

Tackling the Macho Culture

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The grizzled cameraman standing at the back of the newsroom shifted slightly as the trauma briefing approached its end, cleared his throat and signalled that he had something to say.

The discussion for the previous half hour among the 30 or so people present had been of grief at the death of two much-loved colleagues - a cameraman and producer killed on assignment four days earlier by a roadside bomb in Iraq - and the wounding of their reporter.

The team had been speaking warmly and sadly of the dead, and had been encouraged in the introductory briefing to talk and listen to each other, and to allow themselves - as normal, sentient human beings as well as journalists - to express their sorrow.

The introduction had included reassurances that with good social support, most people recover well from traumatic loss. But the team had also been reminded that recovery often takes at least a few weeks and sometimes a little longer. And they had been advised that if traumatic distress *does* get stuck in the system, then - as advised in the 2005 guidelines from Britain's National Institute for Clinical Excellence (NICE) - it's a good idea to get professional help.

The floor was now open for questions or comments.

The man at the back spoke. "I'd like to make a couple of observations," he said.

Everyone turned to listen. The two briefers - one a former journalist-now-turned-psychotherapist, the other an EAP professional - feared the worst. Would he rubbish the whole idea of trauma awareness and support? Would he undo all the good work that had been done in the previous half hour? But no.

"Listen to what the man says," the journalist continued. "I know what this is like."

The briefers' anxiety began to abate.

"As many of you know," he went on, "I had a rough time in the first Iraq war in 1991. When I came back, the company sent me to see a doctor.

"I told him of course that I was fine, physically and emotionally. The doctor said that was OK, but he just let me know that I might just feel different in a few months or even a few years. The emotions might catch up with me, or something like that, perhaps in response to something quite different and even trivial."

It rapidly became clear that this war-hardened cameraman knew a great deal about trauma. One of the most experienced, respected and toughest of his generation, with approaching 30 years of news reporting behind him, he had been held for several months in 1991 in Baghdad's Abu Ghraib prison, and had been treated rather badly.

He continued. "I thought at the time that what the good doctor said was rubbish. I put it all behind me. I was tough, after all. This is what we journalists do for a living. But a couple of years later, just as the doctor had warned, I fell apart. It wasn't a lot of fun. I got myself help. A bit late, but it made all the difference. So, as I said, listen to what the man is telling us."

Our post-trauma journalism briefing could not have been choreographed more effectively. Several people then spoke up expressing gratitude that their emotional needs as journalists were now at last being taken seriously. The only problem, added another equally experienced colleague, is that journalists didn't start talking about this years ago. They had needed this for so long.

It's a statement that's equally true for other professional First Responders who deal with trauma as a core part of their job. But in tackling the macho culture of such areas of work, there are babies that must not be thrown out with the bathwater.

First Responders need to be tough – albeit not so tough that they are unable to accept the possible consequences for of being exposed themselves to extreme human distress.

When a bomb goes off in a city centre, or a train is derailed, with consequential death and injury, or an aircraft crashes on a motorway, or when drunken young men start brawling on a Saturday night, the healthy response of most ordinary people is to run the other way, and very sensibly to absent themselves from personal danger.

Professionals who rush in the other direction, on the other hand, and towards danger rather than away from it – a group which includes journalists as well as policemen, firefighters, ambulance and rescue workers – can find themselves dealing with extreme situations.

Exposure to critical incidents is likely to be, at times, emotionally difficult. But they have a job to do which requires them to be resilient, and in the heat of the moment to put their own emotions to one side – skills and qualities which can show themselves in sometimes unsettling ways.

As anyone who works closely with groups such as soldiers, doctors and mortuary workers – and again, journalists – knows, people who work with death and disaster have a black sense of humour which can seem very callous to outsiders. However, the ability to see the funny side of even the most extreme situations is an important part of staying sane.

It is of course politically very incorrect, but policemen, amongst themselves, will talk about suspects and the public in sometimes crassly insensitive terms. Journalists dealing with overwhelming stories of trauma and distress will talk excitedly in editorial meetings of earthquakes with thousands of dead as a "great story".

That too may seem insensitive to outsiders. But to those that deal with such incidents on a regular basis, a great story is exactly what it is.

None of this should be too sharply condemned. First responders need at some level to be hardened to the emotional effects of horror. But they also need to be allowed to be vulnerable human beings, able to recognise, acknowledge and process the impact on themselves of the traumatic soup in which they so often swim. Even the hardest may find themselves "wounded" from time to time. Hard does not mean impenetrable.

Organisations which employ such professionals need also to know that it is not just those on the front line of blood and tragedy who may need support and training. Those at the rear, who deal

“merely” with the aftermath, the traffic, the relatives, the reports or the pictures are also at risk. Trauma does not respect artificially drawn lines between professional groups.

So in tackling the macho culture of professions such as journalism, what are the lessons we have learned, and what still needs to be done?

Since 2002, the Dart Centre for Journalism and Trauma (www.dartcentre.org) has cooperated with a number of major news organisations such as Reuters, Newsweek magazine and the Washington Post in the United States, German television, the Arabic television news channel Al Jazeera and especially the BBC in Britain, in developing training programmes in trauma awareness and support.

We have drawn generously on the experience of Britain’s Royal Marines and their programme of Trauma Risk Management (TRiM), with a particular focus on internal culture change and open recognition of trauma and its impact.

Our underlying understanding of trauma was usefully reflected in the 2005 NICE guidelines, with their recommendation for “watchful waiting” for the first few weeks after a traumatic experience, and with the reassurance that, on the whole, most people, with the right kind of support, will recover naturally.

We have therefore supported the BBC and other organisations in moving away from the idea that confidential counselling and a free, outside helpline number are the only answers – an approach which rather obviously can be seen by staff as management washing their hands of their own duty-of-care responsibilities.

We needed to de-mystify and above all de-pathologise the concept of trauma-related distress, taking our cue from the Marines in emphasising peer-led monitoring and assessment of trauma symptoms within teams, by colleagues or managers given basic training.

What we have added to the Marines’ TRiM model, however, has been a very clear accent on generic and pre-assignment briefings, introducing the concept of trauma and PTSD *before* individuals are exposed to potential stressors – so that on their return, no-one need feel surprised or stigmatised by being asked how they are doing.

The approach has seven levels – summarised here in a short list, and then with explanations.

1. There has to be top-level political buy-in from the senior managers;
2. There needs to be a rolling programme of explicit trauma focused training which is best integrated into existing management and entry-level training courses;
3. Generic and pre-assignment briefings about trauma should be normal practice. Where an assignment or project is likely to be tough, people need to be told;
4. Teams and individuals dealing with trauma need, in the moment and while it is happening, appropriate support and care;
5. On return from potentially traumatic assignment or at end of (or during) emotionally challenging projects, individuals should have an opportunity, within a few days, for what we call a “structured conversation” with a trained colleague – to assess how they are doing;
6. A month or so later, there must be a follow-up contact, again to check in how the individual is faring, and to identify any continued or emergent distress;

7. If necessary (and in general infrequently), professional mental health support can be suggested and individuals referred on, ideally with the knowledge of an organisation's occupational health provider or department.

So, let us explain in more detail why we have found that this approach works.

First, culture change will not work without explicit and enthusiastic support from respected group and organisational leaders. Top management needs to be seen to be personally and publicly committed, regularly reinforcing the message. That can be very hard to achieve.

The benefits for those managers may be far more than they initially realise. In helping their organisation discharge its duty of care, senior managers may eventually be viewed in a more positive light as individuals not just sanctioning good journalism, but also demonstrating real interest in their staff.

Second, an established and accepted programme for training - and not just briefing - of managers and editors, existing and newly-appointed, will ensure that those deploying staff into emotional harm's way recognise and normalise for their teams some of these points:

- Why and how trauma knowledge matters in their business;
- How real human beings – which includes journalists, however tough they might be - can be affected by psychological trauma;
- What are the current scientific understandings of trauma;
- How to discuss the issue with colleagues, and recognise if someone is getting into emotional difficulties. This requires nothing more than (often already existing) active listening skills coupled with a basic awareness of trauma and its impact;
- What, as manager or editor or colleague, one can do about such distress, and where a referral to a specialist might be advised.

The training package we have put together usually lasts one day, allowing plenty of discussion and sharing of experiences, and an afternoon of role plays. The course is designed to leave participants with very practical skills as well as knowledge.

It is worth noting, as with the newsroom briefing described at the beginning of this chapter, how participants in this training frequently bring powerful personal stories of often unrecognised trauma from their own or colleagues' past, and how grateful many are that the issue is now being openly tackled.

At the third level, there then needs to be an expectation of regular pre-assignment and generic trauma briefings, to emphasise the normality of dealing with trauma responses as part of day-to-day management. That trauma is part of the job needs to be seen as normal and routine in the same way as many other already identified risks for particular forms of work or areas of assignment, such as malaria, lifting heavy equipment, and of course, sometimes avoiding bullets.

Trainees often find this pre-deployment discussion one of the hardest parts. When colleagues are just donning their emotional Super(wo)man suits before dashing off to cover a war, a fire or a murder, how does one broach the issue of possible emotional distress?

The answer, of course, is that this should have already been done several times in the normal course of team and individual briefings, so that what is needed now is just a reminder. The possibility of exposure to trauma should be part of the formal pre-assignment risk assessment.

The messages we encourage managers and team leaders to convey in this pre-assignment briefing include:

- Thank, acknowledge and appreciate what is being undertaken, and in general the colleagues' continued good work for the organisation. The thinking here being to reinforce psychologically healthy attachments within the work group, which is what good management should do as a matter of routine.
- Explicitly name what might be involved – emotionally as well as physically. In tackling the negatives of the macho culture, half the battle is in encouraging individuals and teams actually to talk about the issue in an informed way. Managers and example-setting leaders who are uncomfortable talking about trauma will send the implicit signal that they would rather everyone else bottle up their feelings as well.
- Make reliable arrangements to keep in touch. Again, this is about reinforcing health-supporting attachment and contact. As anyone working in this field knows, colleagues away from base, even the most organisationally aware and responsible among them, very quickly adopt an Us-and-Them attitude towards “London” or “Head Office” – and supervisors can lessen any associated distress simply by encouraging regular contact.
- Encourage self-care. Looking after physical needs for sleep, water, food and exercise makes all the difference. People under emotional pressure, and especially, it seems, journalists, can very easily forget that their mind and body are their most important pieces of kit, and like their equipment need fuel, water, cooling off and maintenance.
- Reassure that some distress is not unusual when dealing with trauma. What matters is how it is dealt with – and that it is good to talk, although not, of course, compulsory.

This can be a very simple discussion. As we have found at the BBC and elsewhere, when done well it can make a great difference to how a journalist reporting the worst things human beings can do to each other is able to handle the emotional stress that comes with that.

Pre-assignment briefing is, however, only part of a three-dimensional package. At the fourth level in our seven-point list, we make clear that good management *during* an assignment or project is just as important as preparation or reaction afterwards.

- Arrangements beforehand to keep in regular touch need to be honoured and initiated. Managers need to be inquisitive, alert and supportive, and not simply reactive.
- Colleagues should be allowed and encouraged – and financed, although with internet email and now telephoning this is no longer quite so expensive as it was - to keep in close contact with home and friends.
- Leaders should set an example – for instance in getting enough sleep. Of course, that is not always easy, and eight hours every night may not be possible. But a team's attitudes are set in large measure by the behaviour of the individual in charge. As military forces now emphasise constantly in their training, sleep-deprived

soldiers are simply unable to fight well. The same is true of all professions dealing with stress and trauma. Being tired is just not good for business.

- Be careful with the timing and pitch of any criticism. The emotional defences of teams in the field will be down, and their sensitivities high.
- Similarly, make sure the rest of the home team (including Finance...) is on side, and aware of the pressure teams are under.

These last two points often elicit wry smiles of understanding, and horror stories of the Accounts Department ringing a journalist who is in the middle of a firefight to query a month-old taxi receipt, or of insensitive output editors bellowing nasty feedback down an open telephone line just when someone has been travelling all day through mine- and guerrilla-infested battlefields to file their story.

As one journalist put it after the war in Afghanistan in 2001: "I could cope with the dead bodies. What I couldn't cope with was that b***tard on the Five O'clock news who could only criticise what I was doing."

- Before individuals return to base from a stressful assignment, encourage where possible a spell of "decompression" with their colleagues – e.g. day or two in a nice hotel or coming into the office for some easy days when they have arrived back safely.

This latter suggestion does not always go down well. Staff are needed for the next assignment; their partners want them home; there aren't the resources to pay for this kind of downtime.

In reality, though, giving people space and time to wind down, to talk and to relax a little with their trusted team mates – at company expense, and especially if they have just been through similar experiences - has a strikingly soothing and health-reinforcing effect.

It sends a *felt* signal that their work is appreciated. It allows arousal and alarm levels to abate naturally, before the colleague is pitched into dealing with the very different stresses of home life. And it protects journalists just a little from the jolting transition from war zone to home which many say is the single most damaging aspect of their work, and one which has destroyed many a marriage and relationship.

Moving to point five - what happens *after* an assignment - the opportunity to talk about what was experienced should again be part of a broader approach, one which recognises the importance of social and practical support in the first instance, and the value of small gestures – appreciation, what we in journalism call herograms (notes of special individual appreciation for work well done), emails, being met at the airport, parties, public acknowledgment and the like.

We make the point that factual information about what happened when "you were out there", and about the array of normal emotional reactions to traumatic events, often reassures and soothes the nervous system. So it should be shared generously.

We do not make it compulsory that people talk with managers or colleagues about the emotional side of the assignment. But we do expect managers to make sure that the opportunity of a structured conversation is offered, and indeed encouraged.

And the conversation should not just be what journalists usually do with each other – “Hi, good to see you back. Great work! Hairy stuff! You OK?” To which the answer, almost invariably, will be, “Oh thanks, I’m fine” - a word which can mask a multitude of experiences good and bad, and which, we joke, can actually mean “F*ed up, Insecure, Neurotic and Emotional...”

One should not forget that stigma is a real and important issue which prevents many people, especially the more hardy ones, from asking for help even if they need it. Unless distressed individuals appreciate that actually the organisation really *does* care and wants to ensure that they are really “FINE” then they are unlikely to be open and honest with their bosses or colleagues. The training emphasises the point that if you are going to take an interest in your staff – and of course all managers should – then that has to be a sincere interest.

So, drawing from but slightly adapting the TRiM approach developed by the Royal Marines, we encouraging teammates or managers to use the word FINE as a mnemonic for the structure of how they talk.

- F is for FACTS – what happened, when, where, how, who etc, rather than the emotions or the feelings. And we encourage here that the event or experience is talked through chronologically in the sequence of Before, During and After.
- I for IMPACT – how did the person personally experience what happened? Their thoughts (and feelings) THEN?
- N for NOW, How are you doing? Which can explore how well they’re functioning in the present, and whether any distress is getting stuck in their ‘system’.
- E for EDUCATION – reassurance and reminders that human beings have natural responses to trauma, that on the whole and with time, they recover pretty well, but that if things remain difficult, then a spot of professional support can be helpful.

The process is not one of forced catharsis. Not everyone needs to express huge amounts of emotion. Often the simple telling of one’s story from start to finish is enough. What is important is that people get an opportunity to chat with someone who is interested in what they are going to say, and who may be in a position to offer or point to appropriate help and support if they need it.

Note that that counselling support is not necessarily brought into play just yet, unless of course the colleague is in obvious and serious distress, and finding it difficult to function. Rather, the expectation is (Level Six in the seven-point list above) that there will be a follow-up conversation or contact in a month or so, again to check in how the person is doing.

Usually, of course, there is not a great deal to worry about – and the mere fact of having expressed an interest, *within* the culture, and given reassurances about normal reactions to trauma allows people to come to terms with their experiences in a more productive and healthy way.

So what do we tell peers and colleagues to look out for? Again drawing on the Marines’ experience, we use two very simple 10-point checklists, boiled-down versions of more comprehensive lists that have been proven very reliable in identifying PTSD-style symptoms.

Readers will be familiar with the Acute Stress checklist developed by Chris Brewin of University College London – watching out for:

- upsetting thoughts or memories

- upsetting dreams
- acting or feeling that bad things are happening again
- feeling upset by reminders
- physical reactions – e.g. fast heartbeat, stomach churning, sweatiness, dizziness...
- sleep difficulties
- irritability or outbursts of anger
- difficulty concentrating
- heightened awareness of danger
- being jumpy or startled at something unexpected.

What we do, however, add is a useful further 10-ingredient cocktail of Risk Factors which help to identify distress that does not necessarily fit into straightforward patterns of PTSD – which after all is a less likely outcome from exposure to trauma than depression, anxiety or relationship difficulties.

- Did the person feel out of control when experiencing the trauma?
- Did they feel their life was threatened?
- Do or did they blame others, beyond the reasonable?
- Or did/do they indeed blame themselves, in the form of shame?
- Are they still exposed to substantial stressors??
- Have they been having problems coping with day-to-day life?
- Has their experience reminded them, in a distressing way, of previous traumas in their life, personal or professional?
- Do they have good or poor social support – perhaps the key risk factor?
- And finally, are they using alcohol or drugs to try to make themselves feel better? Not a habit normally associated with journalists, of course...

So, is this new focus on an awareness of trauma in journalism making a difference?

We believe so. More and more journalists – in Britain, in the United States, in Germany, in Spain, in Scandinavia – are beginning to talk more openly about their emotional experiences of covering tragedy and violence.

“In the old days,” says David Loyn, the BBC’s experienced Developing World Correspondent, “none of us would ever talk about this stuff. Now, sitting around in bars in the Middle East or Africa, there’s little else we talk about.”

Loyn is a committed supporter of the trauma-and-journalism agenda, and member of the Dart Centre Europe Advisory Board. His perspective is personally coloured, and for every David Loyn in the business, there are still probably 10 who have never yet given a thought to the connections.

But the climate *is* changing.

In the Royal Marines, the difference to the macho culture made by nearly a decade of TRiM training was neatly illustrated in a conversation between one rank-and-file serviceman and the co-author of this paper, Dr Neil Greenberg.

Greenberg asked the fellow – a big and tough Regimental Sergeant-Major type - what was done in his unit about trauma. The soldier responded: “We have this thing called TRiM, Sir. The lads think it’s a bit poncey – but they like to know it’s there.”

Journalism in the UK is, as yet, nowhere near the level of acceptance which the Marines appear to have achieved towards talking practically about trauma.

But well-known journalists are beginning to write and broadcast about trauma and their own experiences. They are beginning to talk with counsellors. News managers are calling the Dart Centre for advice and starting to commission training.

Almost all broadcasters, although not yet most print media, have Employee Assistance programmes in the background with a confidential helpline – not the whole answer, but an important element.

And when two Western newsmen were badly injured in a bomb attack in Iraq in 2006, the response when we spoke to the bereaved teams was not to button up and hope that giving them a few days off would sort it. The organisation involved openly acknowledged the emotional dimension of what had happened, and told colleagues that anyone who did want to see a specialist would be funded to do so. And our grizzled veteran ensured that the message got credible backing from the newsroom floor.

Working with journalists who are dealing with trauma – sometimes accumulated over a career of many decades - the stories that the other co-author of this paper Mark Brayne now hears from people coming through his consulting room door are heart-breaking but also typical.

The stories are not just about Iraq, a conflict of especial psychological toxicity for journalists covering the story from Baghdad. They speak also of trauma bottled up in many cases for a long time - from Africa, the Balkans, the Middle East and all the disasters and wars of the past two decades, and at the cost of marriages, health, even careers.

By respectfully tackling, and seeking gently to change, the macho culture, we can help First Responders to recognise that trauma responses come with the territory. We can give them a language to talk about that, and encourage them to give themselves and each other the space and the time to do so.

The change will take years, probably generations, to bring about. But the process has begun.