

Tragedy and Objectivism: The Impact of Trauma on Media Professionals

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Following the arrest and death of Freddie Gray in April of 2015, numerous journalists were victims of mob violence while covering the ensuing riots in Baltimore, Maryland.¹ On August 26, television news reporter Alison Parker and photojournalist Adam Ward were shot and killed by a former coworker during a live on-air segment in Roanoke, Virginia. On December 2, news outlets covered the second deadliest mass shooting in the state of California as two extremists killed and injured nearly 40 people in San Bernardino. Throughout 2015, audiences watched over and over again as traumatic incidents of mass violence saturated television, radio, print and online media. Yet, what is the impact on those who report on such incidents?

Journalists and media professionals are culturally viewed as invincible to the horrors on which they report, but repetitive exposure to others' trauma ultimately takes a lasting toll. It is not just large-scale acts of violence, either; small, intimate incidents of local violence and tragedy can affect media professionals profoundly. Professional reportage requires a closeness with the subject that the general populace is safeguarded against via computer screens and newsprint. Objectivity is the media professional's standard, but objectivity can take only so much abuse before it begins to crumble under the weight of human pain and suffering. It is critical that employers in the field take necessary steps to maintain the well-being and resilience of their workforce.

Recognizing Trauma

Culture has popularized a romanticized version of journalists as thick-skinned purveyors of truth who are largely immune to the stories they cover. They are portrayed as grizzled and sleep-deprived, drinking and smoking to excess in pursuit of editorial dictates to break the next big story. It's all part of the job, we're told; to be anything less is to appear weak and unfit for the field.

There are varying degrees of truth to this version of the media professional. Literature on the impact of trauma on employees within the field is woefully underdeveloped, in part because of the reluctance of individuals to admit mental health concerns. In an industry that has seen radical upheaval over the past 10 years - including ongoing budget cuts and the advent of online reporting - the perception holds that to be at less than 100 percent is to risk losing one's job.

¹ <http://www.poynter.org/news/mediawire/339619/journalists-attacked-and-injured-in-baltimore-riots/>

Ignoring the very real effects of trauma on media professionals is a disservice to those who put their emotional and psychological well-being on the line every time they bring authentic stories to the greater population. Mac McClelland, a journalist who wrote a book on her struggles with Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) after covering the 2010 earthquake in Haiti, told Huffington Post, "Nobody that I have ever talked to has been trained to think about their emotional wellness before they go on an assignment."²

The Dart Center for Journalism and Trauma, a resource center at the Columbia Journalism School, regularly researches and publishes on the impact of trauma on media professionals. Executive Director Bruce Shapiro issued signs and characteristics to be aware of when understanding whether or not media professionals are experiencing trauma, highlighting vicarious trauma as a conduit to affecting reporters.³ Signs of trauma include:

- Physical reactions, such as an elevated heart rate, dizziness or difficulty sleeping
- Emotional reactions, such as behavioral changes, outbursts or bouts of sobbing
- Psychological reactions, such as PTSD, frequent nightmares or substance abuse

For McClelland, she admitted understanding the signs well enough to seek counseling despite its stigma within the field. "I was a mess when I got back to San Francisco [from Haiti]. I woke up and started crying. I went immediately to a counselor's office," she told Huffington Post. "I didn't know what the problem was, but no one could have looked at me and not realized that there was some kind of serious problem."

Trauma Over Time and the Potential for Burnout

There have been studies showing that media professionals who have frequent exposure to traumatic information for short amounts of time have more pronounced physical and emotional reactions than those who deal with the traumatic on a long-term, regular basis.⁴ Even amidst claims of desensitization, constant exposure to human pain and suffering - such as within the field of war reportage, for example - can eventually prove detrimental to an individual's well-being and resiliency.

"I've been immersed in it too long. My spirit is wobbly and my mind is confused. The hurt has become too great," wrote Ernest Pyle in 1945. Pyle was a war correspondent, a Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist who would die later that same year during the Battle of Okinawa. The compounding experience of exposure to traumatic incidents over long periods of time can lead to lasting psychological issues and culminate in burnout.

² http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2015/05/26/mac-mcclelland-journalism_n_7444214.html?1432670099

³ <http://dartcenter.org/content/staying-sane-managing-stress-and-trauma-on-investigative-projects#.VhhaNivw-xU>

⁴ <http://shr.sagepub.com/content/5/8/2054270414533323.full>

As careers extend, resilience is further diminished by long hours, stressful pacing and overwork. The proliferation of online media outlets and rise in freelance reportage puts veteran media professionals at odds with their younger, content-churning peers. Not only that, but the global, digitally connected culture and 24-hour news cycle demands media professionals always be available and working.

With demand for steady work increasing in an already competitive field, the pressure is on for journalists to stay at the top of the game in an effort to make a living. Stress eats away at all aspects of life, and the need for psychological and emotional support remains strong.

Improving Well-Being and Resiliency

Counseling referrals and employer-provided options are notoriously underemphasized for those working in media. While other social-serving sectors regularly receive support for trauma through debriefings - police work, firefighting, social work, medical practice, etc. - journalists and other media professionals often move on to the next story with little or no debriefing. It does not help that media culture stigmatizes the use of such services, regarding them as symbolic of fragility.

Even so, there are ways employees can diminish the impact of their work on well-being and improve resilience. Ideas include:

- Decompressing via hobbies or exercise
- Regulating exposure to traumatic stimuli and maintaining limitations (e.g. saying no to a potentially traumatizing story)
- Getting proper amounts of sleep and sleeping regularly
- Remaining social and seeking peer support with difficult stories
- Receiving counseling, either on their own or through an employer-provided benefit

Some media outlets are attempting to provide better resiliency and counseling services for media professionals. Initiatives are being launched for trauma-education, trauma-awareness and peer support programs.

Other efforts surround current trends in workplace redesign, favoring open floorplans, accessibility to health foods and recreational activities, and allowing for more natural lighting and unconventional workspaces to foster employee wellness and engagement.

While these are steps in the right direction, more can - and must - be done. Luckily, there is already an established provider of wellness and resiliency services.

The FEI Difference

Building an inclusive benefit addressing the effects of trauma on media professionals is crucial to the ongoing resilience of reporters, freelancers, photojournalists, editors and other industry professionals. The need for such services has been acknowledged, and a growing body of research will continue to conclude that the impact of trauma on journalists requires employers to provide an effective means of treating mental and behavioral health within the sector.

FEI Behavioral Health was created to support and further the mission of its parent company, the Alliance for Strong Families and Communities, by delivering services and resources to individuals in need throughout the world. Operating since 1979, FEI is one of the largest companies offering wellness and resiliency services in the United States.

A leader in preparedness, response and recovery, FEI integrates behavioral health expertise, crisis management experience and technology to offer specialized resilience training for a multitude of industries. Our comprehensive Employee Assistance Program (EAP) utilizes a national network of Masters-level clinicians and counselors who specialize in areas such as substance abuse and trauma.

Our EAP is based on a short-term, problem resolution counseling model. Services are provided to address a wide range of concerns and each program we design for employers is built to meet the specific needs and challenges of their workforce.

FEI also provides a number of resilience resources that include Workplace Violence Prevention Training, Crisis Management, a Compliance and Ethics Hotline, and Wellness Connections Packages (providing services for physical, emotional and social well-being).

Our services will help employers within the media create the robust, comprehensive program their employees not only deserve, but require for ongoing well-being.

FEI partners with you to protect and enhance your workforce effectiveness and organizational resiliency. We offer flexible solutions for the full spectrum of your workforce resilience goals, from EAP and wellness to crisis preparedness and management. We leverage our proven resources, compassionate experts and robust network to improve your employees' focus, empower your managers and prepare you to handle the unthinkable crisis, so that you can maintain a healthy, resilient organization.