

Tips for News Managers: Covering Pandemics

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What a manager can do to support news professionals covering pandemics.

There are many unique challenges to covering a pandemic in the field, including being exposed to potential infection. This unseen but very real threat can lead to increases in anxiety and stress for everyone involved.

In addition, reporters and other news professionals who are reporting from hotspots might find themselves in situations of lock-down or quarantine. This might happen suddenly, without opportunities to fully prepare. Your team might be separated from family and other loved ones. If they are already remote workers (e.g., foreign correspondents), this might be compounded if they are unable to return home to their families, who in turn will feel isolated.

Be aware of staff working from home and in isolation. Just because people are at home does not mean they are not under your duty-of-care. Introverts may be relishing this opportunity, but extroverts might be struggling. Be mindful of that.

These stories involve potentially traumatic events, which can lead to ongoing mental health challenges.

Your team may be reporting on people who have suddenly died, been denied critical health care, been forcibly quarantined, or witness or report on public panic or other mass responses. They may interview people who are known to be infected, and therefore worry about their own protection. These are all situations that could provoke a longer-term trauma reaction.

Social and peer support is vital.

Social support is one of the most important protective factors for trauma-related outcomes. Make sure you stay in touch with your team, checking on them every few hours as they go through their work day. Ask them open-ended questions, “How are you today?” “What do you need?” Ensure you send the message that not reporting on the story, for today, or in an ongoing way, is an option. Emphasise self-care.

Be creative with team cohesion for those working at home and online – consider using any number of the group meeting apps for team meetings and editorial decision-making.

During time off or downtime, if you know your team are isolated from friends, colleagues and family, contact them often. During these conversations, don't ask them to file stories or tell them the latest news. Instead, check in that they are caring for themselves, that they have a way to connect with loved ones, and that they have access to more formal peer or professional support structures if needed.

Reassure them that the assignment is difficult, and if they let you know they are finding the going tough, that will not affect your decisions about whether they continue with this story, or any other story in the future.

In short, be supportive and be available. And make sure you are also receiving support you need.