

Journalism & Trauma – Working on the Frontline!

SANEF Wellness Workshop – November 2020

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- ▶ Useful to think of the battle as occurring in phases
- ▶ Each phase comes with its own challenges, common psychological responses and possible solutions



COVID-19 Phases of the Mental Health Wave

TAIL-OFF PHASE

(more capacity, minor ethical dilemmas)

- ***STAFF CHALLENGES***
 - Staff running on empty
 - Many with burnout
 - Potential retrospective guilt



POST COVID19 PHASE

(full technical capacity, still reduced staff function/reduced numbers)

- ***STAFF CHALLENGES***
 - Delayed stress response
 - Retrospective guilt
 - Mitigate staff distress
 - Delayed psychological impact

The **5** Stages of Grief



Denial



Anger



Bargaining



Depression



Acceptance

60% of the journalists surveyed so far said they are working harder during the pandemic at the same time that they have increased responsibilities at home.

The journalists interviewed so far give their news organizations a score of 6/10 when it comes to how supportive they have been during the pandemic.

In June 2020, researchers at the Reuters Institute of Journalism at Oxford University surveyed a small sample of 73 journalists from international media organisations in countries such as the United Kingdom, South Africa, Kenya and Nigeria, amongst others, to find out how reporting on the coronavirus pandemic affected their mental health.

Among those surveyed, only 63 responded and 4% were health journalists.

What did they find? 70% of respondents said they suffered some form of psychological distress.

About a quarter of respondents said they experienced clinically significant symptoms of anxiety including worry, insomnia, poor concentration and feeling on edge during the pandemic.

11% of journalists covering COVID-19 who participated in the survey reported symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). Symptoms can include intrusive and recurring thoughts and memories of a traumatic COVID-19 related event, a desire to avoid recollections of the event and feelings of guilt, fear, anger, horror and shame

60% of respondents reported working longer hours since the pandemic started. This burden fell disproportionately on women who felt “incredible pressure to do more at home and at work with far fewer resources”.

During a natural disaster or outbreak of violence, a journalist — like a psychotherapist — often takes on the role of a witness

Covering trauma can generate another kind of trauma, “Like therapists — who through the process of ‘transference’ can vicariously experience their patients’ emotional pain — reporters may also experience a type of indirect, secondary trauma through the victims they interview and the graphic scenes to which they must bear witness,”

PTSD

According to the survey results, 1 in 5 respondents met the threshold for PTSD, and 90% experienced some level of PTSD symptoms related to Hurricane Harvey coverage

“With most breaking news situations we’re talking about the people just being curious about what’s going on, but when you’re talking about something like a region-wide disaster, you’re talking about peoples’ actual lives. The news can potentially save someone’s life.”

User generated content (UGC) — for instance, cell phone videos and photos obtained from members of the public — can offer a window into a breaking news event that a journalist might not be on the ground to witness themselves.

Frequency of exposure to UGC independently predicted higher scores on mental health screenings for PTSD, depression and psychological distress.

The authors conclude that frequency of exposure to UGC, rather than duration of exposure, is linked to more symptoms of emotional distress. In other words, the number of shifts journalists spent looking at UGC mattered more than the length of a shift in terms of emotional impact. They suggest that news organizations might reduce the frequency of journalists' exposure to UGC to minimize the risk of emotional harm

ANXIETY

Anxiety

Anxiety disorders are a group of common mental health illnesses that can present alone or in combination with other psychiatric conditions (typically depression) or physical comorbidities. Short-term anxiety is a natural emotional response that can help drive performance and improve alertness; however, when anxiety becomes prolonged or severe it can be distressing and disabling.

Anxiety

Generalized anxiety involves a constant and intense feeling of anxiety regarding anything. People with GAD struggle to control their worries.

1. Restlessness, feeling keyed up or on edge.
2. Being easily fatigued.
3. Difficulty concentrating or mind going blank.
4. Irritability.
5. Muscle tension.
6. Sleep disturbance (difficulty falling or staying asleep, or restless, unsatisfying sleep).

Human beings like certainty. We are hard-wired to want to know what is happening when and to notice things that feel threatening to us. When things feel uncertain or when we don't generally feel safe, it's normal to feel stressed. This very reaction, while there to protect us, can cause all sorts of havoc when there is a sense of uncertainty and conflicting information around us.

Covid-19 Distress

- Uncertainty over the future
- Lack of control
- Paranoid thoughts
- Safety and security
- Structure and routine
- Constant new information flow

DEPRESSION

2 in 5 respondents met the threshold for depression, and 93% experienced some symptoms of depression.

the medical definition of depression is a sustained abnormality in a person's mood, or feelings of despair, hopelessness, and self-hatred. A depressive episode is defined as a period lasting at least two weeks in which a person feels depressed or becomes unable to experience any pleasure, accompanied by some of the following: changes in sleep patterns, changes in appetite, changes in sexual desire, loss of interest in things that were previously interesting, loss of pleasure in life, loss of energy, inability to concentrate, slowing of reflexes and bodily movements, feelings of guilt, and thoughts of suicide

self-criticism. feelings of inferiority.
worthlessness. guilt. sense of having
failed. loss of approval. loss of love.
depreciating self-esteem. fear. isolated.
weak. helpless. inadequate. abandoned.
unloved. angry. frustrated. indecisive.
suicidal. unattractive. fatigued. restless.
constipation. unworthy. confused.

Covid-19 Distress

- Recreation restrictions
- Weight changes
- No routine and monotony (fatigue)
- Helplessness and hopelessness
- Bad news syndrome

High-functioning depression is usually difficult to diagnose because those who are living with it have been accustomed to masking it in an attempt to cope, and don't display some of the symptoms of more severe depression such as absence of motivation, hopelessness, extreme sadness, and suicidal thoughts.

You Don't Feel Like You're Being True to How You Really Feel

Good Days are Okay, Bad Days are Terrible

Happy Times Can't Chase Away the Sadness

You Often Struggle to Focus

You've Had a Major Depressive Episode at Some Point

BURNOUT

The relationships that *fontliners* develop with their stories include relationships with people and their families. This require ongoing, intense levels of personal, emotional contact. Although such relationships can be rewarding and engaging, they can also be quite stressful; particularly in the *frontliners* setting where prevailing norms are to be selfless, to work long hours and to go the extra mile.

Defining burnout

Three key dimensions of burnout have been described:

1. Overwhelming **exhaustion**,
2. feelings of cynicism and **detachment**, and
3. a sense of **ineffectiveness** and **lack of accomplishment**

Exhaustion



- Wearing out
- Loss of energy
- Depletion
- Debilitation
- Fatigue

Cynicism



- Negative or inappropriate attitudes
- Irritability
- Loss of idealism
- Withdrawal
- Depersonalisation/dehumanisation

Inefficacy



- Reduced productivity or capability
- Low morale
- Inability to cope
- Feelings of personal or professional inadequacy

Seven key domains have been identified as contributing to the development of burnout:
workload, control, reward, community,
fairness, values and job-person incongruity

Consequences of burnout

Associated manifestations include headache, insomnia, tension, anger, narrow-mindedness, impaired memory, decreased attention and thoughts of quitting or early retirement. Physical exhaustion and moral distress can be prominent.

Consequences of burnout

Burnout is a significant predictor of a range of:

Cardiovascular disease,

musculoskeletal pain,

depressive symptoms,

job dissatisfaction and absenteeism.

Trauma, anxiety, depression and prophylactic preparation

- *Preparing for a Traumatic Story*
 - Set a frame
 - Know your limits, triggers, and weak points.
- *Working with Traumatic Content*
 - The Body's Response to Trauma
 - Defence mechanisms
 - Physiological and psychological reaction.
- **Recovering from Emotionally Taxing Stories**
 - Body scan and check
 - Naming is taming

Taking consistent breaks, diversifying the types of stories assigned and having a newsroom coverage plan with well-defined roles and expectations as strategies that might reduce distress

Remember you're not immune to the emotional impact

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.

Know your signs

Everyone has old bad habits, signature strengths and pre-existing vulnerabilities. Making note of all of these and using them to make a plan on how to cope during a crisis or while reporting on traumatic topics.

Flatten your stress curve by taking downtime

At this point, everyone has heard about “flattening the curve” of the COVID-19 pandemic, there’s also a similar curve to measure the amount of stress journalists one. You need to sleep. You need downtime.

Create a self-care plan with assertive boundaries

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.

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

Create mental health protocols

Appoint a mental health committee for the newsroom

Give middle managers the skills to handle mental health in the newsroom

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