

#1

#2

#3

#4

#5

#6

#7

#8

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THREE ESSENTIAL PRACTICES
FOR SAFER INTERVIEWING

**UNDERSTAND
HOW YOUR
OWN
EMOTIONAL
WELLBEING
IS PART OF
THIS TOO**

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#5

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THREE ESSENTIAL PRACTICES
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Exposure to brutality can exert an emotional toll on media professionals. Self-care is a duty that you owe to yourself – and to your sources.

Covering CRSV is emotionally draining work, which carries personal risks for media professionals often already working in dangerous and unstable environments. You may be inclined to discount your own distress because its scale feels irrelevant compared to what survivors are going through. Nevertheless, be aware that those fractional impacts can add up over time and start to become something more problematic, with potential implications for how you relate to colleagues as well as survivors.

Being pulled into making a vulnerable source undeliverable promises of future emotional or practical support is one example of what can happen when a journalist or filmmaker is becoming overwhelmed with the material. Talk issues through with others, follow a deliberate self-care strategy and be clear about what you can and cannot do in terms of helping others.

Audre Lourde, a Black American civil rights campaigner, once wrote:

Caring for myself is not self-indulgence. It is self-preservation...

Covering CRSV involves confronting some of the most disturbing things that human beings can do to others. Journalists don't tend to spend much time discussing the importance of self-care and trauma awareness, although it is a key theme for clinicians and others working with trauma.

Make no mistake – journalists and filmmakers who elect to cover these stories tend to be motivated and highly resilient individuals. But this line of work nevertheless carries elevated risks for burnout, depression, substance abuse and post-traumatic stress.^[a] Even where the impacts are less severe, the difficulty we may have in digesting the traumatic content of the work can have a knock-on effect on already vulnerable sources.

Empathy as a two-way bridge

The ability to connect empathically with others and to gauge where they are emotionally is an essential quality of being an effective interviewer. It is through empathy that we create spaces in which people feel understood and safe enough to share their experiences. It is also how we understand what matters in a story – through trying to see things from someone else's shoes.

[a] A research breakdown can be found at <https://dartcenter.org/content/covering-trauma-impact-on-journalists>.

#1

#2

#3

#4

#5

#6

#7

#8

Empathy opens up a two-way connection between interviewer and interviewee, creating a path for things to flow back and forth across the bridge. As an interviewer, you might find yourself at times taking on other people's feelings without being fully conscious of what is happening. Strong emotions like shame, helplessness and fear can all be contagious in ways that can be subtle and hard to track. It is not unusual for journalists to feel suddenly down on themselves after a harrowing interview.

Similarly, hearing or reading repeated testimony of how people are attacked or tortured can cause intrusive thoughts and images to come into one's head at unexpected times. These effects are usually short term and relatively mild and to some extent they come with the territory – but they can have mental health consequences if they build up over time and become entrenched. This phenomenon is called *vicarious* or *secondary traumatisation* and it sits alongside potential impacts from directly experiencing or witnessing violence.

Being pulled into other people's distress

There is a theory that journalists should never become emotionally involved. While that is an interesting idea, it is not how things work. It is quite likely that at some stage you will feel a strong sense of a concern and a desire to help. If that happens, it is vital that you be clear about your limits as a journalist and what you can and cannot do in terms of offering support. Boundaries can blur in unhelpful ways:

- You may feel a pull towards a less professional, more friendlike orientation. The desire to help is understandable but it is also unrealistic if you are not in a position to fulfil that role. The danger lies in building up false hopes of continuing emotional and material support which one lacks the capacity to deliver. Remember, it is easy to build up people's hopes inadvertently: with trauma, strong feelings like attachment and betrayal run just under the surface. It is perfectly possible to be fully human and act ethically without behaving as a friend.
- You may have your own experience of sexual violence. This can give you valuable insight but it can also put you in a place where your experiences get entangled with those of your source, leading you to lose sight of the other as a distinct, unique individual.
- You may fall into the trap of wanting to believe that the interview is bound to be a therapeutic, cathartic, or empowering experience for your interviewee in some way. It is true that survivors often do find solace in speaking, and it can help people make order out of a confusing and painful experience. But there is no way you can guarantee this as a media professional. In the aid community, this gets called the *saviour complex*, and it can be deeply problematic.

Difficulty in digesting one's personal reactions can take interviews off track in other ways. For example, if we become frustrated with people for not doing more to help themselves, or if we start to rank other people's suffering with only the most extreme being seen as attention-worthy.

What to do about all this?

The solution is not to give up on empathy or a sense of mission. Artificially stifling one's personal responses is not going to help. And besides, both are themselves components of resilience. Instead, think of empathy as being like a muscle that benefits from strategic resting. Time away from the work brings perspective, as well as the space to recharge and disentangle oneself from harrowing material. Reconnecting with the more positive dimensions of life is vital. Here are some things that can help:

- **Build activities into the day that allow you to distance yourself from harrowing material** (and anything that reminds you of work in general). An immersive hobby, reading a book or anything that takes your head out of the topic are all good choices. Mindfulness is another option that works for many.
- **Schedule regular breaks and rest periods.** We can digest distressing material much more effectively when we are not tired.
- **Keep the body in balance.** Exercise, stretching, breathing exercises, adequate sleep and proper nutrition are all effective ways of releasing the tightening, ratcheting effect of accumulating stress.

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#4

#5

#6

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#8

- **Talk through troubling issues with a colleague, mentor or friend.** Sometimes it is hard to see things clearly without a sounding board. If you are the colleague someone reaches out to, be a good listener rather than rushing to solve their dilemma before they have had a chance to explore it. Journaling and personal writing can also help.
- **Make contact with nature.** Many people find this particularly helpful.
- **Take a positive lessons-learned attitude to mistakes.** If things go wrong, commit to learning from accidents and poor decisions rather than repeating them.

Much of the above is about forming protective habits and not abandoning them when stresses build up. Even when you're in the field and working unpredictable hours, you can achieve some variety in your routine. Research shows that social support is probably the biggest single contributory factor to resilience.^[a] Be wary of too much isolation and any kind of excessive self-medication, be that through substances or overwork. **Balance is key.**

Managing transitions

Whether you are a local journalist or a foreigner flying in and out of a country, you may well feel that the disparity between the relative privilege of your life and the situations in which others are living makes transitions particularly difficult.

Among media professionals working on this topic, feelings of powerless (for not being able to do more to bring an end to suffering) and guilt (for being able to return home) are common. There are no easy answers to these dilemmas but you can benefit from working through them. Perhaps ask yourself this question: "Does being hard on myself for things I can't control help my sources or create work that is more relevant?" It is hard to be compassionate to others, without also being compassionate to oneself. The bleaker the topic, the more vital it is to push back and work on finding small positive things that reaffirm you. Again, talking to people who understand these issues can help.

Additional resources: self-care

The Dart Centre has a detailed guide on working with **traumatic imagery**. See too this compressed tip sheet on handling **harrowing testimony during immersive investigations** and **this discussion** on self-care between journalists and filmmakers who worked on child sexual abuse stories. As referenced in section **#1**, managers can refer to **this guide**. This **section of the website** looks at organisational issues in more detail, including the role of peer support.

Let's Talk: Personal Boundaries, Safety and Women in Journalism offers advice for female journalists on handling sexual harassment. **This tip sheet** produced by the Dart Centre for Reporters sans Frontières offers specific self-care advice for journalists working in conflict zones. Finally, because stories about sexual violence are often a magnet for trolls and other malign actors online, here are some ideas on **digital self-defence**.

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[a] See S. M. Southwick and D. S. Charney, Resilience: The Science of Mastering Life's Greatest Challenges (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), especially chapters 4, 6 and 7.