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Neil Greenberg ^a; Matthew Gould ^b; Vicky Langston ^a; Mark Brayne ^c

^a Academic Centre for Defence Mental Health, Weston Education Centre, London ^b DCMH, HM Naval Base, Portsmouth ^c Dart Centre for Journalism and Trauma (Europe), London, UK

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Journalists' and media professionals' attitudes to PTSD and help-seeking: A descriptive study

NEIL GREENBERG¹, MATTHEW GOULD², VICKY LANGSTON¹, & MARK BRAYNE³

¹Academic Centre for Defence Mental Health, Weston Education Centre, London, ²DCMH, HM Naval Base, Portsmouth, and ³Dart Centre for Journalism and Trauma (Europe), London, UK

Abstract

Background: Journalists may be at risk of developing mental health problems including post traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) as a result of their work. Furthermore the literature suggests there may be a "culture of silence" within the profession.

Aim: To investigate journalists' attitudes towards PTSD and help-seeking.

Method: Media professionals, from an international news organization, completed a short self-report questionnaire before attending a 1-day trauma-awareness course. This enquired about the acceptability of various sources of help and the perceived role of immediate supervisors in relation to dealing with trauma-related problems. Participants were also asked about their views regarding help-seeking and PTSD.

Results: The sample ($N=124$) were mostly male (64%), worked in news production (75%) and the majority were managers. Most were aged between 35–44 years (50%) and had been employed by the organization for longer than 10 years (66%). Respondents were more likely to turn to family members than managers or colleagues for support after traumatic incidents. Furthermore although respondents held relatively non-stigmatizing attitudes about PTSD, they were less positive about seeking organizational help for trauma-related problems.

Conclusions: We conclude that news organizations should encourage distressed staff to seek help and ensure managers are equipped to deal appropriately with distressed employees.

Keywords: Attitudes, help-seeking, journalism, PTSD, mental health

Introduction

Journalism is a hazardous profession. Research shows that many journalists are very likely to be exposed to traumatic work-related events (Newman, Simpson, & Handschuh, 2003; Teegen & Grotwinkel, 2001). However, there is as yet limited research on the psychological health of this population. Feinstein, Owen and Blair's (2002) seminal work on the psychopathology of war reporters found a lifetime prevalence of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) of 28.6%, 21.4% for major depression and 14.3% for substance abuse. Similarly, McMahon (2001) found significant re-experiencing and avoidance symptoms and symptoms of depression in print media journalists who had reported on traumatic events. Despite journalists being at risk of developing a range of mental health problems, to the

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authors' knowledge no research exists on attitudes to mental illness and help-seeking in this group. Indeed, Feinstein et al. (2002) found that war journalists were not significantly more likely to have received help (e.g., medication, psychotherapy) than their colleagues who carry out less risky occupational activities. It is perhaps not surprising therefore that Feinstein et al. (2002) ask whether there is a "culture of silence" regarding these problems. They note that, until recently, the discussion of psychological distress amongst journalists was discouraged: "an admission of emotional distress in a macho world was feared as a sign of weakness and a career liability" (p.1574). Stigmatizing attitudes to mental illness and help-seeking have been well documented in other professions, for example, the military (Gould, Greenberg, & Hetherington, 2007). The aim of the current study was to explore journalists' and colleagues' attitudes to PTSD and seeking help.

Method

Brief self-report questionnaires were administered to 124 employees of managerial grade, working at an international news organization between August 2005 and May 2006 who had voluntarily agreed to attend a course about the management of traumatic stress in the workplace. Those attending the course were a non random, but otherwise representative sample of personnel who routinely managed teams of newsgathering journalistic personnel. Prior to the start of the course, anonymous questionnaires were distributed for course participants to voluntarily fill in. To ensure confidentiality, basic demographic data was only provided separately to the researchers by the organization. No names or personal identifiers were collected. Participants were asked about potential sources of help and the perceived role of their immediate supervisor in relation to dealing with trauma-related problems. Both questions were based upon questionnaires that had been used previously in military samples (Greenberg et al., 2003). The exact wording of the questions is shown in Table I. Statements were scored using a 5-point Likert scale from 1 (strongly agree) to 5 (strongly disagree) where 3 indicated a neutral response; where appropriate answers were recoded with scores of 1 and 2 indicating agreement to a statement and other scores indicating dissent. In addition, participants completed the Attitudes to PTSD Schedule and the Help-Seeking Stigma Questionnaire. The Attitudes to PTSD Schedule, developed and used by the UK Royal Navy, addresses attitudes towards PTSD (e.g., "people who experience PTSD are weak"). Each of the seven statements was scored using a 5-point Likert scale; two statements were reverse-scored. In this instance a higher total score (maximum = 35) indicated a more favourable attitude. The Help-Seeking Stigma questionnaire has six stigma statements (e.g., "I would be perceived as weak") scored using the above Likert scale. A higher score (maximum = 30) indicated a more favourable attitude. In our previous research, we found these measures to be reliable within a military population (Gould et al., 2007).

Demographic data was obtained directly from the journalistic organization and pertained to the whole group of course attendees. For anonymity reasons it was not possible to link an individual's answers with their demographic data. Data were analysed using SPSS (Version 12).

Results

All course attendees completed a questionnaire. Demographic characteristics are reported in Table II. Ninety-three (75%) participants reported serving in news production/management; 17 (14%) in technical support, 12 (9%) in operational support and 2 (2%)

Table I. Journalists' and media professionals' attitudes to help-seeking and PTSD.

Q. "If you were feeling the effects of having been exposed to a traumatic event (e.g., disturbed sleep, usually irritable or recurrent distressing memories of the unpleasant event for more than 2 weeks) how likely would you be to initially approach the following for help and or advice?"		
	M	SD
Family member	1.75	1.03
Friend (outside work)	2.29	1.07
Colleague	2.48	1.01
Doctor	2.90	1.01
Senior Manager	3.02	0.95
Therapist	3.36	0.84
Junior Manager	3.51	0.87
EAP	3.57	0.89
Religious figure	3.96	0.46
Key to the above: 1 – very likely; 2 – somewhat likely; 3 – a little likely; 4 – not likely at all		
Q. "What should be the main role of your immediate line manager in relation to dealing with trauma-related problems?"		
	%	n
Offer support	97	120
Monitor and advise as appropriate	92	114
Refer on for specialist help	69	86
Give you time off work	37	46
Inform a senior colleague	27	34
To be forceful & tell you to get on with it	1	1
To do nothing	1	1

Table II. Characteristics of the sample.

	N	(%)
Gender		
Male	79	(64)
Female	45	(36)
Age in years		
16–24	0	(0)
25–34	18	(15)
35–44	62	(50)
45–54	40	(32)
55+	4	(3)
Years of service		
< 1	3	(2)
2–5	15	(12)
6–9	24	(20)
10+	82	(66)
Occupational role		
Technical support*	17	(14)
Management	2	(2)
Operational support**	12	(9)
News production	93	(75)

*Including camera operators, soundmen and picture editors.

**Including safety and security advisors, logistical support and communications specialists.

in management. Seventy-nine (64%) were male and 45 (36%) female. The most common age range was 35–44 years (50%) and most had served for longer than 10 years with the newsgathering organization (66%). Attitudinal responses are reported in Table I. Results showed that family members were most often approached for support. Furthermore respondents believed that the role of their immediate supervisor was to offer support in relation to dealing with a traumatic incident. Attitudes to PTSD were relatively favourable (score of 25.1, SD 2.37) whilst attitudes to seeking help were more neutral (score of 19.6, sd 3.96) (Table III).

Discussion

This paper describes journalists' and colleagues' attitudes to PTSD and help-seeking. The two main findings are that respondents were most likely to turn to family members for help, rather than their employers, and that although they held relatively non-stigmatizing attitudes about PTSD they were more ambivalent about seeking formal help (managerial assistance or work sponsored therapeutic) from their organization for their own trauma-related problems.

The main strength of this study is that it provides insight into the attitudes of a profession that has previously been identified as being at high risk of developing mental health difficulties, but on which there is currently little data to guide organizational initiatives which might seek to support them in times of distress. More detailed demographic information (for example, incidents of exposure to traumatic events, previous experiences of help-seeking) and a measure of contemporary mental health would have been useful to characterize the sample and enable comparisons; however to analyse such data it would have been necessary to gain consent from participants to do so. However 86% of respondents had been employed

Table III. Attitudes to help seeking and PTSD responses.

<i>Please indicate your level of agreement with the following statements which relate to seeking support about the effects of being exposed to a traumatic event within your news organization</i>		
	Agree % (n)*	Disagree % (n)
I would be perceived as weak by my managers	15 (18)	55 (67)
It would adversely affect my promotion prospects	23 (28)	48 (59)
I would be less likely to be given roles/tasks of responsibility	38 (47)	26 (32)
I would not be trusted by my peers when faced with stressful situations	41 (50)	33 (40)
I would be embarrassed by asking for help	33 (41)	37 (45)
My peers would find out and treat me badly or cause problems	6 (7)	79 (95)
<i>Please indicate your level of agreement with the following statements, all of which relate to stress</i>		
	Agree % (n)	Disagree % (n)
People who experience trauma-related problems are weak	3 (4)	95 (117)
My news organization places too much emphasis on traumatic stress	2 (3)	69 (85)
It is acceptable to suffer from trauma-related problems when in a high stress situation or environment	70 (87)	16 (20)
It is acceptable to suffer from trauma-related problems in the workplace	23 (28)	48 (59)
My news organization should sack anyone who suffers with a trauma-related problem	3 (4)	96 (118)
People who have had a trauma-related problem in the past will always be a weak link	1 (1)	92 (113)
Only weak people can be affected by traumatic events	3 (4)	96 (118)

*These answers exclude those who expressed "neutral" views to the questions.

for at least five years suggesting that the sample were experienced, and the nature of journalism is that most managers would have had grass roots experience prior to being promoted. Additional limitations are that individuals who volunteered for the course may be more interested in trauma-related issues, which may account for some of the relatively positive attitude scores, and the survey design and sample size can provide only a valuable snapshot of the culture rather than a prevailing view. Also, self-report questionnaires can result in participants providing socially desirable responses, although the anonymity of the questionnaires should have minimized any reporting bias.

We found that journalists and their colleagues most often turned to family members for support, followed by a friend external to the organization. As this group is at risk of developing mental health problems, this places the burden of care on informal networks to manage distress. That work colleagues and superiors were relatively rarely approached suggests that, prior to the establishment of a trauma awareness programme, journalists would have been hesitant to utilize managerial or organizationally sponsored support (e.g., EAP) when feeling the ill effects of even occupationally-related distress. It is interesting to note that our finding that journalists showed a reluctance to seek help, other than from friends and family, is similar to findings in military personnel, another robust professional group, who also rarely access formal support networks (Greenberg et al., 2003). Although personnel are free to seek help from any source they choose, media organizations have moral and legal duties to address mental health issues. Based on our finding that attitudes to seeking help from their organization for trauma-related problems were relatively neutral, it appears that journalists are yet to be reassured that seeking in-service support is acceptable and will not damage their careers.

Our finding that two thirds of respondents thought a line manager, approached by a distressed employee, should initially refer them for specialist help, may be further evidence that employees lacked faith in their manager's ability to deal with the psychological consequences of traumatic incidents. However, this finding may also be evidence that respondents, prior to the training course, were unaware that specialist referral is not usually necessary for those exposed to traumatic events. Further research is required to clarify whether stigma is the basis for this reluctance to come forward, or whether the support services provided by the organization studied are indeed perceived to be unhelpful. However, our findings are in keeping with our previous research with the military, where we also found a reluctance to come forward (Gould et al., 2007). Stigma in the military is a serious issue (Hoge et al., 2004) and we suggest that this may also be the case in the journalistic industry.

To address some of these problems, the UK Royal Navy has developed Trauma Risk Management (TRiM) (Jones, Roberts, & Greenberg, 2003). TRiM is an intensive psychoeducational posttraumatic management strategy based on peer-group risk assessment. It is not about the medical treatment of PTSD but rather adopts a cognitive-behavioural theoretical orientation. It seeks to modify attitudes about PTSD, provide support and education and identify at-risk personnel and refer them for early intervention. Recent research has shown this programme to be effective in improving attitudes and encouraging individuals to seek help (Gould et al., 2007). News organizations need to be proactive in managing the psychological care of their workforce and addressing barriers to care. To this end, the news organization under study has begun a programme of training based on a 1-day version of the military TRiM programme, which is normally 2 ½ days long; anecdotal evidence suggests that it is having an impact and we plan to conduct further research in this area to assess how effective the 1-day training course has been in changing attitudes towards psychological ill health. We also suggest that given the predictably

traumatic nature of journalistic work, further research is needed to clarify how to make help seeking more attractive as well as to establish which sub-groups of media professional are most at risk of psychological ill health. We hope that through a combination of further research and training the apparent “culture of silence” which this study has highlighted can be addressed.

Conflicts of interest: Mark Brayne is European Director of the DART Centre for Journalism and Trauma and with Neil Greenberg provides occasional paid-for advice and training for the news organization under study.

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