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Tragedies & Journalists

a guide for more effective coverage

Reporters, editors, photojournalists and news crews are involved in the coverage of many tragedies during their lifetimes. They range from wars to terrorist attacks to airplane crashes to natural disasters to fire to murders. All having victims. All affecting their communities. All creating lasting memories.

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September 11, 2001.
April 19, 1995.

Everyone knows what happened on the above dates. But you may remember others, too: The day of the storm that killed many people in your area; the day of the fire that killed innocent children; the day that someone murdered someone you knew.

Reporters, editors, photojournalists and news crews are involved in the coverage of many tragedies during their lifetimes. They range from wars to terrorist attacks to airplane crashes to natural disasters to fires to murders. All having victims. All affecting their communities. All creating lasting memories.

The events of April 19, 1995, and Sept. 11, 2001, are slowly beginning to change newsroom cultures. But to cover any large tragedy effectively, journalists must consider three important areas:

The victims. Their deaths or injuries create a ripple effect of grief. After the Oklahoma City bombing, Ed Kelley, then managing editor of *The Oklahoman*, told the staff that the tragedy was No. 1 a people story.

"Many of these people who died were much like us," he wrote in a newsroom memo. "They lived good and useful lives. The children who died alongside them had as much potential as well."

The community. The way journalists cover the event probably will affect how a community reacts in the aftermath of the tragedy.

Chris Peck, president of the Associated Press Managing Editors, told the APME convention on Oct. 11, 2001, in Milwaukee:

"Our newspapers helped this nation understand what had happened in New York and Washington, D.C. Our newspapers served as the common ground where citizens came to learn about a tragedy and to share their concerns, compassion and coping skills."

Peck, editor of *The Commercial Appeal* in Memphis, Tenn., added, "Our pages continue to bring communities together. Our reporters, photographers and editors possess unique and valuable skills that have helped a nation comprehend and consider complex issues and public policies."

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The journalists. No one is above having a human reaction.

Journalists face unusual challenges when covering violent or mass tragedies. They face the possibility of being a first responder to a violent event. They interact with victims dealing with extraordinary grief. Journalists who cover any "blood-and-guts" beat often build a needed and appropriate professional wall between themselves and the survivors and other witnesses they interview. But after reporters talk with people who have suffered great loss, the same wall may impede the need of journalists to react to their own exposure to tragedy.

Al Tompkins of the Poynter Institute for Media Studies wrote the following for Poynter.org on Sept. 15, 2001:

"Reporters, photojournalists, engineers, soundmen and field producers often work elbow to elbow with emergency workers. Journalists' symptoms of traumatic stress are remarkably similar to those of police officers and firefighters who work in the immediate aftermath of tragedy, yet journalists typically receive little support after they file their stories. While public-safety workers are offered debriefings and counseling after a trauma, journalists are merely assigned another story."

In the future, we know that we'll face more tragedies — more dates that will leave lasting memories for victims, communities and ourselves.

The practical tips in this booklet can help you become more effective in handling these vital areas.

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Tips for interviewing victims:

1. Always treat victims with dignity and respect — the way you want to be treated in a similar situation. Journalists will always seek to approach survivors, but they should do it with sensitivity, including knowing when and how to back off.

2. Clearly identify yourself: "I am Joe Hight with *The Oklahoman* and I am doing a story on Jessica's life." Don't be surprised if you receive a harsh reaction at first, especially from parents of child victims. However, do not respond by reacting harshly.

3. You can say you're sorry for the person's loss, but never say "I understand" or "I know how you feel." Don't be surprised, too, especially when covering acts of political violence, if a subject responds to your apology by saying, "Sorry isn't good enough." Remain respectful.

4. Don't overwhelm with the hardest questions first. Begin with questions such as, "Can you tell me about Jerry's life?" Or, "What did Jerry like to do? What were his favorite hobbies?" **Then listen!** The worst mistake a reporter can do is to talk too much.

5. Be especially careful when interviewing relatives of anyone who is missing, and try to clarify that you seek to profile their lives before they disappeared and not to write their obituaries. If you're unable to contact the victim or survivor, try calling a relative or the funeral home to request an interview or obtain comments. If you receive a harsh reaction, leave a phone number or your card and explain that the survivor can call if she or he wants to talk later. This often leads to the best stories.

Tips for writing about victims:

1. Focus on the person's life. Find out what made the person special: personality, beliefs, environment (surroundings, hobbies, family and friends), and likes and dislikes. Treat the person's life as carefully as a photographer does in framing a portrait.

2. Always be accurate. Check back with the victim or victim's representative to verify spellings of names, facts and even quotes. The reason: When you first talk to a victim, he or she may be confused or distracted. Double-checking can ensure accuracy. It also may provide you with additional information and quotes that you can use.

3. Use pertinent details that help describe victims as they lived or provide images of their lives. Example: "Johnny loved to play the guitar in the evening to entertain his family, but it also helped him escape the stress of his job as a sheriff's deputy."

4. Avoid unneeded gory details about the victims' deaths. After the Oklahoma City bombing, certain reporters chose not to reveal that body parts were dangling from the trees near the federal building. Ask yourself whether the images are pertinent or will do unnecessary harm to certain members of your readership or broadcast audience.

   Also, avoid words and terms such as "closure," "will rest in peace" or "a shocked community mourns the death." Use simple and clear words as good writers do for any story.

5. Use quotes and anecdotes from the victim's relatives and friends to describe the person's life. Especially those that tell how the person had overcome obstacles. Seek current photos of the victim (but always return them as soon as possible). This way, you know what the person looked like in life.

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Tips for covering traumatic events in your community:

1. Understand that your coverage of a traumatic event will have an impact on your readership, viewers or listeners. Remember that the tone of your coverage may reflect the tone of the community's reaction to it. Thus, you should establish policies that affect your coverage: For example, consider coverage of public memorial services for the victims, instead of private funerals. And, if you do decide to cover private services, call the funeral home to ensure that you will not intrude.

2. Write stories about the victims' lives and their effect on your community. These are short stories about the victims, their favorite hobbies, what made them special, and the ripple effect of their lives. In many cases, victims' relatives want to talk when they realize that the reporter is writing these types of stories. In 1995 after the Oklahoma City bombing, *The Oklahoman* called these stories "Profiles of Life." *The Oklahoman* also did "Profiles of Life" after the record F-5 tornado outbreak in May 1999 that killed 44 people and the plane crash in January 2000 that killed the 10 members of the Oklahoma State University basketball team and staff. After the Sep. 11, 2001, World Trade Center attack, *The New York Times* called its short stories about the victims "Portraits of Grief." *The Asbury Park Press* called its stories "In Tribute." These short stories can be published daily in a similar format until all of the victims have been featured. They sometimes lead to bigger stories, too.

3. Provide forums on what people are thinking, especially words of encouragement. Offer lists for ways people can help and how they have helped. Frank M. Ochberg, M.D., chairman emeritus of the Dart Center Executive Committee, says, "Journalists and therapists face similar challenges when they realize their subjects are at risk of further injury. Techniques may differ, but objectives are the same: to inform about sources of help."

4. Find ways people are helping, including acts of kindness, and report on them throughout the recovery process. This may provide hope for the community.

5. Constantly ask these questions: What does the public need to know and how much coverage is too much? When does a medium become infatuated with a story when the public is not? A community is much more than a mass killing or disaster. The coverage must reflect that.

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Tips for taking care of yourself:

1. Know your limits. If you've been given a troublesome assignment that you feel you cannot perform, politely express your concerns to your supervisor. Tell the supervisor that you may not be the best person for the assignment. Explain why.
2. Take breaks. A few minutes or a few hours away from the situation may help relieve your stress.
3. Find someone who is a sensitive listener. It can be an editor or a peer, but you must trust that the listener will not pass judgment on you. Perhaps it is someone who has faced a similar experience.
4. Learn how to deal with your stress. Find a hobby, exercise, attend a house of worship or, most important, spend time with your family, a significant other or friends — or all four. Try deep-breathing. The Eastern Connecticut Health Network recommends that you "take a long, slow, deep breath to the count of five, then exhale slowly to the count of five. Imagine breathing out excess tension and breathing in relaxation." All of these can be effective for your mental and physical well-being.
5. Understand that your problems may become overwhelming. Before he died in April 1945, war correspondent Ernie Pyle wrote, "I've been immersed in it too long. My spirit is wobbly and my mind is confused. The hurt has become too great." If this happens to you, seek counseling from a professional.

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Tips for photojournalists who respond to tragedies:

1. Understand that you may be the first to arrive at any scene. You may face dangerous situations and harsh reactions from law enforcement and the public. Stay calm and focused throughout. Be aware that a camera cannot prevent you from being injured. Do not hesitate to leave a scene if it becomes too dangerous. Any supervisor or editor should understand that a person's life is more important than a photo.

2. Treat every victim that you approach at a tragedy with sensitivity, dignity and respect. Do not react harshly to anyone's response to you. Politely identify yourself before requesting information.

3. You will record many bloody images during a tragedy. Ask yourself whether these are important enough for historical purposes or too graphic for your readers or viewers.

4. Do everything possible to avoid violating someone's private grieving. That doesn't mean that you shouldn't record photos of emotion at public scenes. However, do not intrude upon someone's private property or disturb victims during their grieving process.

5. Realize that you are a human being who must take care of your mind. Admit your emotions. Talk about what you witnessed to a trusted peer, friend or spouse. Write about it. Replace horrible images with positive ones. Establish a daily routine of healthful habits. Dr. Elana Newman, a licensed clinical psychologist who conducted a survey of 800 photojournalists, told the National Press Photographers Association convention: "Witnessing death and injury takes its toll, a toll that increases with exposure. The more such assignments photojournalists undertake, the more likely they are to experience psychological consequences." If your problems become overwhelming, do not hesitate to seek professional counseling.

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Tips for managing those who cover traumatic events:

1. Remember:

- Everyone in your newsroom may be affected differently. Some may be affected immediately while others will take days, weeks, months or even years to see the effect. The journalists who either claim or seem to be the most unfazed by the event may, in fact, be affected the most. Others may have developed mechanisms to help them deal with tragedy, and they may have minimal effects.

- Personal problems will exacerbate an individual's reaction. For example, a staff member who is going through a divorce may be affected more than others.

- Your staff members may show signs when they have been particularly affected. Tiredness, irritability and lashing out are three common ones, whether they occur inside or outside the newsroom. Encourage supervisors and reporters alike to listen and watch for them.

2. Appoint a person to monitor the staff's well-being who can make recommendations to you about it. After Sept. 11, 2001, two "internal staff ombudsmen" were appointed at New Jersey's *Asbury Park Press*. Elaine Silvestrini, a reporter and one of the ombudsmen, wrote that she and Carol Gorga Williams advocated for sensitive coverage and attention to the staff's personal needs. "We attended news meetings, helped get answers to questions, kept an eye out for people who were overloaded and arranged for others to be rotated in to relieve them. We also talked to people when others alerted us they might be having problems."

3. Offer individual counseling. Also, plan group meetings to explain available resources, tone of coverage, what staff members can do to help themselves and each other, and possible outlets, such as peer support. Do not expect staff members to reveal intimate details about themselves during these gatherings.

4. Provide e-mails or memos that offer encouragement, acknowledgment that their work is having an impact on the community, reminders, what day and date it is, tips to alleviate stress, and positive letters and notes from readers about their coverage. Examples after Sept. 11, 2001, include memos from William E. Schmidt, associate managing editor of *The New York Times*, and

the following excerpt from a memo by Henry Freeman, editor of *The Journal News* in White Plains, N.Y.:

"We will cover the news, and we will continue to perform at the highest journalistic levels. Our readers need us now more than ever. What we do every day — especially now — is important.

"But, it is also important that you take care of yourself. And that we take care of each other.

"Thank you for the privilege and honor of being your editor."

5. Encourage staffers to do things to help themselves. Post tips on bulletin boards and include them in memos and e-mails.

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HazMat officer Mike Hagen affirmed a 21st century reality: Police, firefighters — and now journalists — are considered among the first responders to a terrorist act.

The Los Angeles police officer said at the "Homeland Terrorism: A Primer for First-responder Journalists" conference in June 2003 that journalists usually arrive either before or immediately following police and firefighters.

That realization is probably nothing new to any experienced reporter or photographer who has been first to arrive at the scene of a violent attack. However, in today's society in which terrorism has become even more of a threat, journalists and their supervisors must be aware of possible safety and ethical issues.

"Police officers, firefighters and paramedics are equipped and trained for emergency intervention. When journalists are first responders, they face difficult decisions, the potential of physical danger and emotional risk — to others and themselves," Dr. Frank Ochberg said.

Ethical issues include the question of whether to provide aid to injured victims or help in the evacuation before emergency responders arrive. Simply doing your job and ignoring the victims' plight might be considered morally wrong by the public.

Besides the ethical issue of helping victims, reporters or photographers must consider the dangers of covering violent attacks. First responders should be aware of their safety and surroundings when they first arrive at a scene.

These risks include whether:

- The perpetrator is still in the area.
- A threat of violence continues or anything dangerous is near.
- An area is still contaminated in the event of a biological accident.
- Terrorists plan for a secondary attack.

During an address to UNESCO in Jamaica, Rodney Pinder, director of the International News Safety Institute, said journalists must be more willing to accept training to protect themselves from both physical and psychological harm.

"Many still behave like cowboys, putting themselves and their associates at risk," he said.

Supervisors also must face the responsibility of sending reporters and photographers, especially younger and inexperienced ones, into potentially dangerous situations. They should seek ways to protect their journalists and advise them of appropriate precautions.

Newsday and the *Washington Post* have bought safety equipment to help safeguard their reporters and photographers who cover dangerous situations, according to a March 2003 story by *Newsday's* James T. Madore. Also, several journalists at the "Homeland Terrorism" conference said that they had received special safety training.

Howard A. Tyner, editorial vice president of Tribune Co. publishing division, told Madore that its newspapers wouldn't force journalists to cover dangerous events and would advise them of safety precautions. Those newspapers include the *Los Angeles Times*, *Chicago Tribune* and *Newsday*.

"Remember, not only is no story worth a reporter's life, but a dead reporter isn't going to report anything," Tyner said.

Finally, and maybe most importantly, journalists and their supervisors must be aware of the psychological effects. Debriefing and even counseling may be necessary to offset the possible emotional damage caused by being a first responder.

As officer Hagen noted, today's journalists must realize that being first to a violent or terrorist attack carries significant risk — both physically and psychologically.

Chantal McLaughlin wrote the following in a case study published online by the Columbia University Graduate School of Journalism:

"The American Psychiatric Association characterizes PTSD as at least one month of recurrent and intrusive recollections of the event, emotional numbing, and avoidance of people and places that are reminders of the event. Another common symptom is hyperarousal, which may include irritability, jittery behavior, poor concentration, sleep disturbances and feeling a lack of security. Trauma survivors often become depressed and have trouble with work and family relationships. People with the disorder may not understand what is causing their symptoms and may never be diagnosed, suffering in silence, perhaps for years."

Stress is a normal reaction to extreme or prolonged exposure to violence and other human tragedies. But an exceptional thing about journalists is that we alone seem to think that we are exceptional in our reactions. Violence and its emotional aftermath affect all first responders, including police, fire and ambulance workers as well as journalists.

Reporters are no different from cops or emergency crews in that most are more comfortable opening up before peers than strangers. A coffee shop or a bar may provide colleagues with an invaluable venue in which to talk and perhaps debrief each other about the emotions of their work. Honest debriefings, however, require no showmanship, something that anthropologist Mark Pedelty, author of *War Stories: The Culture of Foreign Correspondents*, says is ingrained in journalists' "machista" culture.

Recognizing the need for a debriefing forum or the opportunity to articulate emotions in the aftermath of a school-yard massacre or the World Trade Center attacks is not a sign of weakness, as too many journalists seem to think. Instead, when done successfully, debriefing fosters strength. The act of articulation — writing, drawing, painting, talking or crying — seems to change the way a traumatic memory is stored in the brain, as if it somehow moves the memory from one part of the hard drive to another. Child survivors from Guatemala to Bosnia have begun to heal by drawing or coloring out images of attacks. Especially when the act is coupled with the opportunity to grieve, articulation often provides a release of the emotions associated with the event and leaves its author able to recall the memory in the future with less or no pain.

Journalists often accomplish the same by writing or producing a report, but there is also "stuff you can't put in the paper because it is too gruesome or too out there or whatever," said staff writer Penny Cockerell of *The Oklahoman*. "What I really needed [after the Oklahoma City bombing] was time with fellow journalists … to talk through all the things that happened." But, she added, "by the time we slowed down, everyone was so tired of the bombing that we never really got [to] have that big hashing out session."

Journalists are people who, like almost everyone else who is exposed to pain, feel it whether it is theirs or not. Keeping it bottled up may only prolong its impact and make it worse in the future. The need to articulate feelings after covering mass tragedies is obvious, and it is more likely to happen sooner rather than later if a counselor who is paid to listen is on hand. Providing professional debriefing as a service of employment benefits news employers and employees alike, as the result is usually more sensitive and compelling journalism. Journalists, including free-lancers, should seek and take advantage of opportunities for both peer and professional counseling.

The news is out. Talking it out with others works.

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Joe Hight, managing editor of *The Oklahoman*, is president of the Dart Center for Journalism & Trauma's Executive Committee. In 1995, he led the team of reporters and editors who covered victims of the Oklahoma City bombing. The *Oklahoman's* coverage won several national awards, including The Dart Award for Excellence in Reporting on Victims of Violence.

Frank Smyth is a freelance journalist and a contributor to *Crimes of War: What the Public Should Know*, edited by Roy Gutman and David Rieff. He also is the Washington representative of the New York-based Committee to Protect Journalists.

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THE INTERNATIONAL SOCIETY FOR TRAUMATIC stress STUDIES

The Dart Center for Journalism & Trauma, based at the University of Washington, is a resource center and program developer for students, educators, journalists and news organizations interested in the intersection of journalism and trauma issues. The Dart Center recognizes and encourages excellence in reporting on victims of violence and trains journalists on issues of trauma.

The International Society for Traumatic Stress Studies was founded in 1985 for professionals to share information about the effects of trauma. It is dedicated to the discovery and dissemination of knowledge about policy, program and service initiatives that seek to reduce the immediate and long-term consequences of traumatic stress.

credits

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Sources:
Associated Press Managing Editors (*apme.com*); Dart Center for Journalism & Trauma (*dartcenter.org*); Institute on Coverage of Disasters and Tragedies/Writing and Editing Better Stories About Victims, 1997; International Society for Traumatic Stress Studies annual convention, 2001; National Press Photographers Association (*nppa.org*); Michigan State University; National Writers' Workshop, Oklahoma City, 1999; and Poynter Institute for Media Studies (*poynter.org*).

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Additional Resources:

· Associated Press Managing Editors	***www.apme.com***
· Committee to Protect Journalists	***www.cpj.org***
· Dart Center for Journalism & Trauma	***www.dartcenter.org***
· International News Safety Institute	***www.newssafety.com***
· International Society for Traumatic Stress Studies	***www.istss.org***
· Kurk Schork Memorial Fund	***www.ksmfund.org***
· National Center for PTSD	***www.ncptsd.org***
· National Center for Victims of Crime	***www.ncvc.org***
· National Child Traumatic Stress Network	***www.nctsn.org***
· National Coalition Against Domestic Violence	***www.ncadv.org***
· National Press Photographers Association	***www.nppa.org***
· Poynter Institute for Media Studies	***www.poynter.org***

· Covering Violence: A Guide to Ethical Reporting About Victims & Trauma by William Coté and Roger Simpson (Columbia University Press)

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