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How to recognize and manage stress when covering traumatic events

By Vicki Krueger • March 11, 2011

Covering traumatic events such as the earthquake in Japan and tsunami can affect journalists in the field and in the newsroom.

It can be important and deeply rewarding to cover these events -- but it can also personally affect journalists, says Heather Forbes, national manager, staff development, for the Australian Broadcasting Corporation's (ABC) news division.

It's essential for journalists, whether they're covering the event in person, editing the coverage from a newsroom, or managing those who are producing the coverage, to prepare for the emotional toll these events take.

Understanding the effects of trauma makes for healthier journalism and healthier journalists, she says. She offered these reminders and tips in a Webinar at Poynter's NewsU, "Trauma Awareness: What Every Journalist Needs to Know".

Risk factors for trauma include exposure to a greater number of traumatic assignments; time in field covering the event; personal trauma; low perceived social support.

Trauma reactions are normal human responses. Usually they pass after four weeks, and the first week or two are the most difficult.

Reaction to trauma can take several forms: sleeplessness, intrusive images of the event, anger, being easily startled, self-medicating with drugs and alcohol, and numbing/isolation/loss of empathy.

Warning signs of trauma include shutting yourself away or, conversely, not being able to stop talking about the event; intense and sometimes irrational anger; guilt and confusion; uncharacteristically missing deadlines or obsessing about work; or other atypical behavior.

The impact of trauma can result in a disconnection with family and friends or colleagues, declining health and inability to do your job as well.

She offers these suggestions.

Take care of yourself. People often overlook the basics of life when they are stressed. This includes:

- Exercise
- Sleep
- Drink water
- Eat well & regularly
- Find things that make you laugh
- Enjoy music/art/books
- Allow yourself to cry

Establish peer support in your organization:

- Make contact with other staffers
- Clarify what sort of support is needed
- Listen
- Help brainstorm or problem solve
- Educate about trauma responses
- Ensure social supports are in place
- Refer
- Follow up

Key points for peer supporters include:

- Be discreet and keep confidentiality
- Stay open minded
- Act as an educated listener, NOT a counselor
- Check back in 3-4 weeks with your colleague

One set of guidelines for a structured conversation with peer support follows this acronym: FINE

- Facts: Talk it through. What happened? When, where, how -- not why
- Impact: Focus on thoughts & feelings
- Now: How have you been? How are you doing now?
- Education: It's not unusual, remind each other of likely responses

For more on how to recognize and manage stress and trauma, as well as how news organizations can develop an action plan to help staffers who are experiencing trauma, go to "Trauma Awareness: What Every Journalist Needs to Know," a Webinar replay at Poynter's NewsU and "Journalism **and Trauma,**" a **self-directed course.**



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