

Journalists' mental health affected by reporting on trauma

Published in St. Catharines Standard on March 31, 2023

Covering trauma is traumatic. It really is as simple as that.

Until very recently, not much consideration has been given to the vicarious trauma that might be experienced by journalists, photographers, editors, and other media workers. In addition to that, all of the journalists, photographers, and broadcasters we interviewed for this project indicated they received no training about how to interview trauma survivors or how to address the vicarious trauma they might experience.

In a 2022 study about mental health and well-being, it was found that in both journalism schools and the workplace, media workers are not receiving much trauma training. Ninety percent of survey respondents received no trauma training while studying journalism; 85% have received no trauma training in the workplace; and only 33% of managers and executives indicated they had received trauma training.

Of the journalism schools that responded to the national survey, only Carleton University (where one of the study co-authors teaches) has a full course on trauma training (that launches this year). Other institutions that responded indicated they are beginning to include mentions, workshops, modules, and other training formats that discuss trauma and reporter safety, with some offering an intersectional perspective on trauma.

That there is beginning to be a change in training is good news for media workers and their efforts to tell the stories of trauma survivors; however, not one of the institutions surveyed offered any programming about journalists' personal mental health and well-being, and this impacts how well the stories of trauma survivors can be told, as well as impacting the long-term health of media workers.

As noted throughout our literature review and by some of the journalists we interviewed for our documentary, journalists are among the first to respond to crisis and disaster; they are often the only people who can help a survivor share their story with the community, but they are among the last to recognize or receive support for the psychological implications this can have.

Whilst it is imperative that journalists, broadcasters, photographers, and editors learn how to interview trauma survivors, it is equally important that they recognize the potential impacts of vicarious trauma, including how it might impact both their professional and personal lives.

In *Trauma Journalism: On Deadline In Harm's Way*, it is noted that no matter how objective – and emotionally removed – one tries to be in their reporting, other people's trauma begins to

take a toll, especially if one does not have the tools to address their response to sharing the traumatic story. How anyone, including a journalist or photographer or editor, experiences trauma varies depending on their past experiences, their personality, and how they processed what they witnessed and/or reported.

Whatever one's belief in journalistic objectivity, journalists are human beings first and journalists second, which means, of course, that journalists too can hurt.

Every media worker with whom we spoke for this project indicated that while there has been more of an effort to provide mental health resources for journalists, photographers, editors, and broadcasters, there is still hesitation to access those services. Much of the literature that addressed this indicated there is a significant level of distrust among journalists about making such disclosures in their workplaces for fear of being taken off their respective 'beat' or because newsroom culture has long been to suck it up and move on.

If we are going to ask journalists to report more responsibly about gender-based violence and gendered issues, we also have to address that their reporting may lead to them experiencing vicarious trauma and encourage them to take care of their own mental health and well-being.