionally provoke tears, but if the person does cry, don't be frightened. Tears are a natural response to distress. Crying can sometimes indicate that the person feels safe talking to you. Very often, he or she will be ready to carry on talking once the tearful moment has passed. Just in case, it can help to have a small supply of clean tissues with you. Don't be afraid to offer them — cautiously and respectfully.
- People you speak to in these circumstances are rarely media-savvy. Try to explain to them how their story or pictures are likely to be used — or that they may not be used at all.
- They may be bombarded with requests and need legitimate help in dealing with those demands. Respect that they may want to have someone with them, or to deal with the media through a spokesperson.
- Saying you're sorry for what has happened is not a statement of blame or responsibility, but can be a decent human thing to do. But don't fake compassion. Treat those you approach as you would wish to be treated if the situation was reversed.
- If you sense they're worried about what they've said, and there is enough time, you might read some of the quotes you've recorded or noted back to them, and make sure you've got their story right.
- If you're asking for photographs of dead or injured relatives, allow your interviewees to suggest which might best be used. Make sure you have noted the name that the family uses of any injured or dead.
- If the context allows it — and covering a fast-moving crisis or fighting, for example, may make this impossible — encourage interviewees to ask you questions while you're there, and give them your contact details just in case. Sometimes people who don't want to talk immediately may be ready to do so later.
- In summary, don't ever, as journalist or filmmaker, gratuitously make things worse for the people whose stories you report. In the coverage of extreme human distress, there can be no justification for disrespectful and thoughtless journalism.

One important thought: the moment that someone hears of the death of a loved-one can be the most traumatic moment of that person's life. Before you make an approach for an interview, find out if possible whether the person you're talking with has already been told of what has happened by the appropriate authorities. If you can, avoid being the first person to break such news to relatives or close friends.

The Interview

Good and sensitive interviewing is of course central to all good journalism. But when you're dealing with trauma victims and survivors, these skills are especially important.

It's about more than asking good questions. It's about creating, however briefly, *rappport* and a relationship — one that allows both you and your interviewee to give your best.

- Before you approach anyone or begin an interview, be clear what it is you want out of it. How does this person's experience potentially fit into the larger narrative that you are exploring? What information do you need? It's important to have done your preparation and your research — but remember that the expertise will come from the interviewee.
- You may be feeling nervous, fearful, even angry about the story you're reporting. It's important to acknowledge and be aware of your own feelings. But try to let your emotions inform rather than cloud your understanding.
- Check whether it's OK to ask a tough question. Then listen! The worst mistake a reporter can do is to talk too much.
- Use active listening skills — appropriate eye contact, non-verbal signalling of interest and engagement, mirroring the movements of your interviewee. Remember that most communication takes place through body language and tone of voice rather than through words.
- Structure your discussion — it will give both your interviewee and yourself a sense of containment and relative safety.
- Be confident and clear — and stick, certainly in the beginning phases of your interview, as far as possible to the facts of what happened. You can “walk” interviewees through an experience — what was going on before it happened, what they experienced, what followed.
- Simple, open questions work best. Try to avoid questions that can be answered just ‘Yes’ or ‘No’. And don't ask more than one question at a time.
- Be curious. Use phrases that open up areas of exploration. “Tell me more.” ... “What happened next?” ... “Let me check. What I'm hearing is ...”
- Reflect back. Paraphrase, summarise, check understanding. Try prefacing questions with: “I wonder...”
- Allow silences and pauses. Name what your interviewee is doing: “I notice you're smiling.”
- **Never ask that most overused and least effective of journalistic questions: “How do you feel?”** You may get tears in response, but you're not likely to get a coherent, useful or meaningful answer. “How do you feel?” is the one question survivors and victims consistently say they find the most distressing and inappropriate. Better options include: “How are you now?” or “How did you experience that?” or “What do you think about ...?”
- If you're interviewing through an interpreter, you may not be understanding everything your interviewee is saying. But the third person is a key player in the dynamic of the interview, and can help put interviewees at ease or indeed alarm them. Use any translator or interpreter as a partner in understanding the essence as well as the factual meaning of what is being said. Remember how much information you can pick up through body language and tone of voice.
- An inclination to “over-empathise” can be dangerous — you're not there to rescue or make things better for the person you're interviewing. It doesn't help either you or your interviewee if you climb over professional boundaries in order to become a confidante or advocate.
- If you can, establish at the outset roughly how long you are likely to talk — it helps set boundaries that helpfully contain the distress you'll be talking about.
- Be clear about your endings, but take care how you bring an interview to a close. Be aware that if you cut an interview off abruptly or unilaterally because you find it upsetting, or because you wrongly assume that the person wants to stop, that can just add to their hurt. Let your interviewees know when you're approaching the end of the interview. Say how much longer you've got. Ask if there's anything else they'd like to say. If they're still in clear distress, ask if they have someone they can ask to support them here and now.

In summary, get it right and people are much more likely to share the information you need for your story. Good for you, good for them, and good for the journalism.

WHAT'S THE STORY?

Journalists who cover areas such as science or the economy need to know the rules of the game they're reporting. There are also rules and essential expertise in the field of trauma and extreme human distress. You should know what it is that you're reporting.

In the immediate aftermath of a traumatic event or experience, many of those involved *will* experience PTSD-like symptoms, including intrusive recollections, numbing, avoidance and hyperarousal. That's because they, like you, are human.

Just like bleeding after being injured, or the pain of bruising or a broken bone, symptoms of psychological distress are entirely natural, and the beginning of what the body intends to be a process of healing.

And just as flesh wounds take a couple of weeks to heal, and bones a couple of months, there's a natural cycle to recovery from emotional trauma. Most people will be generally feeling quite a lot better within four to six weeks.

What they need in the first instance is practical support, human warmth, reassurance and education about normal responses to trauma.

Similarly, the classic disaster story itself will often move through a cycle, and it's good as a journalist to know which part of that cycle has been reached. It can help you keep perspective at a time of especially high emotion:

- As the impact of what has happened sinks in, there will often be a mixture of initial shock, confusion and bewilderment. People will at times be literally at a loss for words.
- At the same time, there can be the dramatic early rumours — inflated death tolls, fear of contamination and disease, reports of social breakdown. Some of this may be true. More often, however, first rumours and reports turn out to be exaggerated.
- Very quickly, as rescue operations get into gear and the news machine settles in, there can follow a period of heroism and stoicism. In this phase, news coverage often highlights brave survivors; heroic rescue workers; a resilient city, etc. This, too, is a phase that — while sometimes helpful

and appropriate — can be associated with some denial of the enormity of what happened.

- After this initial, perhaps adrenaline-fuelled phase (usually not much more than a few days), both survivors/victims and the media can shift into blame mode, focusing on such things as slow rescue services, a chaotic government response, or poor construction of buildings that collapse in an earthquake.
- After a few days or weeks, depending on the dimensions of what happened, the caravan begins to move on. The media find new headlines. People are left to get on with their lives. By the wider public at least, the story is forgotten.
- For individuals going through their own emotional response to what has happened, most will be getting back to their normal selves within a few weeks. But some will still be raw and hurting long after the media have gone, sometimes for years. Everyone recovers — or not — in their own way.

Remember this cycle as you report the story.

ACT II JOURNALISM

I believe we ought to invest equal energy to finding out what happens after the cameras have left. To provide this diet of raw emotion is only half the story. We capture the grief, the anger, the tears but there are many more human emotions and a range of feelings which are excluded from our obsession with the immediate. To truly reflect our world we need to report those more discreet human responses as people seek to rebuild their lives and reconcile themselves to what happened to them. — Peter Burdin, BBC.

If the "Act I" of journalism is the immediate reporting of what happened and how people were impacted — the blood and pain, the violence and the despair — "Act II" is the often unreported narrative of what happened next.

Sometimes that involves healing, recovery and confronting the past, allowing communities, families and individuals to move through their trauma to a new sense of meaning. Sometimes that doesn't happen, and the bitterness remains.

Whatever the aftermath, journalists owe it to their readers, listeners and viewers to report Act II as well as Act I.

WRITING THE STORY

- After a disaster or tragedy, stories do not need to be sensationalised or embellished. Rely on good, solid, factual journalism and a healthy dose of sensitivity.
- Take extra care not to take liberties with facts, quotes or details. These are stories you must tell or write with accuracy, insight and sensitivity.
- Research now suggests that even if people who've experienced tragedy are only rarely clinically re-traumatised in the longer term by poor coverage of their story, many are profoundly distressed by the way they've been reported, and especially by even small inaccuracies. Therefore, always and thoroughly check and re-check facts, names, times, places.
- When you're dealing with trauma, consider carefully the balance you need to strike between telling the story in all its details and the wellbeing and safety of the individuals involved. There will be occasions when you should not identify those you have spoken to — for example, when there is a danger of reprisals, or the further victimisation for example of a rape survivor. (See below for more suggestions about covering sexual violence.)
- Be careful and respectful with what people have told you. In print, try to use the exact words your interviewee gave you — with as little tidying up as grammatically necessary.
- If you can, don't be afraid to ring back and make sure you've got it right. Far better to intrude again in this small way than to publish or broadcast something that's wrong.
- Consider above all: if this was being written about you and your own experience, would you consider this, when you read or hear or view the report, to be a fair representation? If your instinct as a journalist tells you that the answer is no, even in a small way, then your story needs rewriting.

COVERING RAPE & SEXUAL VIOLENCE

Rape is one of the most traumatising experiences a human being can endure. In many cultures, there is an added stigma of shame or social ostracisation. Reporters should take special care when approaching interviewees. In extreme cases, insensitive reporting can lead to suicide, or murder by relatives or perpetrators.

Sexual violence doesn't only mean rape, but can involve any kind of unwanted sexual activity — in a family, a relationship or a marriage, as well as in an attack by a person unknown to the victim. It can happen anywhere, from the privacy of people's homes, to noisy playgrounds; from deserted streets to bustling nightclubs; from prison cells to battlefields.

Covering sexual violence requires the journalist to be on "red alert", applying all the sensitive tools outlined in this booklet. The following are some additional considerations.

- **DISEMPOWERMENT:** The person whose experience you are reporting has been violated in a very particular way. The victim might feel dirty, humiliated and powerless — and also fear reprisals by the attackers.
- **WAR:** Throughout history, sexual violence has been a brutal accompaniment to armed conflict. Increasingly, it is now also understood as an explicit weapon of war. Be prepared to hear survivors speak of such experiences. While bringing usual journalistic caution to bear, listen carefully and with respect to what they say.
- **INTERVIEWING:** Try to interview the victim alone. It can be overwhelming to face a pack of journalists and their accompanying translators, photographers, producer and fixers. Use as small a crew as possible and when possible operate any equipment yourself. Discourage others who are not close to the victim from being present. These might include soldiers, elders, community leaders, aid workers, villagers. Ask if the subject wants family members present. Avoid having children nearby — they do not need to listen to the account.
- **INTERVIEWER'S GENDER:** A woman who has been raped often feels more comfortable with a female interviewer, although of course some men can establish a comforting rapport. Ask how the subject feels, and if she's uneasy with a

male reporter, ask a female colleague to do the interview.

- **SHAME:** Feelings of shame and humiliation are at the core of any survivor's story. Be aware that there can be more at stake. In much of the Muslim world, and in some African countries, husbands, relatives and neighbours can disown or even murder a raped woman. You may want to mask the subject's identity to avoid social and violent repercussions.
- **PRESSURE:** Never put pressure on victims of sexual violence to tell their stories — for example with offers of money. Do not promise that publication or filming will improve the victim's life or change policy.
- **ANONYMITY: Never name a survivor without that person's explicit and informed consent.** In many countries, it is now against the law to name a rape victim. The use of a first name only or a pseudonym is not always enough to mask someone's identity. Through the Internet, your report will be accessible everywhere, not only to audiences back home. Consider obscuring features such as job, age or village — and be careful not to leave identifiers in the report by mistake.
- **OBSCURING DETAILS:** Film your interviewee from behind against a strong light, or in shadows. Be careful with silhouettes of the face or from the side, or with digital blurring or mosaic techniques, as images can now often and quite easily be enhanced on computers.
- **BLAME:** It is common for rape victims to feel they are to blame for what happened to them. News reports that imply this might be true can be deeply damaging to the subject. Exercise great caution when you depict the incident or accusations.
- **DETAILS:** In some cases, graphic details told sensitively can have a positive impact, leading to legal action or policy change. But be very careful with such descriptions. Will they enhance your story, or further humiliate the victim?
- **LOCAL NORMS:** In some cultures, touching or making eye contact with victims could cause offence. Brief yourself on culturally appropriate euphemisms. Some subjects may not want to hear or use the word "rape." Male reporters should be careful about interviewing a raped woman in

private behind closed doors, as this might cause further social stigma.

- **HELP:** Your story may trigger memories of rape or sexual assault for readers and audiences. Consider including details of where they can find help.

COVERING TRAUMATIC EVENTS IN A COMMUNITY

As well as reporting the facts of what happened and reactions in the community and in politics, find ways if you can to tell stories about who those involved really were and how they have lived their lives.

This might include short stories about individuals, their families, what made them special, and the ripple effect of the lives they lived. In many cases, victims' relatives are happy to talk when they realise that this is the approach the reporter is taking.

In 1995 after the Oklahoma City bombing in the United States, *The Oklahoman* called these stories "Profiles of Life." After the September 11 World Trade Centre attacks, *The New York Times* called its short stories about the victims "Portraits of Grief." Short stories can be published daily in a similar format until all of the victims have been featured. They sometimes lead to bigger stories, too.

Find out how people are helping each other, and report on them throughout the recovery process. Use your reports to link to resources where people listening, reading or viewing can find further information and help. Without being sentimental, there is nothing wrong with journalists providing not just news for a community, but hope as well.

When interviewing community representatives, be cautious when individuals emerge as vocal spokespersons. Articulate survivors, witnesses, family members or colleagues can find themselves uncomfortably elevated above others affected. In turn, others in their community can become resentful that one individual or family is getting the lion's share of attention. In small communities this can cause long-term damage to relationships.

Ask these questions: What does the public need to know, and how much coverage is too much? When do reporters become obsessed with a story when the public is not? A community is more than a mass killing or disaster. The coverage must reflect that.

A SELECTION OF WORST TRAUMA CLICHÉS

When you're reporting trauma, think especially carefully about the phrases and words you use. Does your language add to the public's understanding? Is the phrasing respectful without being maudlin. Don't say, for example:

- **"This shocked community mourns the death ..."** This is superficial and obvious ... Instead, just describe what has happened and how people are responding.
- **"The villagers are still trying to come to terms with the tragedy ..."** Of course they are. Again, focus your reporting on what people are doing and saying.
- **"Even today this community is in mourning,"** or "The parents/brothers/sisters are already missing their son/brother ..." This can imply that grieving has a defined time period, starts only at a given point, needs to be quickly concluded, and that extending that period is unusual or unnatural.
- **"Trained counsellors are on hand ..."** If they were untrained, that might be newsworthy. And anyway, those brought in to support the survivors and victims soon after a tragedy probably aren't actually offering counselling at that point, but more practical and simple listening and help.
- **"So-and-so is receiving counselling."** Check with professionals what kind of emotional support is being given — it's not usually likely to be formal counselling or therapy. That is recommended only for those who are unable naturally to recover from a traumatic experience — which isn't usually evident until a few weeks have passed.
- **"This community/school/family will never get over this."** Most individuals and communities do recover, and sometimes astonishingly quickly. What is more relevant is that they will have been changed by the experience — and that's the story.
- Be wary of the term **"closure."** Sometimes grieving people do use the word; be sure you ask them to define what they mean by it. If the person doesn't use the word, don't add it to the story. Similarly, terms and ideas of stages of grieving vary by age, culture, etc.

In the immediate aftermath of a traumatic event or experience, many of those involved *will* experience PTSD-like symptoms, including intrusive recollections, numbing, avoidance and hyperarousal. That's because they, like you, are human.

REPORTING TRAUMA — THE JOURNALIST

So, if those are the implications for the journalism of trauma, what does this knowledge mean for the journalist, or the maker of documentary programmes? Probably more than you think, or may want to admit — even to yourself.

Details and names have been changed in the following stories ...

- John was a picture-desk editor at a television station when images began coming in of the 9/11 attacks in New York in 2001. For 24 hours he absorbed sequence after sequence of mayhem, death, falling bodies ... Some weeks later, John fell apart emotionally, with distress he couldn't understand. What had happened is that old and unprocessed memories from a war zone a decade earlier had been ripped open, and overwhelmed him with post-traumatic distress.
- Sarah was a local court reporter, and found herself covering the trial of three men who had beaten another young man to death with sledgehammers. The details were so gruesome that network news decided not to report the trial at all. Sarah was left alone with the information she'd had to hear. She began to have nightmares and was unable to sleep. It was only when a friend explained the connection to what she had witnessed that she began to feel better.
- Yevgenia's job in journalism was to monitor radio broadcasts in Russian. She'd grown up in Chechnya, but was already living in England when the war there began. For years she listened to and reported the stories from Grozny of atrocity and death. Without understanding what was happening, over time she developed PTSD. When she and her managers realised what was happening, she had to take nearly a year off work to get well.
- Andrew had only recently joined his local newspaper straight from journalism school when asked to report a particularly nasty car crash just outside his home town. Two young men on a Saturday night had gone off the road at high speed and smashed into a tree. Andrew had never

seen a dead body before, and was profoundly shocked by the state of the two men, mangled beyond recognition as humans and enmeshed in the debris of the car. For years afterwards, he would wake at night bathed in sweat with pictures of the crash burning in his brain — and was terrified of telling anyone for fear of being labelled unable to cope.

- For David it was a reporting trip on famine in Africa. He had travelled before to the region, and thought he was coping well. It was a mother's distress and David's powerlessness to help her dying child that, when he came back to base, tipped him for a time over the edge.

JOURNALISTS' EMOTIONAL WOUNDS

What's sometimes called "Type 1" trauma can be seen as a sudden, one-off, recognizable external event, such as an accident, witnessing a killing or armed attack, or surviving an incident in which you could easily have died — a "near miss".

"Type II" trauma can be seen as a kind of "final straw" — a breaking point after previous incidents or experiences. The "trigger" for a collapse or breakdown might be something as simple as getting yelled at by someone at work or having the family pet ran over by a car.

Everyone experiences trauma differently — and that's true also of journalists. It depends on personality, past experience, and how someone personally took on board what was witnessed and reported.

Many will have difficult moments in the immediate aftermath — especially when coming off a story after days or weeks on an adrenaline high.

In the short term, someone might feel flat, confused, and even depressed. In the longer term, though, most people who've been through a traumatic experience will cope well. That's what we're programmed to do as human beings. Without a robust ability to bounce back from trauma, we wouldn't have survived and prospered on this planet as we have.

Journalists who deal with extreme human distress often find their work profoundly rewarding — both personally and professionally. To get the job done — like doctors or police dealing with illness or crime — they need to build, to some extent, a professional

wall between themselves and the survivors and witnesses whose stories they tell.

Photographers and camera operators seem to be particularly vulnerable to accumulated trauma.

It may be because, unlike writing journalists, they don't sit down every day and construct a narrative of what they witness — with a beginning, middle and end — which helps the brain make some sense of what happened. It may be that their craft requires them to dissociate as they witness events through a viewfinder — their bodies clearly *there*, but their mind on the photographic product.

Team and collegial support are key to the maintenance of emotional balance and health. A good team and good social support can help keep people emotionally robust through and after the worst of circumstances. A dysfunctional team can have the opposite effect — compounding the distress of the story, and leaving its members angry, depressed or confused.

A team that's not working well needs support and possibly change. And if an individual isn't coping so well, or if a new experience of trauma is bringing old distressing stuff to the surface, or if someone is finding it difficult to handle everyday life, then it's important that journalists should not be afraid to turn in confidence to a professional counsellor, or to suggest that their colleagues consider doing the same.

Be aware also that the worst outcome of PTSD, depression and substance misuse is suicide. It's not common, but journalists who are struggling with traumatic experiences are at heightened risk of taking their own lives. If someone is having thoughts of suicide, that always needs to be taken seriously.

If this sounds a little grim, remember three key things:

- Most people cope well with trauma — especially if they have good social, family and team support.
- Those who do find they're not recovering well shouldn't shy away from getting support, professional if necessary. It can make a big difference.
- And, crucially, be aware that being open to emotional experience can make you a better

reporter. After all, if you can't empathise with those whose story you're reporting, you won't be able truly to reflect their experience.

Even the most seasoned and professional journalists can be affected and possibly distressed by exposure to tragedy. That professional wall can, with time, become a barrier to living happily and healthily with others.

We are human beings first and journalists second. That means that we too can hurt — whatever our belief in journalistic “objectivity.”

DEALING WITH POTENTIALLY TRAUMATIC EVENTS

Maintaining Resilience — Self-care

The most important ways of keeping yourself emotionally on an even keel are also what you should sensibly do for your physical health.

- The British military have a phrase for a key part of self care: “Three Hots and a Cot”. In other words, try to eat well and healthily three times a day, and — especially — get enough sleep. Surviving on too little sleep is nothing to boast about. It affects your physical and emotional wellbeing AND your journalistic judgement.
- Establish a standard routine of healthful habits. There’s good research to show that even small amounts of gentle exercise are an effective anti-depressant. Experts now say a 30-minute walk does you as much good as a 30-minute run, so the exercise doesn’t have to be heavy. Bad eating habits and dehydration also have an instant effect on mood. Drink lots of water.
- Take breaks — and encourage others to do so. A few minutes or a few hours, or on a longer project a day or two away from the story, helps the body and the brain to process and assimilate more healthily what it’s experiencing.
- Know your limits — and be especially careful in the early stages of your career when you’re keen to establish your reputation, and still ready to agree to most things. If you’ve been asked to undertake a difficult or dangerous assignment that you’d rather not do, don’t be afraid to say so.
- To be a journalist can mean taking risks and placing yourself in situations of sometimes extreme discomfort. There’s a job to be done, and there are places and times when those who deal professionally with trauma need to be tough, and to repress emotions. But it’s not a good idea to maintain the stiff upper lip forever.
- Acknowledging feelings and choosing to talk about emotions at the appropriate moment is not a sign of weakness. On the contrary, when done well, an appropriate and informed post-event or post-assignment discussion with peers — and, when trust is sufficient, with caring managers and editors — is an expression of resilience.
- Talking, and especially connecting with other human beings, helps the brain to make sense of trauma and tragedy, with time to come to terms with it, and to move on. It is as if, in computer terms, the memory is moved from active processing to be archived safely on the hard drive. From there, it can be recalled in the future without re-triggering the emotional distress of the actual traumatic moment.
- Find someone who is a sensitive listener. It can be an editor, or a peer, or your partner. But you must trust that this person will not pass judgement on you. It might for example be someone who has faced a similar experience. Support your colleagues in the same way — and let them talk.
- Learn how to deal with routine stress. Find a hobby, exercise, take time out for reflection, spend time with your family or with close friends — or all four. Find things that make you laugh.
- Try deep-breathing. Take a long, slow, deep breath to the count of five, then exhale slowly to the count of five. Imagine this as a circular movement, breathing out excess tension, and breathing in relaxation.
- You can also use your imagination to take yourself to what in trauma therapy is sometimes called an internal “safe place” — somewhere warm and nurturing and relaxed, like a beach, or a beautiful mountainside, or somewhere in nature.
- Take care with alcohol. It’s fine in moderation, but if you find you are using it to help you block out memories or as a way to get to sleep, then you need to think carefully about your situation and perhaps ask for help. See the appendix for information on how much alcohol might be too much.
- Understand also that, sometimes, what you’ve been through may overwhelm your capacity to cope — and keep an eye out for delayed reactions. Journalists and programme-makers who feel they have managed well for years, covering difficult stories, might find that something relatively small suddenly tips them over the edge. If that happens, don’t bottle it up, but talk to colleagues and perhaps seek professional support.
- If you find yourself becoming negative about your job or yourself after covering traumatic events, internal self-talk such as “I’m useless” or “What a wimp” needs to be challenged and replaced with

a more positive and appropriate assessment. If this is hard to do, then talk with someone to help you shift things.

As you consider the psychological impact of trauma, bear in mind the findings of researchers who've explored what keeps soldiers going in conditions of extreme danger and stress. They consistently found variations of the following nine characteristics in those who demonstrated resilience.

- Resilient Role Models.
- Optimism — the key fuel that ignites resilience. Not unrealistic, rose-tinted optimism, but the ability to “negate negativity” — to insert positive thoughts, to not be overtaken by the negative self-talk that people can experience in difficult situations.
- A Moral Compass — Defining and keeping in the front of the mind a purpose, mission or goal, often morally grounded
- Religious faith or an awareness of spirituality
- Physical well-being — exercise has the same neurochemical impact as anti-depressants, without any bad side-effects.
- Positive Cognitive Appraisal: Resilient people seem the most able to reframe their experiences — to learn from failure, and to see even negative experiences as opportunities to make themselves stronger people or able to understand the world differently.
- Social Support
- Training
- Responsibility

So, seeing traumatic events as challenges and opportunities to do something good in the face of tragedy can strengthen your resolve, and keep you focused on the value and meaning of your work.

Managing Trauma — Before, During & After

Good trauma management is, in essence, good management writ large. Change needs to be driven from the top if it is to succeed — and a trauma awareness programme be seen as reinforcing resilience, not pathology.

The American military, for example, now use the term “behavioural health” instead of “mental health” and find this works as what they call a combat-strength multiplier — where failure to address normal reactions to trauma results in a weakening of will and combat effectiveness.

Commanders in the US Special Forces and some other military branches now use behavioural health in their units as part of their performance review. American special forces are told they'll never be discharged from the service because of a clinical diagnosis. They'll only be discharged if they can't function.

The combination of this message with the directive to commanders has seen the number of soldiers who are at risk of developing PTSD and actually asking for help rise from 10 to 80 percent.

So, how can managers in the less hierarchical media trade reinforce this culture change?

Here are some simple principles which have been used effectively in the military:

- Leaders need to provide resilient role models and optimism;
- After-action reports — a culture must be built of routinely learning from failure;
- Keep the mission forefront — it's key that top leaders and managers constantly articulate this;
- Unit cohesion. US Special Forces created a buddy system, and unit commanders are taught the importance of never letting one soldier suffer alone;
- Encourage active coping and problem solving;
- Intervene early, not late;
- Build in recovery periods.

It's essential to brief and educate teams and individuals before they're sent on potentially traumatic stories; to support them during such assignments or projects; and to support them afterwards with practical and social support, and, where necessary, with expert trauma counselling.

Before

- *Trauma awareness briefings* should be a core element of standard training and management. Journalists entering the profession or joining a new team should learn as early as possible that trauma is taken seriously — and how it's addressed in the organisation's culture. That can be done with leaflets, brochures and information on the internet. Most important: Leaders and managers should speak naturally and openly about trauma, and convey confidence in how it's managed.
- Within a *trauma-aware culture*, it's easier and more natural for managers and editors to sit down with colleagues going on an assignment, and recall what's been already and often discussed in training and general briefings.
- *Thank, acknowledge and appreciate*, even before the assignment. Feeling valued helps keep people emotionally balanced and well. It's important that people feel they're not just being sent because there is no one else to go, but because their manager knows they are up to the task.
- At the same time, explicitly *name what might be involved* — emotionally as well as the challenges of physical safety. Don't be embarrassed or frightened to talk of the impact that trauma might have. It's in these ordinary conversations that the most valuable work of culture change can be done.
- *Connection* with other human beings helps balance and reinforce the brain chemicals and hormones that allow us to process and survive emotional distress. So, make reliable arrangements to keep in touch, regularly, and stick to what you've agreed.
- *Encourage self-care*. Remind those who are going out on assignment that looking after physical needs — sleep, water, food and exercise — can make a big difference.
- Reassure, once again, that *distress isn't unusual* when dealing with trauma — but that it's not mandatory either. What matters is how it's dealt with. And that it's good to talk.

During

- Again, for the reasons given above, *keep in regular touch*.
- *Leaders* — both of the team and on base — *should set an example*, for instance with sleep. We know from the experience of the military that if the commander of a unit doesn't go to bed, neither will subordinates. There should be no place in journalism for point-scoring with colleagues about how little sleep one needs.
- *Be careful with the timing and pitch of any criticism*. When people are dealing with stories of extreme emotional distress, their own defences will be down, and their sensitivities high.
- Make sure that *the home team is on side*. When someone's already emotionally stretched to the limit — whether covering a murder trial or a war — a thoughtless, or badly-timed, or inconsiderately-worded request from a programme or department (including Finance!) can depress, enrage or even traumatise, leaving scars that can hurt for years.
- Managers/Editors should allow, encourage — and pay for — those travelling to keep in *regular phone contact* with those at home. It's not a perk of the job, but an essential investment in their emotional wellbeing.
- Before individuals return to base from a stressful assignment, it can help if they're encouraged where appropriate to *spend a day or two in a good hotel* on the way back, "decompressing" before being tipped back into their normal home environment. Make sure, of course, that the partners are OK with this. Many marriages have been destroyed by the difficult transition between assignments that deal with life and death, and the mundane responsibilities of running a home and family.

After

- Remember that *social and practical support is the best psychology*. And that it's the small things that make the big difference — appreciation, herograms, emails, meeting at the airport, parties, public acknowledgement and so on.
- *Information reassures* — so make sure it's shared generously. Especially if something big or bad has happened to people on the teams, then ensure

that everyone is kept up to date with as much detail as possible of how the situation is being addressed and how people are doing. Otherwise, destructive rumours will proliferate.

- *Plan how you intend to respond* to traumatic events that may have taken place. Consider who might have been affected — and don't just think of the stars and the big names. Remember the fixers and translators, the technical staff, the picture editors, the bureau chiefs — and yourself, whatever your role.
- Make sure that individuals who've been through a traumatic time have *the opportunity to talk* about it. Set aside time to listen to them — and not just a brief conversation where you ask them how they are, they say they're "fine", and they're simply despatched on the next assignment.
- It is very important to be aware that this kind of conversation is *not a professional psychiatric intervention*, and not intended as a rummage in someone's feelings. It's more a way of taking stock — colleague-to-colleague, and in a supportive, informal but informed way — of how they're doing. Neither is this a one-off. It's essential to follow up a few weeks later to check in again, and see if further support is needed.

For further information, see guides on the Dart Centre website at dartcentre.org to finding a therapist in the United States, in the United Kingdom and in Australia.

There's a useful way to structure these informal conversations, using the term "FINE" in a more imaginative way:

F for FACTS. Ask them what happened. When, where, who, how etc. Don't climb straight in by exploring their feelings about what happened. Keep it factual and cool, but don't interrogate.

I for IMPACT. This begins to focus on the individual's personal experience. How did you experience that THEN? How did that affect you THEN? What were you thinking and feeling THEN?

N for NOW. How are you doing NOW? How have you been since then. Discuss the simple checklists below, and assess together how you both think the individual is doing.

E for EDUCATION. Reassure that while that different people will respond differently, symptoms of distress are not at all unusual. It's OK to be human as well as a journalist or programme-maker. And while most people, most of the time will probably feel better after a few weeks, it's not unusual either for recovery to take a while longer.

Make sure that you then *arrange a time for a follow-up conversation* in a month or so to see how things are settling down. If they're not, or if matters are getting worse, then it's important that good trauma counselling and support is readily available, and viewed without stigma.

What to Watch Out For

In the first hours and days after a significant story, assignment or project involving trauma, emotions and adrenaline can run very high. Feeling strange — distressed, elated, confused, numb, somewhat "hyper", sometimes just flat — is not at all unusual.

Extensive recent research underlines that most people, most of the time, recover naturally from an experience of trauma — and that good social support is the key factor in helping them do that.

That applies to journalists too. But, how might you know if someone is having difficulties? Especially if they insist that everything's fine, but you sense that it isn't.

- Post-traumatic distress shows itself, above all, in a change in behaviour and even personality. People may no longer seem to be, or feel, themselves.

They and their teammates sense that something is out of balance, but it isn't always immediately easy to link it to a specific event, especially as these changes will sometimes show themselves starkly only some weeks or even months later.

- People who have experienced post-traumatic stress might shut themselves away. Or they might begin to talk obsessively and constantly about what happened.
- They might become uncharacteristically angry or irritable.
- They may talk of feeling guilty or confused. Trauma can also make people more accident-prone, and they may lose their ability to concentrate or be interested in their work, hobbies or relationships.
- They might start falling sick a lot. Emotional distress that's repressed can often express itself in physical symptoms such as back or stomach pain.
- They might start coming in late for work, or missing deadlines. Or they might be unable to leave the office in the evening, and fear being on their own.
- They might show signs of drinking more alcohol than usual.

Don't rely just on external indicators. After a few days, it's good to find time for that measured stand-back discussion — and to keep an eye out for each other over the following weeks too.

How to Recognise Acute Stress

Britain's Royal Marines have a simple method of checking how team members are coping after an experience of trauma, using a 10-point checklist for symptoms of trauma-related distress in the previous week:

1. You experience upsetting thoughts or memories about a traumatic event that have come into your mind against your will;
2. You're having upsetting dreams about what happened;
3. You sometimes act or feel as if bad things were happening again;
4. You feel upset by reminders;
5. You're having physical reactions (such as: fast heartbeat, stomach churning, sweatiness, dizziness)

when you're reminded of what happened;

6. You're finding it difficult to fall or stay asleep;
7. You're uncharacteristically irritable or angry;
8. You find difficulty concentrating;
9. You're overly aware of potential dangers to yourself and others;
10. You're jumpy or easily startled at something unexpected.

People will quite often tick several of the boxes in the days immediately after a major story. But it's equally normal for distress to diminish during the coming days and weeks.

However, if someone is still scoring high after a month or so — and remember how important it is to check — it could be that some distress is getting stuck in the system, and that professional advice or trauma counselling with a specialist could help.

Risk Factors

There are also clear risk factors associated with a likely distress response to a traumatic experience. These can include:

- The person feared for his or her life.
- The person felt that he or she "lost it", losing control of their emotions in a moment of panic or being overwhelmed by the experience.
- The person is experiencing persistent shame about his or her own behaviour or response, or blaming others inappropriately.
- The person is being exposed to substantial stressors since the event.
- The person has experienced previous serious traumas and the memory of that distress is coming back.
- The person doesn't have, or isn't accessing, good social support in the form of friends, colleagues or family.
- The person is using alcohol or non-prescription drugs to suppress symptoms of distress.

Personal issues outside work can exacerbate an individual's reaction. For example, someone who is going through a divorce, or who has small children, may be distressed more by events than others.

WHAT IF YOU ARE HURTING?

The core ideas about trauma response contained in this section are in accordance with guidelines issued in 2005 by Britain's National Institute for Clinical Excellence (NICE).

At the heart of those evidence-based recommendations, formulated to guide treatment and spending plans in Britain's National Health Service, is the expectation that, with social support and an understanding of what they have experienced, most people will recover naturally and on their own accord from exposure to traumatic stress.

- One-off sessions of psychological debriefing should not be used routinely with individuals exposed to trauma. Neither are drugs and medication recommended as a first-line treatment for PTSD, although they do have their place in the treatment of other conditions.

This is not an argument to do nothing. But it is clear advice not to rush in with ineffective, unproven or possibly even counterproductive responses.

- What is recommended is what's termed "Watchful Waiting" — checking with individuals who've been through trauma how they are doing in the weeks and months afterwards, helping them to understand the impact of what they have been through and keeping an eye out for symptoms of traumatic distress.

That's the purpose also of the approach advocated here.

- Rather than farming out responsibility for trauma response to outsiders and trauma professionals, managers, editors and colleagues should themselves take organisational ownership of managing the first-line impact of trauma.
- Training and procedures should be put in place that will help people understand what it is they are dealing with in reporting and dealing with trauma; make it acceptable to experience distress — or not; and ensure that those who do find it harder to recover are identified and encouraged to seek appropriate support and if necessary treatment.

- Journalists and managers or colleagues who would like to find a therapist to deal with the impact of trauma are encouraged to ensure that whoever they choose is experienced specifically in dealing with trauma — and if possible, has experience of working with journalists and the media.

AND FINALLY

Reporting trauma can be one of the most rewarding experiences that is open to a journalist. You're living at the edge, dealing with existential matters of life and death.

It's important — for those you are reporting, for those to whom you are reporting, and for yourself — that the job is done well.

In the coverage of extreme human distress and psychological trauma, it is time for change in the culture of 21st century journalism.

That change is happening — and you're part of it. Good luck.

APPENDICES

COVERING ARMED CONFLICT & WAR

[The ideas in this chapter were distilled from a Dart Centre war reporters' retreat in 2005. While drawing mainly on the experience of those reporting conflict in countries other than their own, it is hoped that these ideas will be useful also to those dealing with war closer to their own homes — and indeed to any journalist covering extreme human distress. See below under "Families and Partners" for further ideas about how best to manage separations.]

"...I was so much overcome by what I saw that I could not remain where the fight had been closest and deadliest. I longed to get away from it....It was now that the weight of the task I had accepted fell on my soul like lead."

— William Howard Russell, Crimean war correspondent for the London Times

"Almost all of us (in Iraq and in disaster coverage) have felt ground down by interviewing countless people who have lost family to violence. We are all too aware that nothing we write will comfort their loss. Added to guilt and a sense of impotence is the relentless threat to one's one life. Some journalists I knew became depressed and retreated to their rooms for longer periods. Some couldn't sleep and would stay up much of the night and then sleep until the afternoon. Some drank heavily. Some suffered fits of temper, and became abusive to local staff. At least a couple became physically ill. Others worked maniacally hard." — Alissa Rubin, New York Times correspondent.

War reporting is a dangerous business. The risks are real and growing of being shot at, injured or killed or kidnapped, of losing colleagues. War and conflict reporting can hurt psychologically, too. So what should journalists and their bosses know in advance to avoid the worst complications later?

We know from research that journalists are resilient. At the same time, we also know — anecdotally as well as from a growing body of clinical literature — that war reporters are more likely to drink, to abuse drugs, and to suffer from post-traumatic stress than their domestic colleagues.

An authoritative survey of war journalists by Canada-based psychiatrist Anthony Feinstein found that more than one in four reported experiencing, at some point during an average career of 15 years

on the front line, significant symptoms of post-traumatic stress, including nightmares, flashbacks and intrusive distressing thoughts.

All of these war journalists were keenly aware of the dangers they faced, both physically and mentally. Yet most desired to return repeatedly to the front.

Non-war journalists interviewed by Feinstein reported fewer post-traumatic symptoms and substance abuse. But a key finding was that neither group was keen on seeking professional help for emotional distress — a confirmation of the macho culture that prevails in most Western journalism.

Leaving Home

- Mental preparation is critical before accepting an assignment in a war zone. The first thing journalists should do is ask themselves why they want to go. Is it an attraction to the danger, a desire for the big story, or because it is simply too hard to say No to the assignment?
- Journalists should take time to figure out what they can personally and professionally gain from the risks and hardships of covering war and weigh whether those risks are worth the effort. Even experienced correspondents should think about their motives in returning to a war zone. Asking these questions will not only help journalists understand what drives them to go, but they provide an often necessary point of focus while on the ground.
- Understanding your motives and setting personal goals can also make it more likely that you'll leave the assignment with a sense of accomplishment. Make sure you're making a decision to go and not just going.
- Before going, call or e-mail colleagues in the field and ask them what it's like. Try to identify your greatest fears and ask how to address them. Learn what the daily routine is; what is expected of you; what the dangers are. To prepare for what might be faced, some journalists find it useful to view beforehand some of the raw and often unpublishable images coming into the newsroom.
- It can help to have a formal ritual for departing and arriving — something as simple as having a team of colleagues to send a reporter off or meet them at the airport. It can also help to talk through the assignment with a carefully-selected friend or colleague to iron out any apprehension.

- Get fit. Soldiers going to war are prepared ruthlessly for the physical challenges they will face. Far too few journalists pay attention to their physical fitness. If you're under fire, and have to run for your life, being unfit can literally mean the difference between getting killed and getting away. Fitness isn't just an optional extra. Take it seriously.

Along with a desire to go comes the guilt of leaving family and loved-ones. For some, the "dark days" settle in, and an inner struggle, which can last for days and weeks, about whether going is the right thing to do. Once gone, however, the gears shift from the family at home to a team at war.

- Journalists need to know up front what their news organisation will do if they are injured, kidnapped or killed. Will their bodies be repatriated, if needed? Is there coverage for mental health problems? By bringing these issues up in a straightforward way, the reporter may decide not to take the risk of being killed and thus decline the assignment. Management should make it clear there are no repercussions or stigma in doing so.
- Have a will and emergency arrangements agreed and in place. Let relatives and significant others know where financial documents, house papers and wills are kept. Make sure arrangements are made to pay personal bills.

While There

- Correspondents and photographers agree that they do better when they have a buddy in the field. Some journalists warn that becoming embedded with a military unit can be a lonely job. Those who are not paired with a photographer or other colleague risk lacking the casual support that groups normally have.
- A journalist also needs an exit strategy if an embed position happens to go awry. Establishing ground rules with the military early on is essential.
- Even if you trust your own sound judgment about danger and pushing yourself, get a reality check from a 'buddy' or colleague. Try to get a feel for whether you are taking greater risks than other colleagues, and whether these risks are too much. Security consultants in war zones are generally conservative and while their advice can be life-saving, it can be frustrating for journalists who feel

they are sometimes overly impeding the work of reporting.

- New journalists should talk with experienced correspondents on the ground, who may give a better sense of safety concerns. Recognise that sometimes the risks are just too great, and despite your desire for a story, you may just have to turn back.
- Freelance journalists lack the protection that larger organisations can provide, which is why they are advised to latch onto other journalists in the region. Bigger organisations are often happy to 'adopt' freelancers, providing them with both institutional and emotional support.
- Being well-rested is especially important when covering war. Self-medication with alcohol, nicotine, caffeine and sometimes with illicit drugs is part of the war journalist culture; but it can be very dangerous. The risks and temptations of substance abuse should be monitored carefully.
- Expect to struggle with the desire for conflict, which makes a good story and photo, and the human impulse to prevent it.

"Blood dripping from a shirt is far more likely to make the cover than soldiers on patrol. You need people getting hurt for great photos, but you don't want people getting hurt." — Photographer Bill Gentile

- While journalists generally try to maintain an emotional distance from their subjects, small humanitarian roles can at times feed their need to connect.

One reporter, for instance, sought to provide clean sheets for families housed in a filthy compound during the course of her reporting in Iraq, even shopping at a Baghdad market to provide them. This gave her a small sense of accomplishment in what seemed otherwise an insurmountable tragedy. The people she helped would never read her stories. But they would remember the journalist who came back with clean sheets.

- At the same time, be aware of the risks of getting too close. Those in the story can sometimes bond very closely with those reporting their lives, and in the emotional intensity of distress and danger, the feelings are easily reciprocated. But be careful, and respect appropriate boundaries. If you promise to help personally, and can't deliver, that can be experienced as very painful betrayal.

- It's important to understand that this is an assignment, not your whole life. Although a planned departure date may change, it is important to have one. It gives you something to look forward to and helps you to pace your efforts.
- If the time comes when you feel you're losing your grip, making risky choices, drinking too much or sleeping too little, you should be able to leave. Your life is worth more than any job assignment.
- War correspondents at the top of their game have both respect and empathy for those they're covering. They can endure harsh conditions and have a larger sense of mission, of giving voice to those who have no other way to express themselves.

Returning Home

The complaints and concerns of troops returning home are often the same for journalists. Gone is their previous tolerance for trivial chit-chat, for relatives who get upset when their car breaks down, or when they forget to stop to buy milk on the way home.

- It helps when editors and colleagues show genuine interest in a war journalist's stories, photos and experiences. If you've risked your life covering a story, a lack of curiosity from colleagues, combined often with public apathy, can really hurt.
- Be aware that returning home can grow increasingly hard. It's not easy to connect with the sense of purpose that covering a war can provide. There is no formula for whether a journalist should endure this anxiety and assimilate back into small talk and normal life, or seize the next assignment overseas. This 'falling off a cliff' feeling is common among war correspondents and, in many instances, is the driving force behind keeping them in chaos.
- It often helps to spend time with those who've had similar experiences. Nobody understands what you've seen and been through quite as well as those who've experienced the same sort of thing. Of course, not all war zone colleagues will be true kindred spirits. But it can be useful, especially when you first come back, to talk to others about how they adjusted. Finding someone you can trust and confide in is like gold.

Seek that person out and talk about your feelings, both good and bad.

- Some people need structure to get through the transition. They recover best by going home and building something, or by taking on a small project. One reporter reconstructed his kids' jungle gym. Others thrive from just lying on a beach, or prefer something semi-structured such as a hiking trip.
- Be prepared to be disappointed with whatever you do next. Most people experience a period of letdown and a sense that what they do is no longer important. They miss the affirmation of being on top of a big story, or part of history. Normally those feelings subside within a few months — but if not, it is perfectly fine to seek professional help to talk it through.
- Similarly, everything in your community may look a bit off-putting — there may seem to be too much food, too much luxury. Even though such things are welcome, they can seem excessive after weeks of deprivation.
- If you see signs of stress lasting more than a month or six weeks, consider professional help from a trauma specialist or counsellor. Just one session can sometimes help you put things in context.

Editors & Management

Editors and managers need to understand better the roles and needs of those they send into war zones. They need to be able to tolerate a reporter's anxiety, fear and sometimes confusion.

- Editors should recognise when journalists on the ground need a break. Some editors wanted to be supportive, but were clumsy in their attempts, often stumbling into a sensitive area with unintended callousness.
- Management needs to be educated on what they are sending their people into and who these people are. They need to understand the reporters' motives and needs.
- Simple things like ensuring all the company bills get paid and that journalists have enough cash and credit on their credit cards goes a long way.
- When possible, pull together the newsroom team that will be handling the incoming stories and set out guidelines on deadlines, daily check-

ins, and special concerns. What might seem trivial conversation to those on base — idle chat about sports, or gossip for example — can be a sanity-saving connection with reality for those on assignment.

- Editors should clearly define expectations, such as how long reporters or photographers will remain on the story, how often they are expected to produce copy or photos, and how often they should check in.
- It's good to lay out a clear 'time off' schedule, both while in the conflict zone and afterward. It is often difficult to have a 'day off'. But just spending a day reading a novel and not worrying about deadlines is better than fitfully reporting, shooting photos or reading the wires.
- To keep in contact, make sure that if a desk is not staffed, all correspondents in the field have the phone numbers of at least two editors who can be reached at any time, in case of emergency or an urgent news decision. At the same time, consider time differences before making calls. Most war journalists have experience of the added stress and sleep deprivation from receiving odd-hour calls from editors many time zones away. It is hard to sleep when you anticipate being woken up by the desk.
- When talking with reporters, editors should not forget to ask about their health, their state of mind and whether they're getting enough food and sleep. And then listen to what people say.
- Most journalists in the field are doing their best to get the story, stay alive, and remain decent individuals. When an editor finishes talking about the story and says, 'What do you think you'll have tomorrow?' it is demoralising and reflects a lack of empathy for how hard it may have been to get through that day. It makes a difference to morale to inject praise for the work done. Praise can buoy moods and help staffers feel connected to home.
- When journalists are in the middle of covering a war, disaster or attack, they are often oblivious to what else is going on in the world, or unable to get access to it because of poor communications. This amplifies the feeling of being cut off. By giving the reporter a sense of where their coverage fits into the overall picture, it can make them feel part of the larger newsgathering effort.
- If possible, at least one senior editor should visit the war or disaster zone at least once. This sends the signal that the editors care about the story, and gives them a chance to assess obstacles to coverage, and to judge better what will be asked of the correspondent.
- As manager or editor, make sure you keep an eye on film editors who might be stuck for days and weeks in an editing suite. Left to their own devices, they tend not to take breaks, but can sit mesmerised by the material, obsessively trying to fix tiny things that nobody else would notice. Take active responsibility to ensure that they get breaks and time away from the work.
- After a big story is over, or when someone returns from the field, it can help to have some kind of event that recognises the person's contribution — perhaps a lunch and a conversation with a senior editor that makes the person feel appreciated and not dropped cold now they are no longer providing news from the front.

Social networks and relationships at home are a key part of the wider support that will help keep individual journalists and teams emotionally well, and functioning to their best ability.

FAMILIES & PARTNERS

When you're away, you look forward to the homecoming — sometimes thinking about it is a comfort — you think of the welcome, smiling faces, the calm and being home.
— A war reporter used to frequent absences from home on assignment.

While he's away I have everything to do, chores, kids and my job. So when he's back I want him to get on with things, go out, get away from being tied to home.
— The same war reporter's partner.

When journalists are sent to cover tragedy and conflict, it can be a stressful and sometimes lonely experience for partners and families back home. Social networks and relationships at home are a key part of the wider support that will help keep individual journalists and teams emotionally well, and functioning to their best ability.

Before an Assignment

What you don't know is often more frightening than what you do know. Partners can sometimes benefit by talking through the assignment together — what's involved, what the dangers might be, and the precautions being taken.

- It can help if editors and newsdesks make arrangements to keep in regular touch with partners at home. It's good to have a 24/7 telephone number, with names, that partners can call for support or information.
- Journalists who've been there know the peace of mind that comes with planning ahead, including for the worst case. Their news organisations need to know exactly who to call — and who not to call (journalists can have complicated private lives) — in case of an emergency.
- Make the workplace a more familiar place to partners and families. They might be invited in to meet colleagues before an assignment, to put faces to names and see how things work.
- Talk to children simply and clearly about why Mummy or Daddy is going away. Let them ask questions and express any fears — but consider carefully how much detail they need to know. You might wish to take the children to visit the partner's workplace too.
- With younger ones who may show distress in the classroom, it can be a good idea to let the school know that a partner is going away for a while.

- Sometimes there may be reasons why someone feels they have to turn down a dangerous assignment. They may, for example, be a newly-minted parent, and concerned about how they would respond to covering the trial of a child killer. They may have done one too many stressful assignments already and need a period of decompressing. Editors should never put colleagues under pressure to accept an assignment they're uncomfortable with.

During an Assignment

- Having a plan for regular contact with relatives and children back home is important — whether by phone, email or mobile/cellphone text. Pick a time and try to stick to it. This can soothe anxiety for your family and help the desk with planning.
- Partners and spouses can also be kept personally informed by a trusted work colleague about their loved-one's assignment. A quick, friendly call to ask how things are at home can make all the difference.
- News organisations can help the spouses and partners left at home to get in touch with each other. They may be having very similar experiences, but feel detached and alone.
- If there's been an incident in the news involving casualties, contact partners swiftly to reassure. However, if there is bad news to convey, GREAT care should be taken. The Dart Centre website has guidelines ("Breaking Bad News": http://www.dartcenter.org/articles/books/breaking_bad_news_00.html) on best practice in this area.
- If you're the partner at home, don't hold back from asking family and friends for support, or from ringing a trusted contact at their partner's workplace for reassurance. It might also be an idea to seek out others in a similar situation. Talking to someone in the same boat can make a difference.

After an Assignment

Re-entry to home life is often more stressful — and dangerous — for a relationship than parting and being away. It is helpful for partners to discuss what they both need to smooth that transition.

- When possible, journalists suggest easing back into society slowly. It can be a good idea not

to go directly home, but to spend a couple days winding down in a nice hotel, ideally with colleagues or friends close by but if necessary on one's own, to decompress. This can be a buffer between the intensity of war and life at home. But make sure your partner understands and is OK with that.

- Once home, be patient and respectful towards each other. It is important to remember that your family has got along without you for a while and has developed routines apart from you. Your partner may have taken on your previous responsibilities and your children may not be accustomed to having you around.
- Schedule some early downtime to reconnect and do normal things together. Talk, but beware of “dumping” emotion or distress.
- Sex is often difficult for people returning from war zones. Intimacy can feel unfamiliar or uncomfortable, so don't expect everything to work great right away.

After a stressful trip, colleagues with families will need to reconnect at home. Supervisors should allow them time to do that — and may want to let them know it's well understood how challenging these transitions can be.

HANDLING IMAGES OF TRAUMA

Think of traumatic images as if they were radiation — with an objective, unavoidable impact on the body and psyche. Like nuclear workers, journalists have a job to do. But as with radiation, it's best to minimise exposure. The following ideas can also help:

- Those who “merely” work with images or text, as opposed to the journalists who collect the material on site, can easily be forgotten. This applies to technical support colleagues as well as picture editors. They too, like everyone else, should be trained and briefed about normal responses to trauma — how different people cope differently, how the impact can accumulate over time.
- Whenever graphic images are about to be fed (including repeats), duty editors should make sure that a health warning is put out to all who might see the pictures coming in, so that they can look away or switch the monitors off.
- The sound can be the worst. For those on the team who do have to watch and make choices about editing, it can help to make sure the audio feed is turned down or switched off.
- People who might be waiting for the material need to be told of the precautions being taken by those taking in the feeds — and to be patient and understanding even when under pressure.
- Organisations and newsrooms should agree to clear guidelines on where and whether graphic material is stored, and who will ensure on any shift that such material cannot be inadvertently viewed. Such material should be recorded only once.
- People dealing with this material should be encouraged to talk to each other about their experiences. After a particularly bad period, get the team together to take stock.
- If possible, workplaces that deal with violent imagery should have physical windows to the outside world, even if that's only to a patch of real sky. The human body and psyche are naturally soothed by contact with nature, so plants and greenery can also help.
- It's true for everyone who works on computers, but those dealing with violent images especially should take frequent screen breaks. Copy the

smokers and make a point of stepping regularly outside the building for some fresh air. Careful, though: Nicotine and caffeine can heighten physiological arousal and anxiety.

Like nuclear workers,
journalists have a job to do.
But as with radiation, it's
best to minimise exposure.

WOMEN, VIOLENCE & WAR

Newsroom cultures often run on the assumption that there's not much difference between male and female reporters. In some ways, that is true. But women working in journalism do have safety and health concerns that are not shared by male colleagues, especially in hostile environments and conflict zones.

The challenges that confront women journalists are easily overlooked — particularly when they work as freelancers. The ideas in this chapter were developed by the Dart Centre in Europe in collaboration with the International News Safety Institute (INSI).

- **THE PROVING CULTURE:** Women will sometimes take unnecessary risks to prove that they are 'as tough as the guys'. Sometimes they feel that they have to work harder to compete. Women journalists should be encouraged to discuss their particular needs for support and protection with their colleagues — female AND male — and ensure that these are met.
- **HARASSMENT:** Especially in conflict zones, women journalists might find themselves living in intimate and close quarters with colleagues or sources, sharing scarce hotel rooms, vehicles or tents — and sometimes on the receiving end of unwelcome sexual advances. Editors and colleagues should be aware of this challenge, and be prepared to act if a female reporter complains. Needless to say, all staff should know that such behaviour is unacceptable.
- **RAPE:** This can be a woman journalist's constant, usually unexpressed, fear. War is violent — and violence breeds aggressive behaviour of all kinds. Rape is a very real threat, yet very few women talk about it with their male bosses. Whether it happens or not, there can be a great deal of shame attached. Women may also fear that raising the issue might adversely affect their careers. Again, editors should be sensitive to this, and talk with women going on assignment about their fears, and discuss training or ways to protect themselves.
- **FLAK JACKETS:** These are usually made for men, who are physically larger than women and differently shaped. Wearing the wrong kind of armour can cause back and neck injuries. Worse, some women will avoid using flak jackets at all because they're too heavy. Editors should be aware of this physical difference and make available jackets that fit women.
- **WOMEN'S HEALTH:** A survey of female war correspondents carried out by the Dart Centre and INSI revealed that it's not uncommon for pregnant journalists to have miscarriages during stressful assignments — and to tell no-one at work. The more mundane issue of menstruation can also be awkward. Women can find it embarrassing to ask for tampons and sanitary napkins. Managers, and male colleagues, should take the initiative to make sure that such supplies are routinely provided.
- **MODESTY:** Unlike most men, most women journalists prefer some cover — a bush, a wall or a ditch for example — to be able to relieve themselves. To avoid being caught short, they will sometimes not drink before an assignment — inadvisable for either sex given the dangers of dehydration. Male colleagues should be aware of this, and whenever possible help their female colleagues find a comfortable solution.
- **RELATIONSHIPS AND FAMILY:** Many women journalists working in war zones are single. Some are mothers, with childcare responsibilities at home. Women journalists' experiences of relationships and parenting can be very different from those of their male colleagues. Editors should take those needs into account, for example in deciding who is asked to go on assignment, for how long, and what particular support and understanding female colleagues might need.
- **LOCAL CUSTOMS:** Before an assignment, female employees and their managers should make sure they know of any local customs specific to women. If visiting Muslim countries, for example, women should pack a head-scarf/chador. In some cultures, going out with wet hair can be misinterpreted as a sexual signal.
- **PERSONAL SAFETY:** Some single women find that wearing a wedding ring can deter unwelcome sexual attention. Women sometimes find it useful and reassuring to carry a personal attack alarm or pepper spray if it is legal to do so. Editors and managers should be aware of what equipment is available, and brief female staff accordingly. They might also wish to explore the value of special training in self defence.

ALCOHOL: HOW MUCH IS TOO MUCH?

How do you know if you or a colleague is using more alcohol than is healthy? With one unit of alcohol defined as roughly half a pint /250ml of beer, or a small glass (125ml) of ordinary wine, or one measure of 40% spirits (50ml), the British National Health Service says that:

- Men should drink no more than 21 units of alcohol per week (and no more than four units in any one day).
- Women should drink no more than 14 units of alcohol per week (and no more than three units in any one day).
- Pregnant women. If you have one or two drinks of alcohol (one or two units), once or twice a week, it is unlikely to harm your unborn baby. However, the exact amount that is safe is not known. So, many women choose to drink little or no alcohol when they are pregnant.

A subjective but proven measure of overdrinking is called the CAGE questionnaire:

- Have you ever felt you should Cut down on your drinking?
- Do you get Annoyed when people comment on your alcohol intake?
- Do you feel Guilty about the amount you drink?
- Do you ever need to drink an alcoholic 'Eye-opener' in the morning?

If you say "yes" to at least two of these questions, that's an indication of possible alcohol abuse, and you might consider cutting down.

FOR FURTHER READING

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ONLINE

- Dart Centre for Journalism & Trauma
www.dartcentre.org
- International Society for Traumatic Stress Studies
www.istss.org
- International News Safety Institute
www.newssafety.com
- Committee to Protect Journalists
www.cpj.org
- www.journalism.org
- www.poynter.org
- www.crimesofwar.org

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- Cover photos (from left to right): British Broadcasting Corporation (from the 2006 Dart Award-winning report, "Return to Sarajevo"), Angela Peterson/The Orlando Sentinel (from the 1994 Dart Award Honorable Mention, "The Miracle of Philip Chandler"), Matt Rainey/The Star-Ledger (from the 2001 Dart Award Honorable Mention, "After the Fire")



The Dart Center for Journalism & Trauma, based at the University of Washington in Seattle and with branches in Britain and Australia,

- Is a forum and resource for promoting the ethical, sensitive and informed reporting of tragedy and violence;
- Supports the education of working journalists and journalism students in the science and psychology of trauma and its impact;
- Develops and promotes the organisational, peer-led and individual support of journalists and teams who cover trauma;
- Supports and disseminates research and best practice in the field of journalism and trauma.

This handbook draws on the experience and wisdom of journalists and trauma specialists in the US, Europe and Australia, gathered over many years. The final version was compiled and edited by Mark Brayne, who is a psychotherapist, former BBC and Reuters correspondent, and Director of the Dart Centre in Europe.

www.dartcentre.org