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Good Mental Health Key to Success in Traumatic Job

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**MASTERING THE ART
CAREER DEVELOPMENT**

Good mental health key to success in traumatic job

Sometimes what we do is no fun. We cover devastation, the horrors of war and tragedy simply because we must. We record history. We tell the stories of life and of death. As journalists, that's what we are called to do.

In this rough and tumble world, we are charged with being ready for anything. The wise among us carry a change of clothes in our trunks, a passport in our top drawer and a can-do spirit in our souls. We are journalists.

Sooner or later, though, we may begin to suffer psychologically or emotionally. Recent studies have shown that journalists — just like firefighters, police officers, medics and soldiers — can suffer trauma from covering intense situations.

Twenty percent of people who are exposed to traumatic events “develop clinically significant psychological problems,” according to the International Society for Traumatic Stress Studies Web site.

A study published in the American Journal of Psychiatry showed that journalists covering war are more likely to suffer from post-traumatic stress disorders than journalists not covering war. That may seem obvious. What may not be so clear is our own level of acceptance that journalists, just like other mere humans, can and do suffer stress from traumatic events. Consequently, we must take special care to

watch out for the journalists who cover devastating circumstances, both at home and abroad.

How do you know if a colleague is in trouble psychologically?

Feelings of grief, helplessness, irritability, depression and fear are not unusual for someone who has witnessed a traumatic event. Witnesses also might experience nightmares or upsetting thoughts some time after the event.

The psychiatry journal article noted that journalists covering the war drank alcohol at about two to three times the amount of nonwar journalists. If journalists are using alcohol or drugs

to self-medicate, then that could signal a problem in the making.

The Dart Center for Journalism and Trauma offers extensive information, including self-study programs, about matters related to covering and surviving traumatic events.

In covering traumatic events, the Dart Center advises journalists to take special care while interviewing people. Among the tips: Respect the person's need to regain balance, give the interviewee insight into the interview process, listen for more than the words; also notice the nonverbal communication, review what you have learned with the person, and then, think through what you have seen and heard before you sit down to write.



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ROBINSON**

RESOURCES

- The Dart Center for Journalism and Trauma, dartcenter.org.
- “Dangerous Lives: War and the Men and Women Who Report It” by Dr. Anthony Feinstein.

The Dart Center also offers these tips for coping and caring for oneself:

- **Physically:** Eat healthy foods, eat regularly, get plenty of sleep, engage in physical activity.
- **Psychologically:** Write in a journal, decrease the stress in your life, read something unrelated to work.
- **Emotionally:** Seek out the company of those you enjoy, play with children, allow yourself to cry.
- **Spiritually:** Sing, meditate, give to causes you consider important, spend time in nature, join a spiritual community.

If the above remedies don't work, seek professional help. The true badge of courage is to seek help when you need it. There's no shame in that. The only shame would be if you ignore the fact that we are humans and, therefore, not immune to tragedies of life.

Carla Kimbrough-Robinson has spent nearly 20 years in newsrooms and is a trained life coach with Inspire Higher International, LLC, a Denver-based personal development company. Send her questions at coaching@inspirehigher.net

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