

LEADING RESILIENCE A Guide for Editors and News Managers

Working with Freelancers Exposed to Trauma



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Cover Image:

A journalist works on his laptop amid items left behind by protesters
in Hong Kong Polytechnic University (PolyU), Hong Kong. November 26, 2019
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LEADING RESILIENCE

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ABOUT DART CENTER FOR JOURNALISM AND TRAUMA

The Dart Center for Journalism and Trauma is a resource centre and global network of journalists, journalism educators and health professionals dedicated to improving media coverage of trauma, conflict and tragedy. It is a project of Columbia University Graduate School of Journalism in New York City. Dart Centre Asia Pacific is based in Melbourne, Australia. For more information: www.dartcenter.org



ABOUT ACOS ALLIANCE

The ACOS (A Culture Of Safety) Alliance is an unprecedented coalition of more than 100 signatory news organizations, freelance journalist associations and press freedom NGOs working together to champion safe and responsible journalistic practices.

We implement effective, practical initiatives that help newsrooms and freelance journalists to embed a culture of safety within their working practices and meet the basic standards outlined in the [Freelance Journalist Safety Principles](#). For more information: www.acosalliance.org

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INTRODUCTION WHY THIS GUIDE?

As a news manager and editor, it is likely that you are commissioning stories from a variety of news professionals. In addition to people working in your own newsroom, you are probably managing freelance news gatherers, people you have hired because of their proximity to the story. Your duty of care to both permanent staff and freelancers involves understanding what may place them in the way of physical or psychological harm. When it comes to freelancers, understanding these risks may be more difficult. You may or may not have an ongoing relationship with them. You probably don't have direct experience of their location, or the local risks. Both of you are likely under time pressure, with little knowledge of each other's stressors, and little knowledge of each other as individuals. And, you both want the best possible story!

KEY POINTS

This guide is written to help you navigate some of these issues. It assumes, as a starting point, a number of important foundation points.

- *A culture of safety in the newsroom benefits everyone – permanent staff, freelancers, news sources and the wider community.*
- *News gatherers are highly likely to be exposed to trauma during their course of their work.*
- *Resilience is normal – most news gatherers can and do cope well with this aspect of their work – but sometimes the impacts are lasting.*
- *The risk of serious mental health consequences can be mitigated by support from colleagues, managers and news organizations.*
- *The best way to respond to these risks is to become informed about trauma and its potential impact on news gatherers and actively support and engage with your team about these issues.*
- *Trauma informed journalism leads to better journalism.*
- *The ability to acknowledge and discuss personal emotional reactions to stories is a sign of professional strength and resilience.*

YOUR RESPONSIBILITIES

If you have asked someone to cover a story for you, you have a legal and ethical duty of care to that person. The legal aspects may vary between jurisdictions, but increasingly courts are considering these issues and in at least one case (in Australia) have ruled against the news organization, in a case related to an employee¹. While the impact of these legal actions may not flow to all jurisdictions and to the freelance relationship, no news organization can assume that their responsibilities for responding to trauma as it affects their staff, including freelancers, are minimal. It is no longer possible for news organizations to ignore the evidence about the potential impact of covering trauma as a news gatherer. As a manager, you need to understand, manage and respond to these risks before, during and after the freelancer works on the assignment.

You wouldn't send someone to report on a football match if they didn't know the rules – why send a reporter to a trauma story without knowing what trauma and its impacts are?

THIS GUIDE

This guide is designed to help you understand and support your team. It is divided into five sections covering both general information and specific suggestions and tips for working with freelancers.

UNDERSTANDING TRAUMA AND JOURNALISM

WHAT IS TRAUMA?

Trauma is the experience of severe psychological distress following a terrible or life-threatening event.

The word trauma does not equate to the terms post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), or acute stress disorder (ASD). These are diagnosable conditions that sometimes follow exposure to trauma. Both of these conditions involve the exposure to a potentially traumatic event (PTE).

The definition of what constitutes a PTE event has been the subject of continued discussion. The DSM-5 (Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, fifth edition²) has directed that it is considered to be direct personal exposure, witnessing of trauma to others, indirect exposure through trauma experience of a family member or other close associate and repeated or extreme exposure to aversive details of a traumatic event.

The DSM-5 makes it clear that exposure to visually traumatic material *through the course of one's work* can qualify as a PTE.

Not everyone who has experienced a PTE will go on to develop PTSD or ASD.

POTENTIALLY TRAUMATIC EVENTS

Typical events where journalists may experience direct exposure to traumatic events in the course of reporting include:

- *War and conflict*
- *Witnessing death*
- *Witnessing or being the victim of physical or sexual assault*
- *Detention / kidnap*
- *Natural disasters*
- *Unnatural disasters*
- *Transport crashes*
- *Terrorist attacks*

SECONDARY OR VICARIOUS TRAUMA EXPOSURE

Secondary or vicarious trauma refers to indirect exposure to all of the above events and can impact people as much as can direct exposure. Vicarious trauma can be induced from viewing graphic imagery or listening to accounts of traumatic events; including:

- *Viewing / editing material*
- *Viewing images / videos on social media*
- *Listening to accounts from survivors or victims of traumatic events*
- *Coverage of harrowing court cases*

TRAUMA AND JOURNALISM

Studies show that between 80 and 100% of journalists have been exposed to a work-related traumatic event^{3,4}, with around 92% experiencing repeated and multiple exposures⁵.

News reporters are often first on the scene and are required as part of their role to get as close as possible to the action (particularly true of camera operators and photographers). Decisions about whether the film or photos are appropriate to view are made later; the first objective is to capture what has happened.

News reporters and camera operators have an ambiguous role – they are not there to “help” (like other first responders) and often experience public vilification or anger due to their presence at the scene of tragedy.

Increasingly, journalists are also exposed to moral injury^{6,7,8}, which stems from exposure to events that violate personal morals or ethical codes. This can be as a result of directly witnessing (or reporting on) moral infringements such as human trafficking, refugee displacement or child sexual abuse. Journalists may also be placed in situations where they may feel they have failed to prevent the trauma occurring (e.g., being forced into a dilemma about taking photographs or assisting survivors to escape a threatening situation).

Compounding these potentially traumatic situations is the social media phenomenon of intimidation and harassment that journalists experience online. For women journalists, people of color and those in the LGBTI communities these attacks can be especially vicious and have been well documented by ACOS Alliance signatories such as the [Committee to Protect Journalists](#), [International Women’s Media Foundation](#), [Reporters Without Borders](#) and [Freedom of the Press Foundation](#) to name a few.

Until recently, there has been little organisational support or understanding of the potential impact of trauma exposure, moral injury or online harassment. This is exacerbated for freelancers, who are not part of the formal workplace structure and may work in isolation.

Understanding journalism and trauma can add knowledge and language to the journalism craft.

News gatherers training in trauma-awareness can and do engage with trauma survivors ethically and with kindness. They can build rapport and support the survivor to have their story told in a way that is important to them. This leads to better journalism.

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

POTENTIAL SIGNS OF UNRESOLVED TRAUMA EXPOSURE

Most people, including news gatherers, do not experience adverse impacts as a result of trauma, however some people may find they have ongoing reactions to trauma exposure. Signs of unresolved trauma include:

- *Intrusive re-experiencing - flashbacks and nightmares*
- *Physical reactions - palpitations, trembling, dizziness*
- *Reduced concentration*
- *Irritability*
- *Anger*
- *Guilt / shame*
- *Difficulty sleeping*
- *Avoidance*
- *Hyper emotional*
- *Emotional numbness*
- *Detachment / dissociation*
- *Withdrawal*
- *Low mood / depression*
- *Self-medication - alcohol / drugs*

WHAT IS STRESS AND ITS RELATIONSHIP TO TRAUMA?

Stress occurs when the demands of daily life outweigh internal resources. Stress is different from trauma in that it occurs in our daily lives. Most people are most able to deal with stress most of the time. Journalists and news gatherers are particularly experienced in handling stress from difficult assignments, deadlines, competing priorities etc.

General stress can impact the likelihood of a trauma reaction, however, because of the resilience it consumes. If someone's stress levels are already high, a traumatic event is likely to affect them more than if their stress levels were low to begin with.

RISK FACTORS

There are a number of risk factors which can exacerbate a vulnerability to develop ongoing consequences of trauma, including PTSD. These include:

- Exposure to a greater number of traumatic events
- The amount of time exposed to the events
- Traumatic events in one's own community
- Personal connection to the traumatic event
- Pre-existing stress factors
- Negative thoughts related to the deployment

TRAUMA AND THE FREELANCER

There are some particular issues that freelancers face that may increase the likelihood of ongoing consequences of trauma exposure. Managers who recognize these additional stressors, or possible stressors, will be better placed to provide appropriate trauma-informed support to freelancers.

INSECURE RELATIONSHIP WITH THE COMMISSIONING NEWS ORGANIZATION

Freelancers are often in precarious positions with regard to the commissioning agency. They may feel unable to speak out about potential risks or adverse reactions to their stories, for fear that this will result in them being removed from the assignment, or not given further assignments.

Often, there is no clarity around how a news organization will deal with trauma exposure, nor a defined procedure, particularly for freelancers. This uncertainty and lack of process can cause reporters to feel unsure of the support and care they will receive, thus creating more stress.

WORKING IN THEIR OWN COMMUNITIES

Freelancers often work in the community in which they live. Therefore, the traumatic event they are covering may be one that affects them directly, or impacts upon close friends or relatives. They are likely to have an ongoing relationship with the story, regardless of whether they continue to work on it for the original commissioning news organization. Psychological proximity to a traumatic story increases the trauma load the reporter may carry.

WORKING IN ISOLATION

Most often freelancers don't work from a newsroom. Many operate on their own and without access to collegial support and tend to feel isolated. Isolation is known to erode resilience and social connection, and support is well known to enhance psychological wellbeing.

SUPPORT BEFORE THE ASSIGNMENT

Trauma-aware managers can positively reduce the likelihood of ongoing impacts from PTEs. Before any assignment, managers should consider psychological safety part of a comprehensive safety assessment. This would start with a conversation between you and the team to better understand what is likely to occur on the assignment, what experiences members of the team have had in the past that may be relevant, what trauma-awareness training they have had, and their experiences and practices in self-care*. Find practical tip sheets in the Appendix.

Best practice support includes:

- *Build fluent communication with your team on all levels. Freelancers and other news gatherers consistently report that open and frequent communication with the newsrooms is vital to their ability to do their job well. If you focus on building this culture, it will form a solid foundation from which to add trauma-aware conversations and check-ins.*
- *Conduct a basic psychological health and wellbeing check or risk assessment. A template for this is included in the Appendix.*
- *Awareness of the physical and psychological risks of trauma exposure and how your organisation will deal with it will increase individual news gatherers' confidence to do the 'tough' jobs – ultimately leading to better stories.*
- *Talk through the possible emotional risks involved as well as the logistics and purpose of the assignment itself. Remind the team that distress from trauma exposure is a normal human reaction and not a weakness. It may even inform their reporting.*
- *Reassure that disclosing distress will not impact on opportunities for future assignments. And follow through.*
- *Acknowledge and appreciate the individual's willingness to do the assignment. Feeling valued keeps people emotionally balanced and more invested in the work.*
- *Make sure the reporter has a direct contact for an editor or manager – someone they can approach any time – to contact during the assignment. This contact must be available and reliable.*
- *Ensure you have updated lists of personal emergency contact numbers for all your team, including freelancers.*
- *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.*
- *Remind your team, including freelancers, to engage in self-care while on the job. Ask them to identify the best strategies that work for them when they experience stress or distress (breathing, listening to music, etc). If you know what some of these are, you will be able to remind them of these later. You may want to use the psychological health and wellbeing risk assessment to note individual self-care practices.*
- *Consider developing a mental health and trauma protocol. This could include things like ensuring any employee assistance program includes trained trauma specialists and making it clear whether freelancers are able to access that support.*

BEFORE IN PRACTICE:

Isra is a freelance photographer based in the Gaza Strip. She is contacted by an international news wire service and asked to file images from a market bombing. She and the editor discuss the likely physical risks, and then the editor asks for her thoughts on the emotional impact of covering the story, including photographing death and the grief reactions of relatives. Isra reflects on covering previous stories and says that while they have been difficult, her focus on producing quality news reports has guided her through. She and the editor agree to check in after she has filed the images.

* See [Self-Care and Peer Support](#) and [Safety and Self-Care for Every Beat](#) by the Dart Center for Journalism and Trauma

SUPPORT DURING THE ASSIGNMENT

During the assignment, regular contact with each person involved in gathering the story is crucial to creating a safe and trauma-aware environment for them to work in.

- *Maintain regular contact – even a quick phone call to say, ‘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. Too much ‘self-medication’ with alcohol has the opposite effect. Remind them of some of the things they had earlier identified as strategies that work for them. Remind them that self-care leads to better journalism; a good night’s sleep will position them to get a good story the next day.*
- *Send the message that it is normal to feel distress if they are surrounded by distressing events. It is ok to talk about it. Such responses are human, and it is not weak, unprofessional or career-threatening to express them. Emphasise that signs of distress will NOT impact future work with your news organization.*
- *Manage contact with others from your organisation – a badly timed phone call will exacerbate stress levels (especially regarding finance!).*
- *Support them to manage other work-related stressors (e.g., logistics, accommodation, etc) and where possible do not add to them by making unrealistic or impossible requests.*
- *Consider rotation or withdrawal of a highly distressed person, but remember to discuss your reasons with them and do it sensitively. Be aware that ending an assignment has a financial impact for the freelancer – make sure you only take this course if absolutely necessary and be aware that it will potentially add a new stressor (financial impact).*

DURING IN PRACTICE:

Juanita has been following stories related to family violence for many years, and her efforts have contributed to a formal government inquiry. This inquiry hears evidence from many victims over many months, and Juanita is present every day to hear all of them. One day her editor suggests that she take a few days off, but Juanita gets very angry, and says the editor is finding ways to take her off the story so that it won’t be told. Her editor is concerned, because this is not a typical way for Juanita to react. She suggests they talk again the following day, and during that conversation she lets Juanita know that the news outlet is fully committed to covering the story, but is also committed to the safety and support of its teams. She suggests they design a plan for getting the story covered without Juanita needing to be in the inquiry room every day.

SUPPORT AFTER THE ASSIGNMENT

It is essential that managers make contact with any team member who has been through a distressing experience. This is good management anyway, but is especially important in the aftermath of trauma. This can be an overlooked step when managing freelancers, and one that should not be ignored.

Follow-up – C.A.S.E.S⁹

- **Check in:** *Open a line of conversation about how the reporting experience was for the freelancer – talk to them about how it was both logistically and emotionally. Don't be afraid to talk about emotions – they are normal.*
- **Assess** *practical needs and safety. Are they physically safe? Is there somewhere they need to be or something they need?*
- **Stabilisation:** *Scan who seems to be travelling okay and who is 'wobbly' – the skill will be to do this via email and phone. Pay attention to those who seem to experience intense or unusual emotions (for them). Check for severe signs like disassociation or hyperventilation. Offer counselling if they are overwhelmed or you feel out of your depth.*
- **Educate:** *Remind them that any distress is a typical human response following trauma exposure – explain that most feel a lot better in 3-4 weeks. Check for the reactions listed on page 2. Utilize humour. Encourage them to focus on something they can control.*
- **Social support and follow-up:** *Encourage the freelancer to maintain support from family, friends and social networks. Acknowledge with thanks, public recognition, emails – thank you goes a long way to assist wellbeing, and leads to better work performance.*
- **IT IS IMPORTANT** *to check in with them again in 3-4 weeks to see if any of these reactions are unrelenting and still occurring. You can also use this contact to once again, express appreciation for the work they did. If they are continuing to experience reactions that are troubling, refer them to a trauma specialist or medical practitioner that understands psychological trauma.*
- *Remember 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 reactions or others that seem out of the ordinary. Make sure you apply self-care and talk to someone as well.*

AFTER IN PRACTICE:

Elliot is a seasoned freelance journalist who one day witnesses a child's drowning on a beach. He immediately contacts a news organisation, and offers them the story. The editor is very interested. Elliot writes the story but the next day when the editor rings him to say thank you, he doesn't pick up the phone. She leaves a voice message that says, "I'm thinking this may have been a hard story to cover, I would personally find it difficult". After a few minutes, Elliot rings back and they talk about how the boy reminded Elliot of his own child. The editor shares a similar story that happened to her some years ago, and reminds Elliot that having strong reactions to stories is not only normal but also can lead to insightful and compassionate journalism. After the call, she makes a note in her diary to call him again in a week, even though he is not an employee of her organization.

MYTH-BUSTING

It is not possible to determine one person's ability to manage the impact of exposure to traumatic events over another's, other than to consider general risk factors. It is not related to strength nor weakness. A news gatherer may be able to handle many trauma-related stories, and suddenly find themselves not coping with something they would normally consider routine. There is no clear pattern. This emphasizes the importance of raising awareness and reducing the stigma associated with mental health difficulties.

There are many barriers and misunderstandings that can impact on attitudes to the effects of exposure to traumatic events amongst news gatherers. Some of these to watch out for are:

- *Lack of education and understanding about how trauma can impact on mental health and wellbeing.*
- *Stigma or cultural attitudes associated with mental ill health.*
- *A belief that reacting to trauma is a sign of weakness.*
- *A belief that journalists should be objective, and therefore remain unaffected.*
- *Managers not trained in how to respond to someone having difficulties post trauma exposure.*
- *No insurance cover or funding set aside to manage difficulties which may require intervention.*
- *A perception that admitting to reactions / difficulties means that future work opportunities will be denied.*
- *Lack of available specialised therapists.*
- *A belief that reactions will go away on their own.*
- *A belief that self-medication through use of alcohol helps manage reactions.*

SELF-CARE FOR EDITORS AND MANAGERS

As a manager, you have a duty of care to your news teams to identify risks and support their wellbeing.

But your self-care is also vital. As a leader, your self-care will keep you resilient from the long-term impacts of stress and vicarious trauma. It will also demonstrate to your team that you are willing to lead by example.

Be aware that as an editor, you are also exposed to traumatic content – electronically or working through story angles with your team – and this can place you at risk.

Here are some tips to keep yourself trauma-aware and trauma-resilient:

- **Self-care basics.** Make sure you cover the essentials: sleep, nutrition, exercise. Take your annual leave, and breaks throughout the day. Don't follow the news 24 hours a day.
- **Eye on the sign.** Watch for the same signs you are looking for in your teams: uncharacteristic behaviour, isolating, jumpy or on edge, outbursts of anger, unusual lack of care or connection to your work, excessive alcohol or other drug use. Take heed of the warning signs – seek peer support from other managers or editors in your organisation or through your networks. If necessary, seek professional support.
- **Know when to call it.** You may also feel pressure to "get the story at all costs". Make sure your editorial team has discussed scenarios, so you know when it is right to call your team off a job for their safety and wellbeing. These prior discussions help make those decisions in the moment easier.
- **Own your response and your responsibility.** There is a burden of leadership that comes with placing other people into potentially dangerous situations. Know that despite your best practices, things may not always work out as well as you planned. Respond to these situations professionally, but remember to be aware of your own potential to feel overly responsible for outcomes. Your job is to lead by example, and this is especially true when things go wrong as well as demonstrating how they can go right.
- **Stay up to date.** Keep learning about trauma and its impact on news gatherers. Develop a newsroom culture that is trauma-literate and committed to excellence in trauma reporting, both for the news subjects and the news gatherers.

APPENDIX:

Psychological Health and Wellbeing Risk Assessment + Tip Sheets



Detail from:

A journalist takes pictures as police spray water during
an anti-government protest march in Hong Kong, China, October 20, 2019

© REUTERS/Kim Kyung Horn

PSYCHOLOGICAL HEALTH AND WELLBEING RISK ASSESSMENT¹⁰

A psychological health and wellbeing assessment is part of the news organization's duty of care to reporting teams, but can also be a useful tool to aid planning for support and actions in the event of a risk being realised. Conduct the following for each person prior to each assignment. Be especially vigilant if children are the subject.

Using the tool - managers can tick the boxes before assigning journalists to a story, or even afterwards. If any of the boxes are ticked then the manager has a record for following up with reporters on their wellbeing later on, as each of these events can (not always) link to negative post trauma outcomes and are based on the indicators for PTSD (DSM 5).

<i>Risk Assessment</i>	<i>Personally threatened</i>	<i>First person witness</i>	<i>Repeated exposure through interviews or watching</i>
<i>Is death involved?</i>			
<i>Is actual or threatened injury involved?</i>			
<i>Is actual or threatened sexual violence involved?</i>			
<i>Has the team member experienced reported traumatic events multiple times?</i>			

TIP SHEETS

Following is a checklist to help you support your freelancers, and other team members, who may be exposed to trauma in the course of their work. You may want to print these and keep them on hand.

BEFORE ASSIGNMENT IF BOXES ON THE HEALTH AND WELLBEING MATRIX ARE TICKED

- Inform of potential trauma exposure
- Explicitly name what might be involved -emotionally as well as physically
- Make realistic arrangements to keep in touch
- Encourage self-care --limiting exposure, taking breaks, getting peer support
- Discuss potential exit strategies
- Inform of what you will do to support them -create rotation plans for fatigue and trauma exposure, checking in on them, etc.
- Make sure you have the latest personal contact details -including who should be contacted first in the worst case.
- Take note of self-care experiences and practices by journalist, you can remind them of these later on if needed

SIGNS TO WATCH OUT FOR (NOT DEFINITIVE)

- Uncharacteristic behaviour
- Isolating
- Talking constantly about event
- Extremely angry / jumpy / on edge
- Guilt / shame / self-blame / extreme blame of others
- Confusion / diminished decision-making ability
- More accident-prone / risk taking
- Uncharacteristically obsessive about work
- Lack of interest / concentration
- Obvious substance use increase
- Uncharacteristically missing deadlines

SUPPORT DURING

- Keep in touch
- Ensure you listen out for any concerns on physical safety/fatigue management/distress
- Allow and encourage close contact with home and friends
- Leaders set an example in self-care – ensure you as a leader take time off and apply self care
- Be careful with the timing and pitch of any criticism or rotation. Defences will be down, and sensitivities high.
- Check in with partners and family for long-term assignments

SUPPORT AFTER

- Make contact
- Check on how people are doing
- Check practical needs - what do people need (e.g.rotation, break from trauma stories)
- Encourage peer and family support
- Normalise post-trauma reactions

SELF-CARE STRATEGIES

- Simple breathing and movement exercises while you are on assignment
- Acknowledge what you're going through or have been through
- Sleep and eat well - and take exercise
- Keep to routines where possible -an early return to work helps recovery
- Talk about it with colleagues, a partner or a trusted friend
- If you'd rather not talk, it can help to write down thoughts and feelings
- Take time for family and friends
- Take time to reflect

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