

Trauma Counseling for Journalists: A Profession in Denial

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Abstract

Research suggests, between eighty to ninety percentage of journalists have been exposed to a work-related traumatic events such as murder, mass casualties, war and natural disasters. Most journalists exhibit resilience despite repeated exposure to such traumatic events. However, a significant minority are at risk for long-term psychological problems, including Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), depression, and substance abuse. Unsurprisingly, the greater the exposure to violence, suffering and death, in particular involving children, the more likely people are to break down. And those are the situations exactly what many journalists have to deal with as part of their job.

Due to the thirty years of war in Sri Lanka, many journalists suffer PTSD as they witnessed many horrible events involving death, violence, bomb attacks and human suffering. Even though the war has ended eight years ago, trauma is still there in many minds and many of the younger journalists are more likely to report occupational dysfunction due to PTSD. Currently, the situation in Sri Lanka, where decades of conflict may have inured journalists to an appreciation of the horror around them. So they claim that No support was therefore required for them. This Paper will analyze what impact such traumatic situations made on journalists and the methods and trainings in order to better prepare fresher journalists to face such traumatic events well in advance.

What is Psychological Trauma

“A traumatic event or situation creates psychological trauma when it overwhelms the individual’s ability to cope, and leaves that person fearing death, annihilation, mutilation, or psychosis.” (Pearlman and Saakvitne, 1995, p. 60) The individual may feel emotionally, cognitively, and physically overwhelmed. It may include responses to powerful one-time incidents like accidents, natural disasters, crimes, surgeries, deaths and responses to chronic or repetitive experiences such as child abuse, neglect, combat, urban violence, concentration camps, battering relationships, and enduring deprivation.

Impact on Journalists

Journalists frequently bear witness to human suffering whether covering mass disasters or individual atrocities. The majority of journalists witness traumatic events in their line of work. Common events may include Automobile accidents, Fire, Murder, Mass casualties, War and Natural Disasters.

However, little is known regarding the impact of such exposure on the well-being of journalists. Psychologists and Researchers are only recently start to examine this line of work may have impact on the health of journalists. They are at risk for long-term psychological problems, including PTSD, depression, and substance abuse.

RATES of posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD)

Study	Sample	PTSD Rate (Current Month)
Morales et al., 2012	100 Mexican journalists	Overall: 35% Photographers only: 59% Drug trafficking only: 43%
Morales et al., 2014	140 Mexican journalists	Overall: 34% Photographers only: 54% Drug trafficking only: 44%
Marias & Stuart, 2005	50 South African journalists	32%
Feinstein, Owen, & Blair, 2002	28 war correspondents	28.6% lifetime and 10.7% current
Feinstein & Owen, 2002	140 war correspondents	19.7%
<u>Drevo</u> , 2016	394 journalists (predominantly American)	19%
<u>Teegen & Grotwinkel</u> , 2001	61 U.S. & European journalists	13%
<u>Backholm & Björkqvist</u> , 2012	493 Finnish journalists	Worked directly with shooting crisis: 12% (n = 196) No direct work with shooting: 9%
Nelson, 2011	159 U.S. print journalists	10.7%
Smith, 2008	167 U.S. print and TV journalists	9.7%
<u>Dworznik</u> , 2011	280 U.S. reporters, photographers, and live truck engineers	7%
Newman et al., 2003	875 U.S. photojournalists	5.9-6.7%
<u>Weidmann et al.</u> , 2008	61 European TV, radio, print journalists covering the 2004 Tsunami	6.6%
<u>Hatanaka et al.</u> , 2010	270 Japanese broadcast journalists	6%
<u>Pyeovich et al.</u> , 2003	866 U.S. print journalists	4.3%

(smith et al. 2015)

In Sri Lanka, overall PTSD rate remains 46% while in photo journalists it stands as high as 62%.

Risk Factors

Journalists who continually exposed to a greater number of traumatic assignments are at a higher risk of suffering PTSD. Younger journalists with less experience and Veteran journalists with more exposure are most likely to get affected. Organizational Factors such as Personal History and Characteristics, Social Support, Low perceived social acknowledgement by supervisors and colleagues also will have an impact on journalists' mental health. Apart from this, Cognitive Factors such as Negative beliefs about self and Guilt cognitions will also have a severe impact.

Trauma Counseling

It's human nature to basically to soldier on during such situations but people do sometimes shut down emotionally. Not everybody who witnesses a traumatic event up close develops PTSD. Exposure to war, high-intensity assignments or longer time in the field will up the risk further.

Due to the thirty years of war in Sri Lanka, many journalists suffered PTSD as they witnessed many horrible events involving death, violence, bomb attacks and human suffering. Even though the war has ended eight years ago, trauma is still there in many minds. During the war time, many of the war correspondents faced many threats of kidnapping, murder and death or injuries. Journalists were the targets of deliberate acts of violence in many parts of the country.

War and political violence on Journalists

Sri Lanka saw abductions and killings of high-profile journalists during 30 years of war. The U.K.'s Channel 4 has screened amateur footage of the body of Tamil news presenter Shoba, indicating that she was shot and killed brutally during the government's final military surge in the northeast. (CPJ 2009)

In fact, a 2003 survey found, more than a quarter of war correspondents struggle with post-traumatic stress disorder, or PTSD. (Reuters, 2010)

A profession in denial

At the Commonwealth Press Union's biennial conference in Sydney in 2005, Sri Lankan journalists denied that scenes of decomposing bodies could be traumatic either for their reporters or their audience members because Sri Lankans had been at war for decades, were used to such scenes and were unaffected by them.

The situation in Sri Lanka, where decades of conflict may have inured journalists to an appreciation of the horror around them. So they claim that No support was therefore required for their journalists. This response flies in the face of evidence from around the world that shows the cumulative effect of continual exposure to traumatic scenes usually affects those involved.

Tsunami

Natural disaster of the tsunami on 26 December 2004 that has produced the greatest cultural change in newsrooms and the Management became more aware of possible short-term and long-term physical and psychological trauma for journalists who are involved in on-the-spot reporting.

Diagnosis and occupational Impact

Symptoms of PTSD may result in impaired occupational functioning, making it difficult for journalists to perform optimally on the job. They are often late to work, missed deadlines, difficulty concentrating at work, etc. and the younger journalists are more likely to report occupational dysfunction.

Diagnosis includes a trio of distressing symptoms that must remain for at least a month. The first part is re-living the traumatic event, for instance as frequent flashbacks or nightmares, or as extreme physiological reactions to everyday things like reading a book. The second is avoidance and a "numbing" toward other people and positive emotions. Third is being revved up all the time, looking for potential signs of danger.

Trauma and safety training

It is vital for journalists to receive proper trauma and safety training during their journalism education before entering the workforce. Trauma training by IMH incorporates, Education on reporting while working in hazardous environments. It will also include, how to interact with vulnerable or traumatized victims and witnesses of catastrophic events. Ethical decision making and best practices, Personal safety and Mental Health and Coping and Self-care are also part of this training.

The training based on methods developed by the Royal Marines in the 1990s was adapted for the BBC by specialist psychiatrist Professor Neil Greenberg (BBC 2015). It is mainly focusing on a common sense approach to peer support, to identify actual or potential risk of psychological problems and assess whether those can be managed at work or require professional help.

Treatments

The most effective treatments for PTSD is the old-fashioned talk therapy by re-living the trauma in safe settings to extinguish the gut-level fear reaction. Cognitive-behavioral therapy, which aims to adjust emotions by changing old thought patterns.

Institute of Mental Health (IMH) works with many other Non profit organizations to make sure the journalists receive proper trauma and safety training during their journalism education before entering the workforce. It also suggests management to decrease the frequency and intensity of exposure to traumatic news assignments, and provide appropriate resources for coping with the emotional toll of these assignments for particular journalists. IMH observed the organizational support likely resulted not just in a reduction of mental health harm, but a reduction in occupational dysfunction and an increase in job performance as well.

Moving Forward

Journalists don't have PTSD because they are not 'post,' They are living it daily. There are signs that journalists may be facing more dangers now than ever, putting both their physical and mental health at risk. Even though PTSD is a bit more serious issue among journalists, only very few big organizations are very aware of it. Hence it is very difficult for a counselor to reach out to their client's organization when in need.

Many in Journalism career think those who are unable to face such horrible incidents are not suitable for this job at all. Hence they try to hide their problems due to fear of losing their jobs. First they must understand that PTSD is not going to ruin their career, and What will ruin it is not getting treatment.

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