



# JOURNALISM AND VICARIOUS TRAUMA

*A GUIDE FOR JOURNALISTS, EDITORS  
AND NEWS ORGANISATIONS*

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**FIRSTDRAFT**

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# INTRODUCTION: WORKING ON THE DIGITAL FRONTLINE

“

I see blood every day. I see bleeding bodies every day and I cannot think about this clinically or scientifically. I cannot look at cut off limbs without thinking ‘Oh my God’.

*Social Media Journalist*

One might assume this quote is from a journalist reporting from the frontline of a war zone or the scene of a man-made or natural disaster. This journalist, however, has never worked outside of the headquarters of their organisation. The experience they describe refers solely to the horrific content regularly exploding onto their computer screen via social media platforms such as YouTube, Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and even closed social messaging services such as WhatsApp or Signal. This content is referred to as eyewitness media or user-generated content (UGC). Viewing disturbing UGC that includes

unexpectedly violent and distressing images all day, every day is now a common task assigned to staff inside newsrooms which may be hundreds or thousands of miles away from where the actual horrors occur. Viewing these images can cause vicarious trauma: the journalist can experience emotions and personal responses relating to the traumatic event on their computer screen. The impact of vicarious trauma is a pathway that can lead to post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD).

The 2013 edition of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-5)<sup>1</sup> published by the American Psychiatric Association concludes that PTSD can be brought on vicariously through the viewing of video or images of a traumatic event if this viewing is work related. DSM-5 now states: ‘Experiencing repeated or extreme exposure to aversive details of the traumatic event(s)’ can lead to PTSD or PTSD-related symptoms. This ‘does not apply to exposure through electronic media, television, movies, or pictures, unless this exposure is work related.’ Feinstein et al. (2014)<sup>2</sup> built upon this conclusion, noting that ‘frequency of exposure to UGC independently and consistently predict[s] multiple indices of psychopathology, be they related to anxiety, depression, PTSD or alcohol consumption.’

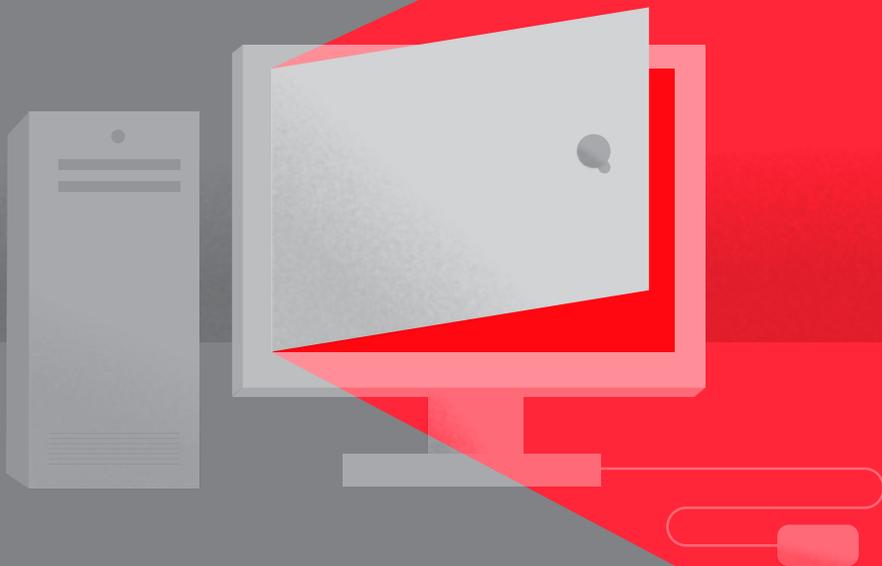
<sup>1</sup>American Psychiatric Association. (2013). *Diagnostic and statistical manual of mental disorders (5th ed.)*. Washington, DC

<sup>2</sup>Anthony Feinstein, Blair Audet and Elizabeth Waknine. *Witnessing extreme violence: a psychological study of journalists in the newsroom*. *J R Soc Med Op* 2014; 5(8)

Social media is now an integral part of the workflow of any newsroom. Journalists seek out, view, verify and edit disturbing and traumatic raw images captured by non-professionals and posted online. The workflow often involves sifting through large volumes of eyewitness media, looking at images and videos, listening to victims or eyewitnesses and watching footage over and over again, to ascertain its veracity and edit out content deemed too extreme for news audiences and consumers. The incredible and rapid growth of UGC has meant that symptoms associated with PTSD are now evident amongst staff working in headquarters who use eyewitness media to improve their reporting, operations, storytelling and investigations. Whether they work for a broadcaster, online news organisation or newspaper, the risk of PTSD caused through vicarious trauma is now a real and serious threat for the office-based journalist, as well as those actually working in the field.

The risk of vicarious trauma at work is supported by research from Eyewitness Media Hub, referred to throughout this guide. Its report, 'Making Secondary Trauma a Primary Issue: A Study of Eyewitness Media and Vicarious Trauma on the Digital Frontline', argues that the frontline worked on by today's journalist is no longer geographic but digital. Staff at an organisation's headquarters who work with eyewitness media often see more horror on a daily basis than their counterparts deployed in the field. Professionals surveyed for the research used eyewitness media frequently, regularly viewing distressing content: over half of the journalists who responded to the survey (52%) viewed distressing eyewitness media several times a week.

Just as journalists deployed to danger zones undergo hostile environment training as a matter of course, today's journalists, newsroom managers and university professors need to understand how to mitigate the impact of viewing distressing imagery. Early-career journalists need to build psychological resilience. Mid-career journalists need to look after themselves and the people they are responsible for. Senior managers need to instill a culture that allows all of these issues to be addressed.



TWO

## HOW DOES THIS GUIDE WORK?

“

It was too late when I got the advice because I had already been dealing with traumatic UGC on a regular basis. It wasn't one of those things people think about...this is very much the kind of thing where, as my job is very new, managers don't expect it to come up. They think we do fluffy internet things, but the internet isn't always full of fluffy kittens.

*Community and social editor  
for a global news organisation*

This guide has been created for individuals faced with the challenges of vicarious trauma in different ways and at different stages of their newsroom careers. We start by providing advice for journalists who are just starting off their careers, move on to those at mid-level and finally give tips for senior leaders and human resource managers. We also provide tips for journalism students and for academics putting together modules or programmes on social media journalism. We offer advice to anyone who thinks they may be suffering from the effects of viewing distressing imagery on social media and we explain the immediate steps they should take to help themselves. As well as applying the guide to themselves, we hope readers will also consider the challenges their colleagues may need to think about and overcome at different times in their careers. Clearly, there is no 'one size fits all' approach in this area of work or in mental health more generally. Each individual, manager, organisation, student or university is different so we have tried to offer a variety of resources to those asking questions about the risks associated with journalists viewing traumatic content.

Each chapter is formulated in a similar way: we outline why we think the group of people or role in question is important, what research has told us about the risks of trauma in this area and what journalists have told us. We rely on Eyewitness Media Hub's research report 'Making Secondary Trauma a Primary Issue', which maps levels of understanding of vicarious trauma and viewing distressing imagery in newsrooms globally. We also outline steps that individuals can take to counter the possibility of being exposed to vicarious trauma and to mitigate the impact of viewing distressing imagery.

We address three groups: journalists who are on the digital frontlines, management and universities.



**Journalists working on the digital frontline** includes those who are just starting their careers and have knowledge of how to verify social media. Also in this group are newsroom technical staff. We have called them 'engineers'. They deal with

archives, video servers and the introduction of new technologies into discovery or verification workflows. This group is at risk of surprise exposure to distressing UGC and their needs can be overlooked in newsrooms. But this group also needs to consider the potential for their work to expose their colleagues to additional traumatic content if the potential impact of unforeseen consequences of new tools are not considered in advance.



**Operational and organisational managers as well as Human Resource (HR) departments** are exposed to less direct traumatic content, but they have to consider its impact on the health of staff who are dealing with it on a regular basis.

This management group is often accused of 'not getting it', or 'being out of touch with newsroom advances', or 'not appreciating what we go through'. However, if it performs its role well, this group has a huge capacity to mitigate the effects of viewing distressing imagery. As one operational manager told Eyewitness Media Hub's research team, 'I like to blub [cry] by example'. This manager showed personal emotion over viewing traumatic imagery, which meant their team felt more comfortable admitting when they were having difficulty with verification tasks.



We note in this guide how many **journalism students** have graduated and gone on to jobs without any training, awareness or resilience building around how to view distressing imagery, and we suggest how

**professors** should include training on vicarious trauma into their coursework to better prepare today's journalists for what they might face on the digital frontline.

While no guide is able to cover everything, we hope that the mix of evidence-based experiences from the Eyewitness Media Hub research, and practical tips for building resilience, will help news organisations and journalists avoid vicarious trauma and the problems it can inspire.

## THREE WHAT IS VICARIOUS TRAUMA? AM I AFFECTED AND WHAT CAN I DO ABOUT IT?

If you are exposed to distressing experiences, even when you are not physically present, your brain has the capacity to experience symptoms of distress similar to those you would experience if you had been there. Our brains are wired to take steps to protect us from perceived threats to our safety. When we see something unexpected, the brain assesses what it is seeing to decide whether we are safe and secure or need to react quickly. Chemicals such as cortisol are released in the body to ready us for action. In the extreme these actions are 'fight, flight or freeze'. When experienced in everyday life, they can translate into aggression or irritability and/or avoidance or escapism, which could include alcohol and drug use or social withdrawal and depression.

Though these triggers may be relatively small, sometimes consciously imperceptible, they can produce a cumulative effect, which means the experience of vicarious trauma can build over time. Even small releases of these natural chemicals into the body can affect physical well-being.

If you have had difficult experiences in your past, these can influence and intensify your reactions to traumatic images. You might also have a reaction just from seeing something that reminds you of someone you know. Likewise, if you are experiencing stress in other aspects of your life or work, you may be more susceptible to vicarious trauma because your overall sense of safety and security is compromised.



## SIGNS TO WATCH FOR

It can be easy to discount the signs of vicarious trauma and to assume they are insignificant and temporary. They may well be temporary, but if you are regularly engaged in work that has the potential to evoke these responses, or if you have a specific troubling experience, it is important to carefully monitor your responses over time and acknowledge the impact and changes.



### PSYCHOLOGICAL SIGNS

Intrusive thoughts and images coming to mind against your will	Fear
Unrealistic expectations of yourself	Disturbed sleep or nightmares
Cynicism	Problems concentrating
Hopelessness, loss of idealism	Being easily startled
Guilt about your own survival/pleasure	Feeling numb
Anger	Feeling unable to tolerate strong emotions
Disgust	Increased sensitivity to violence



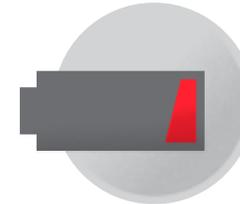
### BEHAVIOUR AND RELATIONSHIPS

Boundaries — difficulty separating work from personal life OR feeling disconnected from people even while communicating with them.

Withdrawal — from social interactions or pleasurable activities.

Moods — irritable, intolerant, agitated, impatient, needy.

Escape (or addictions) involving nicotine, alcohol, food, other substances, sex, shopping, internet.



### PHYSICAL SIGNS

Headaches	Gastrointestinal trouble
Fatigue without clear reason	Changes in appetite

## HOW CAN I PROTECT MYSELF?

Awareness is an essential first step in figuring out what you are experiencing and what you can do to care for yourself in the moment and around it. Although this might seem counter-intuitive, you need to heighten your awareness of your experience. Notice if your mood, behaviour, interactions and physical sensations or general health are shifting.

Rather than suppressing them, turn towards your feelings with friendly curiosity, so you are able to give yourself the space you need to make wise choices about your needs and any support you might want to seek.

It is important that people who are working in an environment where there is a risk of vicarious trauma make the extra effort to attend to basic self-care, in particular in balancing work, play, rest and nutrition, and to vary the work they do.

## I'M FEELING ILL EFFECTS — WHAT SHOULD I DO?

- Notice what's there and name it.
- Allow yourself time to process your experiences.
- Connect with others you trust (acknowledge and name the feelings and symptoms to them).
- 'Gallows humour' is not uncommon in newsrooms, but if you notice that a stronger cynicism is setting in, take steps to restore meaning and hope by acknowledging and connecting with your values.
- Take time out for meditation or other calming breathing-based techniques (see Section 2 below).
- Try some 'grounding' techniques (see Section 3 below).
- Experiment with attention switching. This is not the same as trying to suppress or switch off a thought or emotion, but involves switching attention between alternatives (see Section 4 below).
- As soon as you recognise that your risk of vicarious trauma has been elevated, talk to a colleague and ask them to watch for any escalation in visible signs. Let your manager know that you are at risk and talk to them if you need additional support.

## TOOLS AND TECHNIQUES FOR SELF-MANAGEMENT

### PEACE FORMULA

The PEACE Formula for resilience is an easy-to-remember model you can use to check in with yourself on a regular basis about how you are approaching things and your attitude towards yourself. It's about directly ensuring you're making wise choices about how you use your time and energy. When working with challenging material, step back to ask yourself these questions:

**PACE:** How fast am I going? Can I keep up this level of intensity? Where are the spaces for reflection and recharging?

**ENERGY:** What are my energy patterns? Am I able to organise things so I'm tackling the most challenging material when my energy and resources are higher? Am I listening to my body when my energy is lower?

**ACCEPTING...AND...ADAPTING:** If I'm having a difficult experience or am vaguely aware of problem signs, what might I need to accept that I may have been refusing to acknowledge? How could I adapt to take account of my needs so I can be more resilient in the long run?

**CHOICE:** Where can I choose to focus my attention? What can I choose to let go of (perhaps just for now)? What do I want to ask for in terms of support?

**ESTEEM:** What kind of messages am I giving myself? For example, am I giving myself a hard time for struggling with distress? Can I remind myself that I'm good at what I do and am not failing but am taking care of my overall resilience?

### BREATHING AND OTHER BRIEF MINDFULNESS-BASED TOOLS

Focusing on your breathing can help to calm and regulate your bodily reactions and give you a sense of being anchored. Ways to do this include:

7-11 breathing: breathe in to the count of seven and out to the count of eleven and repeat until you begin to feel more in control. Thereafter continue to simply follow the normal rhythm of your breath.

The three-step breathing space can be used before, during or after a difficult task or period of challenging work:

Prepare yourself by closing or lowering your eyes and noticing the contact your body makes with the floor and the chair. Notice your feet and your back and shift into a position that feels alert and dignified.

#### Step 1

Notice and name the mood you are in. Notice and name any feelings that are present. Notice and acknowledge any sensations in your body.

#### Step 2

Focus all of your attention onto your breathing. Track each breath as it enters the body, moves down into the belly and up and out of the body. Continue for a minute or so just tracking your breath.

#### Step 3

Expand your awareness to your whole body, as if you're breathing out through the pores of your skin.

To come out of the breathing space, notice once more the contact your body makes with the chair and your feet on the floor. Allow the light to begin to filter through your eyelids and gradually lift your eyelids to allow the outside world back in.

## GROUNDING

This a technique that helps to get your mind and body working together in the here and now, and is useful when you're feeling overwhelmed. Try any combination of the following: focus for five seconds on five objects you can see around you; focus on the contact your body makes with your chair and/or the floor; hold a hot or cold drink in both hands and fully feel the hot or cold temperature; smell a food or flower or other item; splash water on your face; say your name, age, where you are now and where you will be later in the day out loud; get up and walk, noticing each step; focus your attention on sounds, first those near you, then those further away and outside the room.

## ATTENTION SWITCHING

Bring to mind an image that makes you feel safe, connected or protected. Make it a conscious process as you switch between the image and the one you are struggling with. Talk to yourself as you switch! Remember this is not an exercise to block out your experience, rather to exert control over it.

Create rituals that help you consciously begin and stop work.



# I'M A JUNIOR JOURNALIST.

## WHAT SHOULD I KNOW ABOUT VICARIOUS TRAUMA?

“The other week we had a guy who filmed a murder and posted it on Twitter. It's not beyond the realms of imagination that you have young trainees straight out of university looking at this and being completely unprepared.

*Social Media Journalist*

Many new journalists entering newsrooms and assigned, in one of their first roles, to the social media newsgathering desk, are not aware they are going to be faced with a high volume of traumatic eyewitness media. While social media discovery and verification skills are starting to be part of journalism degrees at universities, the issue of vicarious trauma has not yet made its way into many of these curricula (see chapters 4.6 and 4.7)

This is backed up by Eyewitness Media Hub's 2015 research. Asked how prepared they were to see traumatic UGC before starting work on the social media desk, 37 percent of survey respondents did not think they would see traumatic UGC in their work at all, while 46 percent were not prepared, in any way, to see traumatic UGC.

In the interviews conducted for the research, several junior journalists were concerned to admit that traumatic content was problematic for them. 'I feel I can't say 'no' to looking at horrific UGC because I want to do well in my career and I can only do that if I say yes to everything,' said one journalist under 30.

Considering that 46 per cent of journalists in this survey believed that viewing traumatic eyewitness media had had a negative impact on their personal life, it is very important that the new social media journalist has an awareness of how to engage with traumatic content, how to build resilience and how to say 'I need a break'.

This chapter guides the new journalist through some of the crucial elements that should be understood to build resilience against and awareness of the impacts of vicarious trauma.



As a journalist in the early stages of your work, you are in a good position to develop positive working habits that will help you to build a sustainable and resilient career. You are part of an early generation of journalists being exposed to unfiltered user-generated content as a standard element of the job. This may not be the case for more experienced journalists and you may not have been prepared for the potential risks in your training so far. Indeed, you may need to be educating your own managers!

Read Chapter 3 (Am I affected and what can I do about it?) to get a clear sense of what you need to be watching out for and some tools and techniques for self-management. Pay particular attention to the need to achieve a balance of different kinds of work: if you feel that you have a disproportionate amount of work involving potentially distressing material, make your manager aware. Remember that vicarious trauma can build gradually — a relentless ‘diet’ of such material, even where you feel unaffected, can eventually take a heavy toll.

Partner with a colleague for informal check-ins using the list of signs and symptoms on as a guide. Looking out for the welfare of someone else also helps to enhance your awareness of your own wellbeing.

Remember that if you are struggling with the effects of distressing material, acknowledging this is not a weakness but rather a sign of being in control of your own long-term resilience as a journalist. Taking steps to manage your needs is a strength and will equip you well to manage others in the future.

Integrate the tools and techniques listed in this guide into your regular work routines.

# I'M A NEWSROOM ENGINEER

## WHAT SHOULD I KNOW ABOUT VICARIOUS TRAUMA?

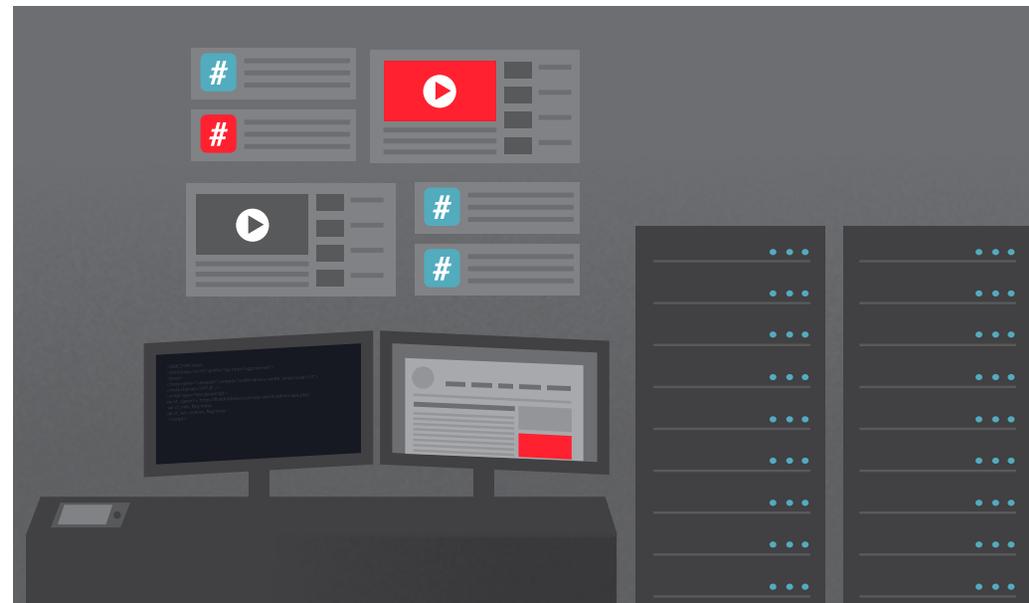
“ I now view [graphic] images every day and exposure to them increased at first as a result of events in the Middle East and the use of new tools to source images. The WhatsApp phone number in particular has increased the amount and volume of distressing images I view.

*Newsroom journalist*

Over the past decade, the specialist newsroom engineer has become an important role in many news organisations as they try to integrate the advantages brought by new technologies into their newsgathering and storytelling. Newsrooms can now source UGC as events happen, they can ingest and publish in clicks, they can archive previously unimaginable volumes of content. The newsroom engineer's role is to troubleshoot these technologies, but also to evaluate and integrate new

ones as they come along. As a 'behind the scenes' role, however, it is often overlooked when it comes to vicarious trauma. Engineers aren't newsgathering, they aren't verifying or interacting with the audience. However, they are integral to every image or video that passes through the newsroom.

Engineers need to be aware of their own exposure to traumatic content. In Eyewitness Media Hub's research, one of the main factors that increased the trauma of viewing distressing imagery was surprise. If someone wasn't prepared to see a piece of distressing UGC, they were more likely to find it traumatic. For example, the engineer may be tasked with ensuring digital archives are well maintained. There is therefore a risk that they could view very distressing content without any warning or preparation.



## TIPS FOR INTRODUCING NEW TECHNOLOGIES TO THE NEWSROOM

One television news editor pointed out this risk: 'We don't have a consistent method in place for making sure that people don't watch video that's going on to the server. At the moment, it's ad hoc — if I put something on the server, I send out an internal mail saying please don't watch it unless you absolutely have to. If I'm not in, I don't think that gets done.' It is important that newsroom engineers are able to protect themselves from viewing distressing imagery.

Newsroom engineers also need to be aware of vicarious trauma because they often lead the teams that assess and rollout new technologies in the newsroom. The introduction of WhatsApp into newsgathering in one newsroom, for instance, brought unforeseen challenges. One journalist noted: 'our current challenge is WhatsApp web because there's no way to stop it coming up in a way that means it's filling your screen'. The newsroom engineer needs to be aware that new technologies can also bring with them new challenges that can affect the journalist responsible for social media newsgathering.



Always evaluate new technologies with the potential for surprise viewing of distressing content in mind. In your evaluation, ask questions like are there auto download or auto play features that could exacerbate the element of surprise? Can these features be switched off?



Build workflows that warn all newsroom stakeholders of the potential for surprising or shocking content. Think about everybody that could be involved in viewing the file and how they can be protected.



Familiarise yourself with the effects of viewing distressing material and how those effects are triggered (see chapter 4.1) Even if you are unlikely to be viewing it yourself, there may be occasions when you do, so watch for the signs that you too have been affected. Be aware that surprise can exacerbate the distress of viewing violent or upsetting images. Notice in particular if the image is intruding into your thoughts randomly after the event. If this continues to happen, you may need to talk it over with a colleague.

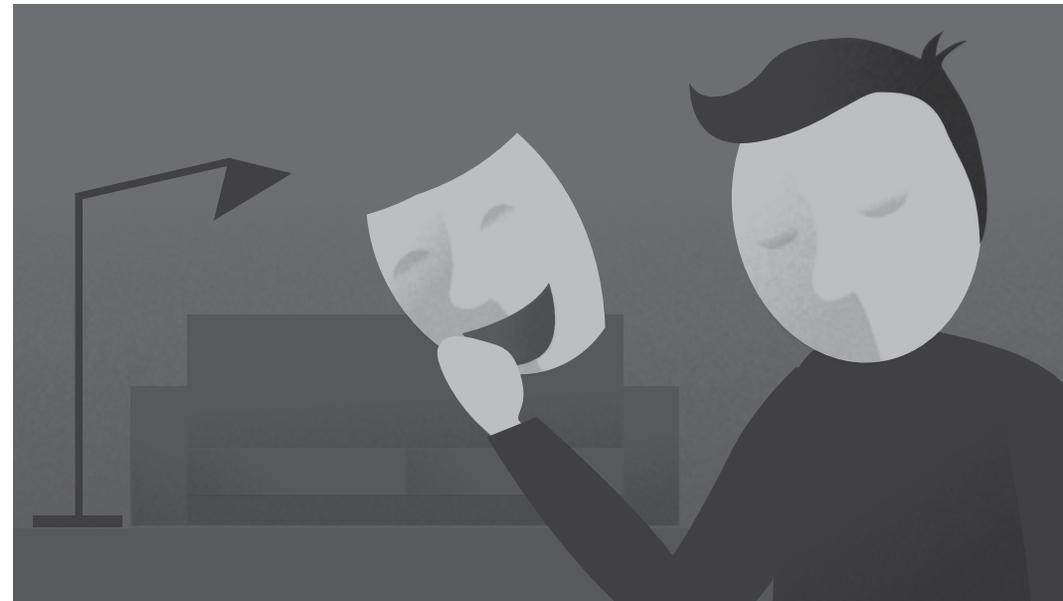
# I'M A MID-CAREER JOURNALIST

## WHAT SHOULD I KNOW ABOUT VICARIOUS TRAUMA?

“20 years ago, we’d have maybe two edits from the Hungarian border because of the cost of doing feeds, and it would have been packaged on the ground, you’d get broadcastable packages. Now everything just comes in, we can bring in all this material and go live as it happens, so that filter has disappeared. For the past three years, it’s only when you receive the material that you say ‘oh, there’s half a body part’.

*Journalist for a news agency*

In research by the Tow Center for Digital Journalism published in 2014, some mid-career journalists were sceptical about the impact of vicarious trauma and UGC. One senior editor said: ‘I’ve been watching graphic footage since 1988. I don’t think there’s any difference’. 18 months later, Eyewitness Media Hub’s research into vicarious trauma noted a shift. Mid-career journalists — for instance senior editors or correspondents — had started to see an impact. These journalists are likely to be among those who saw UGC introduced into newsrooms and have experienced the shift from the edited package received from agencies to social media coming in from everywhere.



As a mid-career journalist, you may be somewhat removed from the day-to-day viewing and processing of UGC. You may also feel that you have 'seen it all' and are hardened to the sight of distressing material. These two factors can, in fact, combine to create the potential for unexpected vicarious trauma. Firstly, the impact of distressing images can be greater when they come outside of a routine. The shock is greater and you may not have the self-protective measures in place as described in the section for the junior journalist. Secondly, you may be more prone to suppressing your experience because you feel you 'should' be able to handle it. In particular, you may find yourself adopting exaggerated cynicism. Check yourself for avoidant behaviours such as withdrawing from others or excessive drinking, irritability, sleeplessness and/or intrusive thoughts and images.

Remember that your teams are more likely to be productive and appreciate you as a team leader or mentor if you are aware of the challenges they may face. One junior journalist noted in the Eyewitness Media Hub research: 'This is the nicest newsroom I have been in. Other organisations I worked for made me feel it would be a sign of weakness to admit I wasn't coping. I feel totally comfortable talking to our boss'. Make a point of checking in with your team or junior colleagues if some particularly distressing content is being verified in the newsroom. Talk about how you find it distressing and create an atmosphere where junior colleagues can talk about it, too.

As a mid-career journalist, you should develop your ability to heighten your awareness of the process and symptoms of stress, in order to support others as both a colleague and as a team leader, now or in the future. This begins with yourself. Practise noticing your own physical, emotional and behavioural responses to stress triggers. Familiarising yourself with the signs listed in chapter 3 will help.

# I'M A SENIOR MANAGER

WHAT SHOULD I KNOW ABOUT  
VICARIOUS TRAUMA?

“Nobody even thinks about hostile environment training anymore, and I want to be in a position where trauma awareness is just part of what we do, and part of good practice. That, as a manager, trauma awareness is something you should look out for, is where we want to get to.

*Senior Manager, International Broadcaster*

Eyewitness Media Hub's study into vicarious trauma and journalists highlighted that senior managers do not see as much traumatic content as the rest of the newsroom. When asked about frequency, 58% of journalists responding to the research survey said they saw traumatic contents several times per week; this dropped to 45% for senior managers. While the senior manager certainly needs to know how to build their own resilience, their role is also linked to ensuring that the news organisation is aware of and prepared for the impacts of viewing distressing UGC. While this may seem obvious to many, it's not necessarily the prevailing attitude. One director who participated in the Eyewitness Media Hub research said: 'I heard a very senior manager say: 'if I hear one more word about secondary trauma, I'll be sick. It doesn't exist and if people can't deal with this stuff then they just need to get out.' While this attitude is thankfully not universal, it shows the need to emphasise the role of the senior manager in building a culture in which the potential for vicarious trauma is acknowledged and staff across the organisation feel able to raise their issues and address their problems.

One editor-in-chief told Eyewitness Media Hub: 'the extraordinary levels of violence that people are shooting on their phones is now quite universal and quite a few people have found this hard to deal with — especially those who have never gone to these places and seen that sort of thing.' Mental health remains a taboo subject in many workplaces. The senior manager is in a position of leadership and can work to ensure that this taboo disappears.



The senior manager needs to build systems into their newsroom to help people affected by viewing distressing imagery and to instill a culture of openness that allows it to be discussed.

### HERE ARE SOME TIPS

1. Ensure psychoeducation is part of your standard training practices. Most news organisations today have hostile environments training. Ensure that, alongside this, you have resilience training for everyone working in your newsroom who could come across traumatic news content.
2. Develop a culture in which mental health is considered as important as physical health.
3. Spread this culture to middle managers and mid-career journalists.
4. Ensure that all new hires are aware of the possible traumatic impact of viewing distressing imagery — raise the issue in job interviews and induction processes.
5. Talk one-to-one and in groups to your staff about how they feel after covering particularly harrowing stories.

As a senior manager, you need to have the expectation that staff will be exposed to distressing material and to be continually and actively managing systems to deal with the effects if they arise, just as you would with any other environmental risk to health. Journalists need to know they can come to you if they are experiencing vicarious trauma. You do not want employees to wait until they are at a crisis point before they approach you. There are four key elements to your role:

### POLICY DEVELOPMENT

Refer to chapter 5 on Traumatic Stress Management (TSM) policy and work with HR support to develop an appropriate policy as part of your overall Health and Safety framework.

### PREVENTION

Vicarious trauma can build over time, and if exposure to distressing material is relentless, the risks increase. Ensure that this type of work is balanced with alternatives. Ensure that employees have been briefed on what vicarious trauma is and how to look after themselves. Consider offering specialist training workshops.

### AWARENESS

As a manager, you need to develop a heightened awareness of the signs and symptoms of vicarious trauma as they begin to manifest. Make sure you know what to look for (see the Signs to Watch for in Chapter 3) but also practice stress awareness on yourself.

## SUPPORT SYSTEMS

It is normal for people to have an emotional response to distress. It's only when that response is not processed effectively that the potential to develop acute stress is activated.

Admitting to being affected by vicarious trauma can carry stigma unless you, the senior manager, make it clear that it is acceptable and important for people to come forward when they need support.

The first step is to normalise the act of seeking support. One of the best ways to do this is to create a 'buddy system'. Ideally, set this in motion with an introductory workshop on vicarious trauma, followed by pairing the participants up so they all have someone they can regularly check in with about any difficulties they are experiencing.

Allow people to set aside time during the working day for these short sessions, which can be self-scheduled. These buddy system relationships serve two functions: they can prevent the escalation of a problem by providing a space for processing, and they can give someone the courage to report their problem to you for more help.

## WHEN TO REFER FOR MEDICAL HELP

Below is a list of symptoms to ask about to the person you manage. Everyone may experience these things from time to time, but you will need to refer for professional medical help when they are severe and/or persistent:

1. Recurring intrusive thoughts and images coming to mind against a person's will
2. Upsetting dreams
3. Bodily reactions (such as fast heartbeat, stomach churning, sweatiness, dizziness) when recalling the material
4. Sustained difficulty falling asleep
5. Irritability or outbursts of anger
6. Difficulty concentrating
7. Being easily startled
8. Reporting or showing symptoms of dissociation (e.g. someone feeling as if they or the world is not real, things seeming to move in slow motion)

# I WORK IN HUMAN RESOURCES IN A NEWS ORGANISATION

WHAT SHOULD I KNOW ABOUT VICARIOUS TRAUMA?

“ I don't think there is a good support mechanism to handle people who experience vicarious trauma. My direct manager is very good. But if you go higher up, the further they're removed from the newsroom the harder it is for them to understand.

*Editor at an international news agency*

There is a feeling among journalists that human resource (HR) departments do not understand what people do on the 'shop floor', that plans put in place to combat any form of trauma in the newsroom, not just vicarious trauma, are put in place to tick a box, not to actually help staff working in traumatic environments. It is hard for senior managers to crack this perception — managers who have often worked on the newsroom floor at some stage in their career — so it is even harder for HR managers who usually have no journalistic experience.

An important finding of the Eyewitness Media Hub survey is that journalists who admitted to being traumatised in some way by seeing distressing content were less likely to feel happy speaking to their manager or their organisation's hierarchy. Thirty percent of journalists surveyed who felt that viewing distressing content had impacted on their professional lives said they would feel comfortable speaking to their manager. Sixty-one percent of journalists who did not feel that viewing traumatic content had affected them felt comfortable speaking to their manager.

One of the main reasons journalists felt they could not speak to their managers was because they thought they would not get the chance to work on what they saw as interesting projects. One journalist said: 'one person, it really got to them, looking at the constant bombings from Syria, kids maimed and injured, they'd probably clicked on too many grim things, and they couldn't move from their desk. One of the things was that they didn't want management



to know because they thought that would be it, that they would never be given the opportunity again.' This was reiterated by a senior manager responsible for trauma care in a large newsroom: 'one [challenge] is the idea of 'will it have an impact on my career?' because it doesn't have an impact on your career, but people think it will, so just breaking that notion is important. It rather depends on who your manager is. There's lots we can do about that, but it's quite deeply embedded.'

Understanding these challenges is important if human resources departments are to take the right steps toward supporting the managers and the staff and overcoming these barriers.

## HERE ARE SOME SUGGESTED STEPS

- Work with senior management to develop a traumatic stress policy as part of your health and safety procedure (see Policy Development).
- Designate one or two people within your HR team to have special responsibility for handling vicarious trauma referrals. Ensure that the designated people have a good understanding of how vicarious trauma evolves and the kind of work being undertaken in the organisation that carries with it a risk of vicarious trauma. Make sure they are visible and accessible within the organisation/newsroom in this role.
- HR can take the lead in setting up and supervising a 'buddy system' through which journalists working with distressing material are partnered with each other for informal check-ins. Provide them with the checklist of signs and symptoms.
- Consider commissioning workshop training to familiarise journalists with the risks of vicarious trauma and use these as a starting point to create the buddy system/network.
- Ensure that any counseling or Employee Assistance Programme has the specialist resources available to respond to referrals for vicarious trauma.

# I'M A STUDENT ON A JOURNALISM PROGRAMME.

## WHAT SHOULD I KNOW ABOUT VICARIOUS TRAUMA?

“ I did a Masters in online journalism. We just didn't mention traumatic content. Definitely now it should be considered just because of the sheer quantity of content out there and the fact that every journalist is going to be exposed to it.

*Digital news editor for  
an international broadcaster*

Your journalism degree or professional qualification provides you with good knowledge about what your chosen professional environment might look like, what skills you need to develop and what challenges you may face. If your chosen path is social media journalism, the risk of vicarious trauma is one of the potential challenges. As noted above, the Eyewitness Media Hub research survey asked journalists how aware and prepared they were to see traumatic UGC before starting work on the

social media desk; 37% did not think they would see traumatic UGC in their work at all. However, 58% of journalists responding to the survey see distressing images more than one time each week. In the course of your studies, you might also be asked to find or verify content that could depict traumatic events.

You should be aware that vicarious trauma exists and that it is a phenomenon from which you can and should protect yourself. Be aware that potential employers may not have procedures in place to help their staff to protect themselves from the risk of vicarious trauma through viewing distressing content (see Chapter 2). Start protecting yourself now in the work that you do now as a student. We also recommend you read chapter 3.1 of this guide, 'I'm a junior journalist. What should I know about vicarious trauma?', which outlines the challenges you may come across in the near future and how you might tackle them.

As a journalism student, there are two things to watch out for that can make you susceptible to vicarious trauma. Firstly, if distressing material is not something you are specifically working with, then there is the potential for you to have a significant reaction if you see something disturbing unexpectedly. Secondly, whether you are working with material in large quantities or not, it is likely that much of your research time will be spent in isolation, which can intensify the distress.

Your research may be inspired by a sense of purpose, for example around issues of injustice. But repeated exposure to disturbing content can lead to compassion fatigue, in which your personal sense of efficacy feels undermined, leading to negative beliefs about yourself. The intensity of these feelings can be heightened precisely because of the strength of compassion you felt in the beginning. These heightened feelings can lead to burnout where you feel overwhelmed and perhaps want to give up, or vicarious trauma, in which you experience your own sense of fear.

#### How can you protect yourself?

- Consider in advance whether what you are researching means you might come across distressing material. Follow the self-care guidelines set out in chapter 4.1.
- Make sure you have a support system in place, especially if distressing material is at the heart of your research. If you can, partner with someone who is doing, or has done, similar research and schedule check-in calls. Be sure to pace yourself so that distressing work is alternated with more hopeful and pleasant experiences.
- Pay careful attention to the pace of your work. Plan for respite spaces in and around any period that will require you to work with distressing material.
- Think about your working environment and try to avoid long periods of isolation.
- Reconnect with your purpose and values.



# I TEACH JOURNALISM.

WHAT SHOULD I KNOW ABOUT  
VICARIOUS TRAUMA?

“ I did a Masters in journalism. There was very little, if any, training around social media, let alone verifying, sourcing and looking at this kind of [distressing] content. That was the formal part of my education, that was when you would expect to get some training in this area.

*Newsroom social media manager*

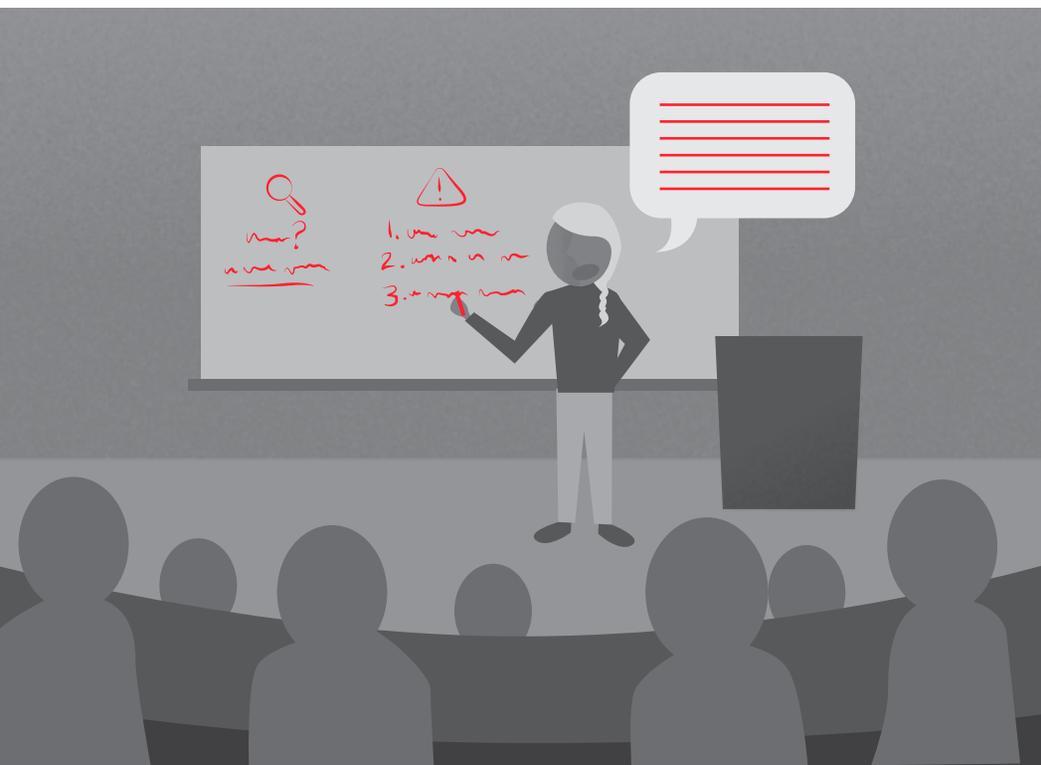
Increasingly, as the skills required are demanded more and more by students, universities and training institutions are offering social media discovery and verification modules in journalism courses. They teach the skills required to find content on social media platforms and the steps that need to be taken to verify and check if something truly is what it purports to be. However, they lag behind when it comes to building awareness of the risks of viewing distressing content on the job. The need for this element to be part of university training is exemplified by this comment to Eyewitness Media Hub made by the editor-in-chief of a major broadcaster: ‘you need to train people about traumatic footage — it can’t be just a few hours — but you need a case study. Before they may see something horrible sitting at their desk, people should know they might be exposed to it.’

How can the next generation of journalists be truly prepared if they are not given all of the information? As the editor-in-chief above notes, people need to think about what they are getting into on the job. Hard news is not for everyone. University programmes have an obligation to be transparent in showing students that, if they are thinking of using social media in their reporting, they may have to watch and listen to very distressing material. They also have an obligation to help students build resilience and protect themselves.

An academic institution is in a unique position to be able to introduce the concept of the resilient journalist and to define resilience in terms that run counter to the notion that it involves being 'hardened' or even cynical. Resilience is about the ability to bend with the strain, to be flexible, to adapt and thus to regain shape over time.

The image of the big tree destroyed in a storm can be useful: it has no flexibility to bend with the wind, while a smaller tree with a flexible trunk has a better chance of survival, especially if its roots are well-nourished.

As you equip your students with the tools of the trade, be sure to emphasise that resilience in the face of distress is a key feature of a sustainable career in news.



A basic understanding of how vicarious trauma can be activated should be built into the teaching elements of the programme, which should include an explanation of how the unexpected gives rise to a need to protect oneself from danger and how vicarious trauma can build over time as the result of an accumulation of repeated provocations.

Include information about the signs and symptoms of vicarious distress and trauma and how to heighten awareness of these signs in oneself and in colleagues. Name the unhelpful and often unconscious coping mechanisms we may employ to alleviate the impact of distress and encourage students to learn to look for these signs in themselves and in others — looking beyond, for example, a colleague's irritability or drinking pattern for underlying causes. Introduce tools and techniques for self-care, such as the PEACE formula, and consider offering speciality workshops. The 'buddy system', in which journalists partner with someone for informal check-ins about experiences that might be affecting overall resilience is a great way to operationalise the personal resilience toolkit. Where better to start this lifelong career habit than at journalism school?

Be sure to brief the counseling service at your institution on the particular issues that journalism students may encounter. Be sure to provide a list of services for onward referral, training and support.

Finally, no matter how experienced you are, take time to enhance your own awareness levels by monitoring your own experience and making adjustments that strengthen your own resilience.

## FIVE

# TRAUMATIC STRESS MANAGEMENT IN ORGANISATIONS

The UK Psychological Trauma Society, in association with the European Society for Traumatic Stress Studies, has recently published some guidance on how to develop a traumatic stress management (TSM) policy for any organisations that has staff who work in high-risk environments. Such a policy should form part of an overall Health and Safety framework. To summarise the guidance, this policy should include the following:

- The opportunity for staff to reflect on their suitability and preparedness for work that may involve being confronted by distressing material.
- Preparation and training of staff aimed at promoting resilience and self-care, information about the organisation's traumatic stress management policy and guidance on how to support the mental health of colleagues.

- Incorporation of trauma awareness into management, leadership and team training.
- A clear approach to the timely provision of mental health care for staff when the need arises. Only interventions that are consistent with medically approved guidelines (e.g. the UK's National Institute for Health and Care Excellence) should be supported.

More information is available in the Society's full guidelines: <http://ukpts.co.uk/site/assets/UKPTS-Guidance-Document-120614.pdf>

## RESOURCES

### The Dart Center

The Dart Center for Journalism and Trauma provides journalists with the resources to work with traumatic material, drawing on interdisciplinary network of news professionals, mental health experts, educators and researchers.

[dartcenter.org/content/working-with-traumatic-imagery](https://dartcenter.org/content/working-with-traumatic-imagery)

Dart recently released the guide, “Developing Your Own Standard Operating Procedure for Handling Traumatic Imagery.” [dartcenter.org/resources/developing-your-own-standard-operating-procedure-handling-traumatic-imagery](https://dartcenter.org/resources/developing-your-own-standard-operating-procedure-handling-traumatic-imagery)

### Health and Safety Executive

UK-based organisation with the mission to prevent death, injury and ill health in the workplace.

[hse.gov.uk/stress/standards/index.htm](https://hse.gov.uk/stress/standards/index.htm)

### March on Stress

A psychological health consultancy specialising in trauma- and stress-related organisational needs.

[marchonstress.com](https://marchonstress.com)

### Mindfulness Information

A website that describes what mindfulness is, and its uses including in universities, in the workplace and for executives.

[mindfulnet.org](https://mindfulnet.org)

### Rising Minds

Webinars and experiential workshops on tools and techniques to manage secondary stress and trauma.

[risingminds.org.uk](https://risingminds.org.uk)

### UK Psychological Trauma Society

Provides a forum for multi-disciplinary professionals working in the field of psychotrauma to share ideas and knowledge relevant to their work in the field.

[ukpts.co.uk/links.html](https://ukpts.co.uk/links.html)

## ABOUT THE AUTHORS



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Michele Grant is a Director of Rising Minds, a social enterprise company specialising in resilience coaching and training for individuals and organisations. She spent 22 years in BBC News including nine years based in the Washington DC Bureau where she oversaw the launch of BBC News services for the US market. She moved into interpersonal work in 2010. She is an ICF Accredited Coach and holds a teaching certificate in mindfulness-based cognitive therapy from the Oxford Mindfulness Centre, part of the University of Oxford Department of Psychiatry. She is also trained in the TRiM protocol (trauma risk in management).



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Sam Dubberley is a cofounder of Eyewitness Media Hub and manager of the Digital Verification Corps at Amnesty International. He has more than 10 years experience in broadcast news and was head of the Eurovision News Exchange from 2010 to 2013, managing the world's largest exchange of television news content. As a fellow at the Tow Center for Digital Journalism at Columbia University, Sam coauthored a global study exploring the use of user-generated content in TV and online news. He also led research on Eyewitness Media Hub's most recent project 'Making Secondary Trauma a Primary Issue: A Study of Eyewitness Media and Vicarious Trauma on the Digital Frontline'.

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