

Working With Victims and Survivors

February 22, 2011

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Journalists, researchers and mental health professionals offer advice on how to deal with people caught up in tragic events.

Whether you're new to reporting traumatic news or simply feel you've got more to learn about such assignments, these tips, drawn from journalists, journalism researchers and health professionals in Australia and around the world, can help you.

- People who have experienced deep trauma or who have lost someone close to them in sudden, violent circumstances have a right to decline being interviewed, photographed or filmed, and news media, and their newsrooms, need to respect that right. Exercise the principle of doing no further harm.
- Above all, be accurate and do not feign compassion. It can't be faked. Offer sincere condolences early and in considerate, supportive terms. Use a supportive phrase like "I'm sorry this happened to you" rather than the more abrupt "How do you feel?" or the discordant "I know how you feel" which will immediately result in a loss of credibility.
- Witnesses and survivors are likely to be in shock, at least in the immediate period after a disaster, and may not be in a fit state to be interviewed, filmed or photographed – indeed, to give anything like informed consent to an interview, so go easy on them.
- Avoid "devil's advocate" questions or questions that might imply blame or that they could have done more.
- Even though a large number of news media will be chasing stories and fresh news angles at this time, resist the "pack" mentality, especially when media throngs are covering a subsequent development, event, arrival, etc. Pool resources where possible to limit demand on individuals and communities.
- Often these people will be experiencing deep conflict and perhaps confusion. For news media to focus on that as-yet-unresolved mental or emotional conflict can be destructive to victims, survivors, witnesses, their families and friends as well as to unseen others who might have experienced similar or worse situations.
- Invite these people to be interviewed or photographed and provide a supportive atmosphere for that interchange, rather than coerce, cajole, trick or offer remuneration to them to get cooperation. Especially don't thrust the additional burden of negotiating an "exclusive" onto grieving families.
- Respect their choice to have someone with them or to appoint a family or external spokesperson or even a media advisor and don't pay out on them for making such choices.

Most likely they're being bombarded with requests from media and have little choice but to seek help to deal with, or limit, those demands.

- Try to make your approach as respectful and gentle as possible, despite your pressing deadline or a newsroom impatient for your copy or images. Treat these people as you would like to be treated if the situation was reversed. This is particularly critical if you are an “out-of-towner,” as your radar may not be as attuned to local sensitivities as it could be.
- For the families of victims and survivors, their loss, grief and concern is intensely focused and personal. It will also have its own timeline, which may mean you'd get a far better story or image if you held off a little with those immediately affected. That doesn't stop you from speaking to others who are not so closely affected, including officials, chaplains, etc.
- If you get a knock-back, leave a contact card and tell them they can call you if they want to talk later, but don't use leveraging techniques with victims, survivors, witnesses or their families to get them to agree to an interview or photograph. Do not blackmail people into cooperating on the basis they will help others. Let them decide.
- Avoid, wherever possible, being the one to relay news of a death to an individual or family. The appropriate authorities should do that and relatives have a right to receive such news in private. If you are asked for additional details about the tragedy that they may not yet have, consider carefully your response and try to think how you would feel if you were in their situation. You may want to suggest they check with others. You may decide to share some information but not all you know, but don't repeat unconfirmed information.
- Remember victims, survivors and their families and friends are struggling to regain control in their lives after a devastating experience ... allow them to have some say in when, where and how they're interviewed or photographed/filmed. Include them in any decisions you can – for instance, read back their quotes or replay raw tape, allow them to suggest which photos of a deceased or badly injured relative should be used, etc. Let vulnerable interviewees tell you when they'd like to take a break, whether they want you to put your notebook down or to turn off recording equipment so they can say something they don't want used. Check whether it's ok to ask a tough question.
- If someone breaks down, give them time to compose themselves before asking: “Are you ready to go on?” Resist filming or photographing individuals in a distressed or emotional state (even readers/viewers with no connection to tragedies are critical of this clichéd technique). Choose powerful, reinforcing images to illustrate the story and the victim's worth to their family and/or community.
- After a disaster, stories do not need added sensation – rely on good, solid, factual journalism and a healthy dose of sensitivity. Be wary of recycling particular images of individuals, especially graphic ones. Also beware of choosing “tragic images” as page or screen icons. Often this will be a family's last image of a lost loved one and it may not be pleasant.
- Thoroughly check and re-check facts, names, times, places, etc., because such errors are painful to these individuals, families and their colleagues and cause unnecessary stress.

- Remember people you speak to in these circumstances are rarely media-savvy. Try to explain the media process and how your story/picture/footage is likely to be used. Also explain that it may be reshaped prior to publication, or afterwards, or not used at all. Be honest if you know something is likely to run more than once. [Many will take steps to ensure vulnerable family members such as children or the elderly are informed of, or shielded from, such reports.] Encourage them to ask questions while you're there to answer them and to call you if they have a question at a later stage.
- Beware of over-reliance on good "talent". Articulate survivors, witnesses and family/colleagues can find themselves unwittingly and uncomfortably elevated above others affected. In turn, others in their communities can become resentful that one individual or family is getting the lion's share of attention. In small communities this can cause long-term, even irreparable, rifts in relationships.
- Despite the difficulty and sadness that you might encounter, this can be an opportunity for personal and professional growth if you choose it to be.