

Staff Care Tips for Managers and Editors of News Personnel Exposed to Traumatic Events.

Trauma and the coverage of extreme human distress is a core part of journalism. It can be important and deeply rewarding – but it can also affect us personally. News organizations are no different from other services which respond to trauma in needing to take this seriously, and to prepare and support staff appropriately.

The best way to deal with trauma is good and mutually-caring teamwork and good management – within a wider culture that acknowledges the part trauma plays in news work.

*These tips are offered as suggestions to assist healthier journalists and ultimately better journalism. It is important to brief staff **before** exposure to potentially traumatic material and support them both **during** an event and **after**. This is true for both large scale (e.g. natural disasters, war reporting) and 'small' scale (car crashes, court and crime reporting) incidents.*

Before an assignment -

- Trauma awareness briefings should be a core element of standard training and management. Awareness of the physical and psychological risks of trauma exposure and how your organisation will deal with it will instil confidence to do the 'tough' jobs – ultimately getting better stories.
- Sit down with the individual or team and talk through the possible emotional risks involved as well as the logistics and purpose of the assignment itself.
- Remind staff that distress from trauma exposure is a normal human reaction and not weakness. It may even inform their reporting. Signs of distress should not be a determinant for the next assignment.
- Acknowledge and show appreciation even before people go. Feeling valued keeps people emotionally balanced and more invested in hard work.
- Organise newsroom to journalist contact before departure for support as well as news gathering.
- For longer assignments reassure that phone calls with home are important - not a perk.
- Ensure you have updated lists of personal emergency contact numbers for those leaving.
- Remember that all those involved in news gathering can be exposed to trauma – not just the front line. Picture and film editors, sound recordists, etc. will be also exposed to potentially traumatic material.

On assignment –

- Maintain regular contact – even a quick phone call to say 'g'day, how's it going'?
- Give words of encouragement and watch criticism – people's sensitivities are heightened when exposed to trauma.
- Remind them of the importance of self care. Healthy eating, exercise and sleep are vital and ensure better journalism. Too much 'self-medication' with alcohol has the opposite effect.
- Encourage staff that if they are feeling distressed not to hide it. Such responses are not abnormal, they're human, and it is neither weak, unprofessional nor career-threatening to acknowledge them.
- Manage contact with others from your organisation – a badly timed phone call will exacerbate stress levels (especially regarding finance!)
- Consider rotation or withdrawal of a highly distressed person, but remember to discuss your reasons with them and do it sensitively.

- Following longer assignments consider a day or two of 'decompression' – a 'layover' period to readjust from trauma exposure. Ensure that families are aware this is happening.
- Maintain newsroom contact with partners or families.
- Research indicates that car crashes, court reporting and 'small scale' trauma reporting can have as much an impact as the 'big ones'. Be mindful of daily domestic tragedy.

After the job –

It's essential that managers make contact with anyone on their staff who's been through a distressing experience. This is good management anyway, but is especially important in the aftermath of trauma.

- Send somebody to meet and greet those returning from overseas or long absences.
- Acknowledge with thanks, lunch, drinks, public recognition, emails – thankyou goes a long way to assist wellbeing, and better work performance.
- Diffuse with those returning from trauma reporting – talk to them about how it was both logistically and emotionally. Don't be afraid to talk emotions – they are normal.
- Encourage staff to maintain support from family, friends and social networks.
- Remind them that any distress is a typical human response following trauma exposure – explain that most feel a lot better in 3-4 weeks. Some not unusual responses are -
 - *Sleeplessness*
 - *Upsetting dreams*
 - *Intrusive images or thoughts of the event*
 - *Avoidance of reminders of the trauma or feeling numb*
 - *Feeling that bad things are about to happen*
 - *Being jumpy and easily startled*
 - *Anger*
 - *Difficulty concentrating*
 - *Feeling 'hyper'*
 - *Physical reactions such as sweating, rapid heartbeat, dizziness, nausea when reminded of a traumatic event*
- Offer counselling if they appear overwhelmed or you feel out of your depth.
- **IT IS IMPORTANT** to check in with them again in **3-4 weeks** to see if any of these symptoms are still occurring. If they are then refer to a trauma specialist. During this time employ 'watchful waiting' (keeping a quiet eye on them). Any behaviour that is out of character for your staff member is an indicator that all is not well.
- Remember that **you** are also part of the 'ripple effect of trauma'. Notice your own emotions and don't be surprised if you also feel some of the above symptoms or others that seem out of the ordinary. Make sure you apply self care and talk to someone as well.

For further information contact the Dart Centre Australasia – Melbourne, 0419 131 947