

MENTAL HEALTH TIPS AND RESOURCES FOR JOURNALISTS

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Journalists are often on the frontlines of some of the world's most challenging events, from crime scenes and road accidents to natural disasters and wars. Now, journalists around the world are working overtime to cover the COVID-19 pandemic.

Covering these stories, whether major international stories or events much closer to home, can have an impact on those who do the reporting, leading to issues like post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) in some cases, but more likely anxiety, stress and burnout.

Months ago, at IJNet, we discussed the need to delve into this topic with more stories and resources. We could have never predicted how necessary this topic would be now in the midst of a global health crisis — one that affects everyone, no matter where they live or what beat they cover.

We decided to kickstart this conversation with a webinar on journalists' mental health, with panelists Bruce Shapiro, executive director of the Dart Center for Journalism and Trauma at Columbia University; and Sherry Ricchiardi, Ph.D., co-author of ICFJ's Disaster and Crisis Coverage guide and international media trainer who has worked with journalists around the world on conflict reporting, trauma and safety issues. This webinar was moderated by IJNet Editor, Taylor Mulcahey.

Shapiro and Ricchiardi offered a briefing on trauma and journalism, offering tips to support your own mental health, to interview victims of trauma and to encourage better mental health support in the newsroom.

Tips on how journalists can address their own mental health:

(1) Remember you're not immune to the emotional impact

"We are first responders," Ricchiardi said. When there's trouble, others may run away from a scene but journalists rush towards it. In order to stay resilient and effective, it's important to remember that stress can be accumulated over periods of time.

"This [COVID-19] pandemic is going to challenge us, it's going to challenge both our craft capacities and our personal capacities," Shapiro said. "We are, by definition, trauma facing professionals." Staying attuned to your own emotional health, and not ignoring signs that you need support, will allow you to catch any issues that arise and manage them appropriately.

(2) Know your signs

"We need to know to think about how we cope well with things and how we don't," Shapiro said. Everyone has old bad habits, signature strengths and pre-existing vulnerabilities. Shapiro suggested making note of all of these and using them to make a plan on how to cope during a crisis — like the one we're facing now — or while reporting on traumatic topics.

(3) Flatten your stress curve by taking downtime

At this point, everyone has heard about “flattening the curve” of the COVID-19 pandemic, but Shapiro said there’s also a similar curve to measure the amount of stress journalists face. While a certain amount of stress is healthy and motivating, such as looming deadlines, too much can lead to crashing, breakdowns or burnout.

“Flattening the stress curve will greatly enhance our ability to effectively function professionally, and our ability to cope well psychologically,” Shapiro said. “A resilient journalist is a well-rested one. You need to sleep. You need downtime.”

Allow yourself some downtime when you aren’t working, which can be more difficult when working remotely. “Plan ahead for the end of your workday, just as if you were in the newsroom,” said Ricchiardi. “That’s really important. Set a strict time for work hours and stick to it.”

The 24-hour news cycle is a challenge that many journalists have acknowledged as a factor that contributes to stress, but planning something enjoyable to look forward to at the end of the workday can alleviate that stress.

“Think about when I finish today, I’m going to cook a great meal, I’m going to find a movie on Netflix, I’m going to take a walk, whatever it is,” said Ricchiardi. “The main thing is to walk yourself out of the work mode.”

Schedule your day so you have short breaks, and take unexpected breaks to allow yourself 10-15 minutes to pause.

“You need both internal recovery, calming yourself biologically, and external recovery, a change in tasks and a change in atmosphere,” Shapiro said. “Your brain needs that to function.”

(4) Create a self-care plan with assertive boundaries

Especially when working remotely, Shapiro emphasizes the need for a self-care plan. Maybe that means yoga, exercise or meditation.

Another suggestion is to keep a list of what you’ve accomplished throughout the day, which gives you some level of control. At a time when we have so little control over what’s going on in the world, small steps like this can help overcome feelings of helplessness.

“This is also a good time to keep a work journal. That is something which I think a lot of psychologists would say is very helpful now because we get to see our accomplishments at the end of the day,” Shapiro said.

And you don’t have to do any of this alone. “We are sometimes our own best healers, with a little help from our friends,” said Ricchiardi. Letting your friends or close colleagues know what’s going on in your life can also alleviate some stress.

Finally, both Shapiro and Ricchiardi said to step away from the technology. Apps like Twitter and Facebook are a constant stream of information, and although scrolling endlessly could feel mindless, creating assertive boundaries with social media and technology is critical.

“We need to be owning our devices, not having our devices own us,” Shapiro said. “Get off of them an hour before bedtime so that your brain can calm down, or plan device free blocks in your day.”

Tips for interviewing victims of traumatic events:

Journalists need to consider their own mental health, but also the mental health of their sources. While Ricchiardi and Shaprio covered personal tips, they also gave advice on how to interview victims of traumatic events.

Ricchiardi recently spoke with Hannah Dreier, a ProPublica reporter who won a Pulitzer Prize last year for her work covering MS-13 and the gang’s impact on immigrant families in Long Island, New York.

“I asked her to give us some tips, some best practices on how she worked with the parents, grieving parents of children who had been murdered,” Ricchiardi said.

(1) Let the source have as much control over the interview as possible

Let them tell their story in their own words, and give control to people who are in crisis. Allow them to do the interview at their own pace, and recognize that it might be long, but you can come back later.

(2) Safety first

Find a safe place, and a safe time, to interview them.

“At one point [Dreier] interviewed a mother at night, and the mother said, ‘Wait a minute, I’ve had nightmares all night long because of our discussion,’” said Ricchiardi. Dreier responded by agreeing to only do the interviews during the day, to avoid adding any additional stress and trauma.

(3) Explain to your sources why you’re asking tough questions

When you’re talking to victims or grieving families, they need to know why they should tell you their stories, especially when doing so causes them to relive traumatic experiences. Transparency and sensitivity are key.

The role of newsrooms in advocating for the mental health of their reporters:

(1) Create mental health protocols

Just as there are safety protocols in the newsroom, journalists should be equipped with mental health support, which starts at the top, Ricchiardi said.

“I can start at the bottom [training] the journalists, but it eventually has to go to the top for them to sign off on it,” she said.

(2) Appoint a mental health committee for the newsroom

Sometimes management won’t create their own set of guidelines, but journalists can still step up to lead the charge. Ricchiardi said that creating a mental health committee doesn’t require direct managerial influence, and gives reporters the capacity to do their own research on available resources and establish a set of guidelines to present to management.

This also gives reporters freedom over how they want to see it work, and it encourages more journalists in the newsroom to enter the discussion.

(3) Host peer trauma support or peer mental health support programs

Another idea for newsrooms is creating peer trauma support, or peer mental health support programs, said Shapiro added. He's seen this work before. "They are actually training colleagues in newsrooms to be informed ears, not counselors, but to be resources for colleagues."

(4) It's not just about feelings

The biggest misconception journalists and newsroom leaders have when discussing trauma, anxiety or stress is that it's all about feelings. It's more than that, said Shapiro.

"As a workplace health issue, it's no more about feelings than a bullet or a bad office chair. It's occupational health," he said.

(5) Give middle managers the skills to handle mental health in the newsroom

"The role of leaders, not just the top managers, but the middle managers — the people on the desk — is crucial," Shapiro said.

"There are skills that middle managers need to learn, and they're not: how to listen, how to talk about these things, how not to pathologize, and yet, how to be there," he said. "It's crucial that middle managers get some of these skills, and also that managers recognize they need to be self-care role models for the rest of the staff."

(6) If journalists are struggling to have their editors make the time to be involved, bring outside resources to the newsroom

While journalists may have great interest in these issues, and may even begin the initiatives, it's important to involve editors, said Ricchiardi. She encourages journalists to plan meetings with outside experts or trainers on these topics in the newsroom.

"Then they do listen and they do care and they do respond, she added. "But it has been a struggle to get them involved. And we just have to keep at it."

Resources:

- Dart Center for Journalism and Trauma
- Committee to Protect Journalists
- International News Safety Institute
- Poynter Institute for Media Studies
- Reporters Without Borders
- International Women's Media Foundation
- International Journalists' Network

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