



Trauma-Sensitive Reporting

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Trauma-Sensitive Reporting

**Basics of Understanding
Trauma-Informed Journalism**

Tipsheets for Reporters

Credits, Reviewers & Licensing

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Disclaimer: These Trauma-Informed Journalism (TIC) tipsheets are to be used in context of a Master Class or expert-led discussion and training session on Trauma-Informed Care LTICM. They are meant exclusively to provide orientation and are by no means a replacement for professional consultation or support.

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Table of Contents

Trauma-Sensitive Reporting	2
Basics of Understanding Trauma-Informed Journalism	2
Credits, Reviewers, & Licensing	3
Introduction	6
Scope and Design of the Guide	6
Foundations of Trauma-Informed Journalism	8
What is Trauma-Informed Journalism?	9
Why Must We Understand Trauma?	10
Why Discuss Trauma? (Justice and Human Rights)	11
Module 1: The Informed Interview	14
Module 2: Journalist Safety	21
Module 3: Professional Performance	27
A. Pre-Coverage Questions and Queries	29
Interim Measures Until You Get Support	36
References and Further Reading	38



Introduction

These tipsheets aim to serve as a professional guide equipping journalists with the necessary tools to understand the essence of Trauma-Informed Journalism (TIJ) and its impact on victims, survivors and media workers alike. It also seeks to highlight the occupational hazards they face, foremost among them secondary trauma and burnout.

TIJ is built on the principles of Trauma-Informed Care (TIC) described in Module 3 below. This guide is based on a fundamental principle: Journalism as a tool for support, free from any form of harm. It aims to protect survivors from re-traumatization and safeguard the mental health of workers, whether in the field or within newsrooms, to ensure the production of media content that adopts an intersectional and inclusive perspective, committed to the values of social justice and human rights.

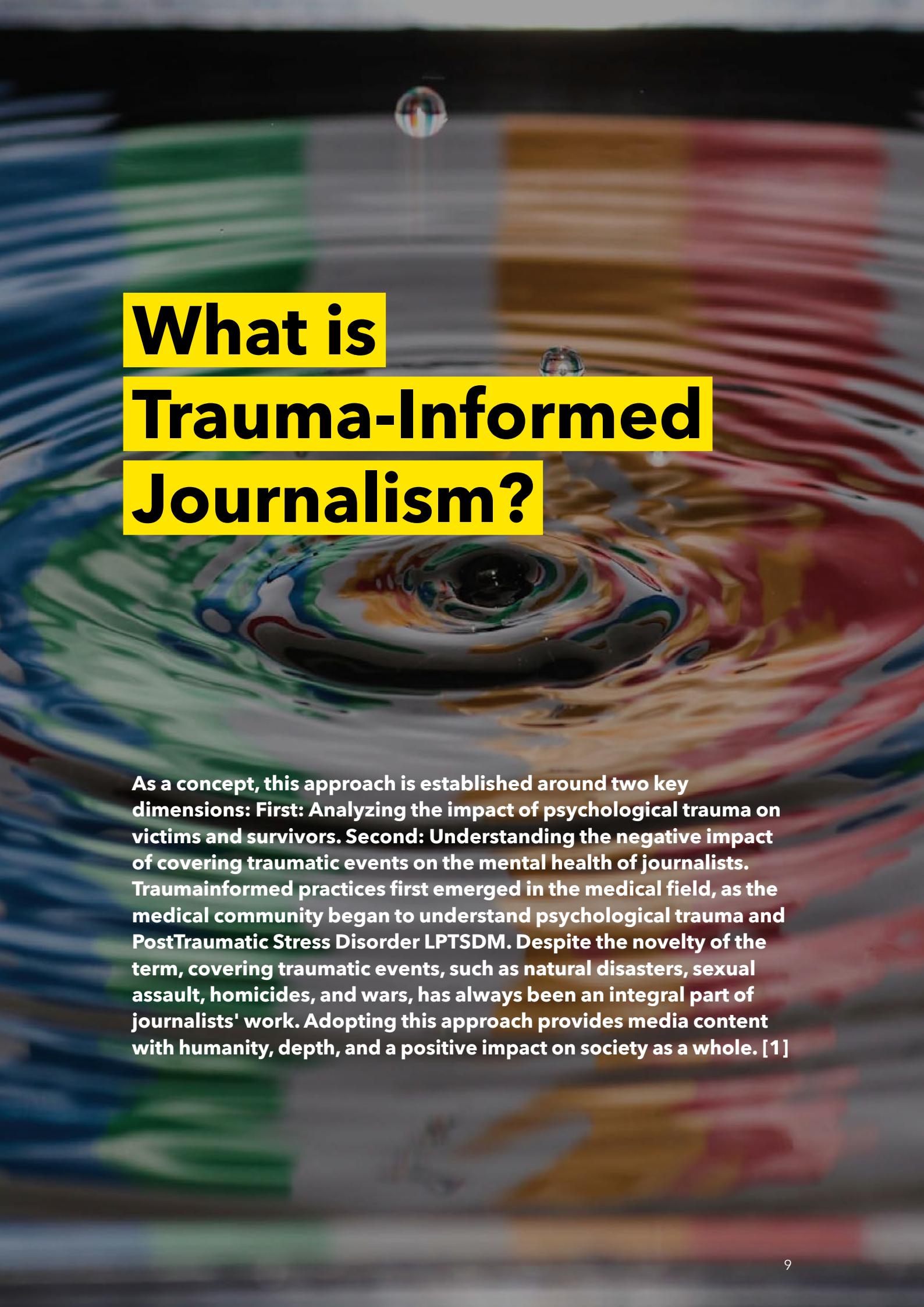
Scope and Design of the Guide

Important Note: These tipsheets are limited in scope and were designed in collaboration with clinical psychology and trauma experts. They serve as a foundation for better understanding the implications of trauma on victims/survivors, and they do not cover all aspects related to this issue. They contain simplified core concepts and specialized guidelines distributed across three main working units aimed at developing professional competence and promoting self-care. They are designed to serve as the primary educational curriculum accompanying an intensive workshop (Master Class) or an expert-led discussion.

- **Module 1:** The Informed Interview - Focuses on source protection and navigating the culture around trauma.
- **Module 2:** Safety of the Journalist - Identifies signs of occupational stress, secondary trauma, and self-care strategies.
- **Module 3:** Professional Practice - Includes newsroom protocols and narrative construction.



Foundations of Trauma-Informed Journalism



What is Trauma-Informed Journalism?

As a concept, this approach is established around two key dimensions: First: Analyzing the impact of psychological trauma on victims and survivors. Second: Understanding the negative impact of covering traumatic events on the mental health of journalists.
Trauma-informed practices first emerged in the medical field, as the medical community began to understand psychological trauma and Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). Despite the novelty of the term, covering traumatic events, such as natural disasters, sexual assault, homicides, and wars, has always been an integral part of journalists' work. Adopting this approach provides media content with humanity, depth, and a positive impact on society as a whole. [1]



Why Must We **Understand Trauma?**

We designed these tipsheets as a resource for journalists to understand the intrinsic complexities of trauma, its impact on survivors, and the risks facing journalists themselves. Specifically, our goal is to assist journalists in mitigating the psychological challenges associated with their work.

What Is **Our Vision?**

Trauma-informed and professionally grounded journalism not only elevates the quality of the content and the accuracy of the narrative, but also ensures that journalistic work serves as a source of support. This is achieved not only through high-quality content that protects survivors from further harm, but also by protecting and supporting media workers themselves.



Trauma: A Broad Spectrum and a Matter of Justice

In its psychological essence, trauma is a difficult and far-reaching experience. It is a condition that impacts a journalist's life either directly (as a result of a traumatic event during coverage) or secondarily through repeated exposure to the trauma of others (vicarious trauma). Both experiences require special care.

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Have you recently felt a sense of anxiety reverberating inside you like an annoying whisper?

We all agree that the effects of trauma vary among individuals, and they can result in psychological stress that exceeds the limits of human endurance, whether stemming from acute trauma or the accumulation of chronic stress. Overcoming this situation requires activating systematic psychological support mechanisms, which must be provided in our local professional environment to address the existing gaps. [2]

Why Discuss Trauma? (Justice and Human Rights)

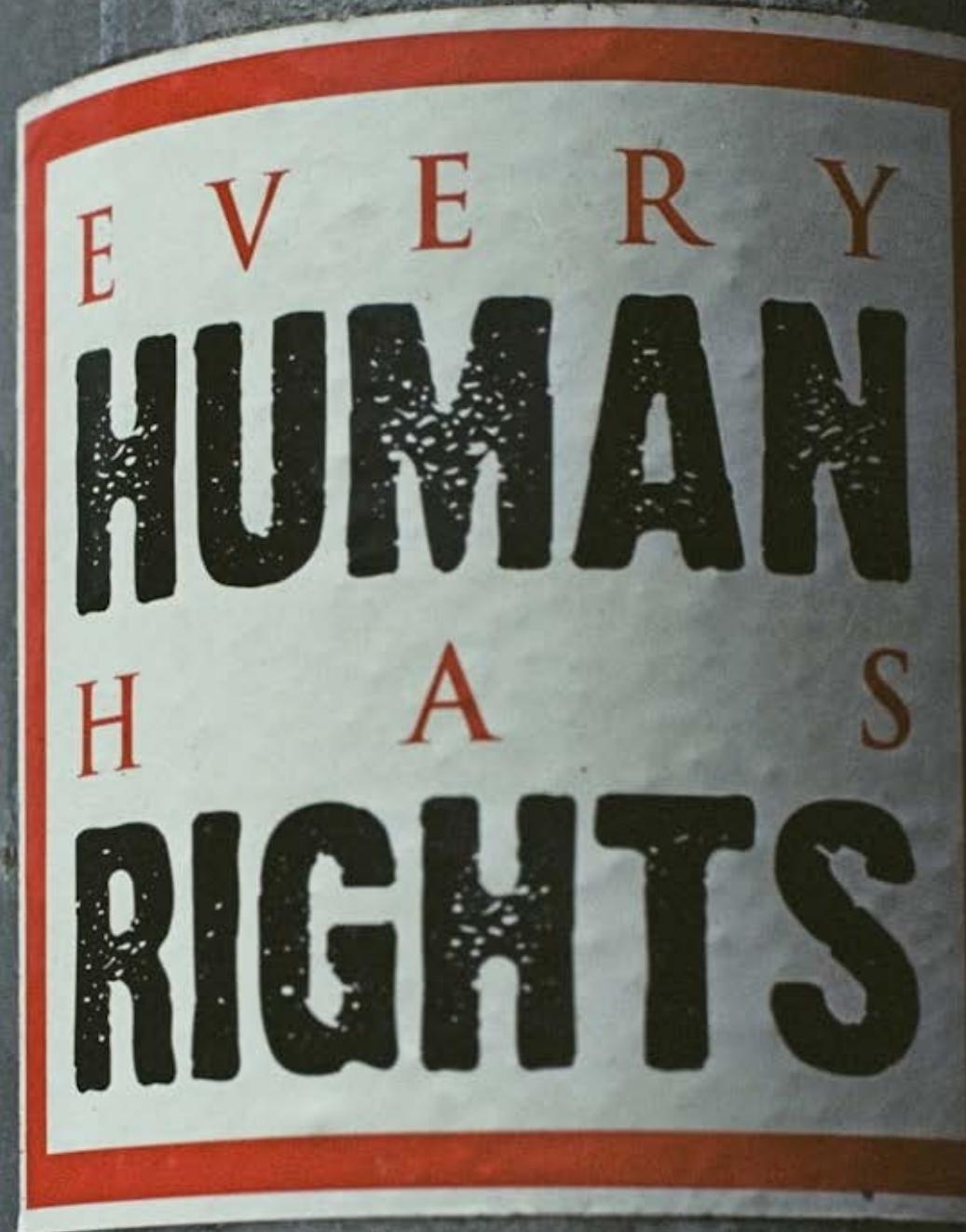
Studies indicate that the majority of trauma cases are human-induced; therefore, and therefore it can be altered and mitigated through human intervention. This requires professional behaviors encompassing trauma-informed principles and trauma-responsive practices that media professionals should adopt.

Human Rights: Framing trauma as a human rights issue is an acknowledgment that society is obligated to take action to prevent avoidable trauma for all people.



Social Justice: Trauma is considered a matter of social justice because its burden falls disproportionately on marginalized and economically disadvantaged groups, and women.

The Press: Media professionals recognize that professional (ethical) conduct leads to the production of specialized and more accurate narratives.



Module 1

The Informed Interview

This module focuses on source protection and addressing the culture around trauma.

It aims to provide journalists with the necessary tools to ensure that coverage is sensitive to the emotions and psychological well-being of survivors, and to avoid exposing them to secondary trauma.

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I want to understand the world from your point of view. I want to know what you know in the way you know it. I want to understand the meaning of your experience, to walk in your shoes, to feel things as you feel them, to explain things as you explain them. Will you become my teacher and help me understand?

James Spradley

To ensure a trauma-informed interview, the journalist must adhere to several key practices. These include thorough pre-interview preparation with survivors; ensuring they receive full informed consent and clear understanding of the implications of publication, adopting empathetic body language and formulating purposeful, non-provocative questions, while avoiding asking private or confidential information. This extends to setting clear and comfortable boundaries and limits for the interview, while giving the source control over how and when their story is shared. However, applying these practices professionally requires a healthy work environment, clear policies, and a workplace that moves beyond the culture of silence.

Building on Spradley's principle, trauma-informed journalism is centered in transforming the human experience of survivors into a cornerstone of our work, within an environment that transcends the culture of silence. The biggest challenge for journalists lies in conveying reality faithfully while ensuring that survivors are not subjected to any secondary trauma during coverage. Achieving this requires more than just understanding the story; it demands planning that includes conducting a precise assessment of the required information and the purpose of the interview, preparing informed consent procedures, and consulting experts to simplify complex concepts. The most critical element remains building trust and demonstrating empathy to ensure the survivor can tell their story safely and consciously.



Silent suffering has a terrifying impact. It is often invisible, especially in newsrooms and various media environments, due to a fear of showing weakness on one hand, and a desire to preserve one's job and career progression on the other. While universities and training institutes require us to be objective in our work and to distance ourselves from emotion during coverage, viewing it as bias incompatible with objectivity. In fact, these ideas have reinforced a culture of silence in our work!

Defining Trauma and Occupational Risks

Trauma is defined as a series of highly impactful events resulting from human behavior (e.g., rape, wars, occupational accidents) or natural disasters (e.g., earthquakes). It often challenges the individual's view of the world as a just, safe, and predictable place. Trauma can also result from serious physical injury, such as extensive burns or head injury [3]. Furthermore, political violence and torture often lead to traumatic stress reactions that pose particular challenges for caregivers regarding treatment and assessment.





Risks for Journalists and the Holistic Safety Lens - Global South

Journalists face extraordinary professional trauma stemming from wars, political threats, exposure to traumatic content, and workplace pressures. This leads to a compelling need for specialized mental health support. However, media professionals in the Global South may not receive financial support to access mental health services due to the absence of a mental health culture, lack of supportive policies ensuring universal access, and insufficient funding.

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“To work together to mainstream this perspective and understand the absence of this culture and its psychological repercussions, which are reinforced by a culture of silence, we must move to a holistic framework that encompasses everything from content to workplace safety policies.”

The safety of journalists is a comprehensive concept encompassing physical, psychological, social, economic, digital, and legal dimensions. Therefore, none of these dimensions can be addressed or their impact studied in isolation from the others, or outside the framework of restriction and stereotyping. [4] This comprehensive approach to safety aligns with the principles of the UN Plan of Action on the Safety of Journalists and the issue of combating impunity. [5]

It represents an inherent right that is equal in importance to freedom of expression, work guarantees (e.g., health insurance, retirement, vacations...), women's rights, the rights of people with disabilities and all identities, and it is an inalienable right.

It is noteworthy, as have previously discussed, that mental health should not be considered a privilege or luxury in media institutions, but rather a fundamental necessity, as important as fair wages, health insurance, end-of-service benefits, professional development, and the ability to effectively address diverse issues such as bullying, harassment, war, violence, and all forms of unethical workplace practices, including abuse of power and gender discrimination.



Rather, today it has become a requirement that embodies the will to adopt a policy of change that places human rights at the core of workplace policy, and it is an urgent need for us all. In this module, we offer brief suggestions related to trauma definition, protection, and interview preparation, in addition to an extensive explanation of the principles of informed consent. We all agree that the effects of trauma vary among individuals, and they can result in psychological stress that exceeds the limits of human endurance, whether its source is acute trauma or the accumulation of chronic stress. Overcoming this situation requires activating systematic psychological support mechanisms, which must be provided in our local professional environment to address the current deficit. Therefore, Module 2 reviews the concepts and some of the strategies necessary to confront this challenge.



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Module 2

Journalist Safety



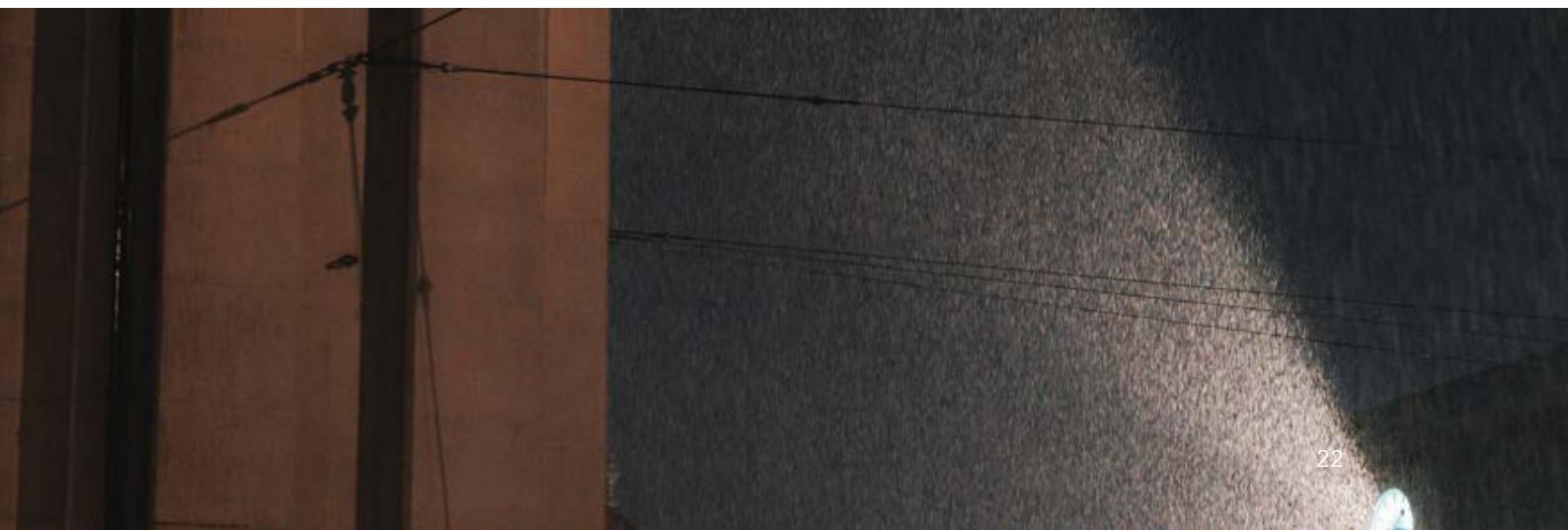
This module focuses on occupational stress, secondary trauma, and care strategies

It aims to clarify how to support the mental health of media professionals who are exposed to stress and trauma, whether it is direct trauma (resulting from their own experience of the event) or secondary trauma (resulting from continuous exposure to victims' stories).

“

It is unrealistic to expect to be immersed in suffering, loss, and hardship in our daily work without being affected.

The idea that war can be just is outdated! We are not offering an opinion here, but a reality imposed by the rhythm of wars and the resulting behavior, regardless of the varying reasons and standards in conflict areas. Amidst all this, a well-known saying emerges: "The first casualty of war is truth." It is an experience we undergo without preparation, one that is neither studied nor given due importance because many of its invisible victims are the ones who convey it. From the live coverage of war correspondents, to the victims: women, children, the elderly, and people with disabilities, to the decision to strive for balance in reporting on individuals or communities and the suffering they endure is essential!





In newsrooms, this reality is reflected in daily questions: What is important and what is the most important? Which breaking news comes first? What story will be headlined? What news do we want to highlight? Why does bad news attract us? Famine, gender-based violence, natural disasters, epidemics or genocide?... And when we are under time pressure, an old, renowned logic asserts its impact: "If it bleeds, it leads."

In reality, we do not have the luxury of time to analyze the impact of negative news and trauma in journalism, especially if we are freelance journalists, gathering ourselves every day with the burden of events and what remains within us at the end of each day: insomnia, anxiety, and the pain that dwells in memory, and the stories of people and news that do not leave us.

At this point, the question remains: in which ways can we help ourselves if we cannot access or afford training or psychological support? These tipsheets provide a supportive, albeit simple, tool, and we hope that there will be a call to develop policies for psychological support and professional frameworks that can secure specialized trainers in psychological support.

Working under high pressure puts us in a "survival mode" and constantly exposes us to the principle that "for every action, there is an equal and opposite reaction." Traumatic work experiences can lead to negative psychological outcomes such as burnout, secondary trauma, and a distorted worldview. This section aims to open a dialogue about how this work affects our mental health and emotions, despite the demands for objectivity.

In the following section, we share various definitions, which may not be exhaustive but cover most of the conditions journalists face. For the purposes of this module, we define Vicarious Trauma as the psychological and cognitive changes that occur in a person as a result of prolonged exposure to traumatic stories through participation in their coverage. We define burnout as exhaustion (psychological and physical) and a loss of a sense of accomplishment associated with chronic work stress.



Key Terms and Definitions

Trauma Informed Journalism, acknowledges the existence of trauma and its significant impact on victims and survivors. It involves understanding their experience both before and after coverage to prevent further harm. This practice prioritizes informed consent and allows survivors to control the narrative of their stories, with the aim of producing more accurate and ethical feature stories.

Burnout, is a continuous experience of stress resulting from chronic professional overload that has been left untreated. Journalists suffer from it due to repeated exposure to traumatic or toxic content, which can lead to vicarious trauma. This can result in severe exhaustion, increased mental detachment or cynicism towards the job, and reduced professional efficacy.

Vicarious Trauma, It is a process of profound psychological change and emotional exhaustion that affects journalists as a result of constant exposure to and empathy for the stories, suffering, and experiences of survivors and victims of trauma. It is also known as "secondary trauma" due to the accumulation of horrific situations covered. Its effect may appear as a change in the journalist's worldview and a shift in fundamental beliefs about safety, trust, and justice.

Compassion Fatigue, is a condition characterized by a gradual decrease in empathy over time, resulting from constant exposure to the suffering of others, whether through a professional role or by following news of tragedies. This condition can develop relatively quickly, leading to exhaustion, lack of energy, and a decline in the ability to empathize.

Resilience, in journalism is the state or ability of a journalist to adapt and recover from difficult circumstances, threats, or dangerous situations, such as covering disasters, wars, conflicts, and crimes of gender-based violence. This resilience facilitates continued work competency without significant psychological harm or disruption of essential functions, ensuring their ability to remain in stressful work environments.



The goal of acknowledging not only external, but also some of these internal impacts (Secondary Trauma and Burnout) is not only to promote self-care and awareness, but to ensure that the journalist is equipped with the right psychological knowledge. The ultimate goal should be to begin changing the work environment from a structural perspective. Therefore, Module 3 will move from individual self-care to institutional strategies, outlining the essentials of newsroom protocols, policies, and concrete steps necessary to implement Trauma-Informed Journalism (TIJ) effectively.

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Module 3

Professional

Performance



This module deals with newsroom protocols and narrative construction

It focuses on coverage while taking into account self-regulation policies, avoiding bias and stigmatization, striving for quality, and speaking the truth.

Key Tips for Journalists

Self-Regulation, Interview Methodology, and Trauma Informed Care (TIC)

In following we will go through various structural and institutional issues which media organizations can implement together with staff to promote TIJ. We are aware that many journalists will not benefit from these changes in the foreseeable future and will need to build on this training on their own.



A. Pre-Coverage Questions and Queries

Key Questions and Procedures

Am I adequately prepared for this coverage?

The many different journalistic formats are not just about breaking news or a scoop; therefore, I must ask myself and assess my state of readiness regarding information related to the issue (in terms of accuracy and sources verification, preferably it should be included under internal newsroom editorial policies), in addition to assessing my moral, personal, and psychological capacity. In this context, communication is essential, I must meet with the editorial manager to share any difficulties or challenges without fear of any repercussions in this regard (linking it to the principle of transparency and mutual support according to newsroom policies). By doing so, I will have evaluated my informational, moral, and psychological readiness, while ensuring that “personal judgments and attitudes” are left out of the coverage to guarantee the highest levels of neutrality and professionalism.

Should we interview this person, at this time and place?

(Time, safety, informed consent, and avoiding pressure). Does the source have meaningful consent?

Do not rush the interview; allocate sufficient time for a thoughtful conversation about trauma and be deliberate in both your expression and language. Assess the safety of the setting. Do not choose places where the trauma occurred that might trigger recollections, and only begin with informed consent. This consent is not a guarantee of achieving the objective, but rather a means of establishing a safe foundation. Consent must be informed and ongoing (not a one-time event), revocable at any time, and negotiated directly with the source (not through a mediator or relative).



Designing the interview/encounter and active listening

Commit to active listening without displaying judgment, focusing on understanding the narrative, and avoiding the display of personal judgments or the use of questions that might re-traumatize the source or diminish their respect. It is essential to allow the victim/survivor to control the pace and details of the narrative and to avoid closed, leading questions that may create psychological pressure.

Information gathering protocols

The priority of journalistic work in these cases is Do No Harm. To achieve this, the situation must be evaluated, all aspects examined, and then the informed consent should be obtained from the source, with emphasis on the right of the victim or survivor to withdraw it at any time. It is essential to avoid publishing sensitive information, including graphic or private images, or any unnecessary details that might expose anyone to danger or social condemnation. Finally, the journalist must work consciously on the language used in the coverage to ensure it is trauma-informed and enhances the source dignity, avoiding the use of victimizing language, stereotyping, or blame, and selecting appropriate scientific terminology for the subject.

Informed consent

A necessary concept and a professional practice in journalism that respects the autonomy, human dignity, and safety of individuals and promotes transparency and trust between journalists and their sources. It is part of the professional code of conduct and includes obtaining permission from individuals (sources) before their participation in interviews or data collection, ensuring they are fully aware of the nature of their participation, the objectives of the coverage, and the potential risks (such as the impact of publication or their identity reveal). The source has the right to withdraw consent at any time during the interview process or before publication without facing any negative consequences.



B. Trauma-Informed Care

Trauma-Informed Care (TIC) is an integral part of Trauma-Informed Journalism (TIJ). It is a comprehensive methodology and a general regulatory and behavioral framework based on interdisciplinary cooperation. It focuses on understanding the nature of danger and how resulting trauma affects human health (physical, psychological, thoughts, and behaviors). Journalists are among the groups most exposed to dealing with these traumas, which may subject their sources and themselves to re-traumatization, secondary trauma, or even PostTraumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). In practice, it is sometimes difficult to reconcile the required protection of information with the necessity of publishing. Specifically, in some media institutions that lack the foundations of self-regulation and the application of a code of conduct, the focus is on publishing details of painful emotions and experiences, as well as other types of information that do not reflect the idea of media and communication as a public good and accountability. In light of this reality, the focus on sharing, interaction, and clickbaits often prevails, making it the sole measure of impact and response, and making it difficult to understand what the citizen/user has gained from this content and what the real benefit of publishing it was.





Based on this difficult starting point, the preparation relies on a set of models and practices. In this document, we adopt the following structure

First Model: Preparation and Initial Assessment

Before communicating or obtaining consent, the source's ability to participate should be assessed (preferably by a specialist).

Assessment Criteria	Essential Questions
Timeframe	Did the event occur recently? Does it still constitute a trauma or profound impact?
Psychological Risk and Functional Impairment	Are there signs indicating potential self-harm, suicidal thoughts, disorganization or dissociation/detachment from reality, or inability to take care of oneself? Have the behaviors shown a clear decline?
Support/Expectations	Has the source received any previous psychological support? Does the source understand what participation in the interview entails, and are expectations clear?



Second Model: Interview Procedures Protocols

Principle	Practical Procedure
Transparency and the Ability Decline or to Stop the Narrative	Clearly introduce yourself and explain the purpose of the interview. Remind the interviewee of their right to stop the interview, take a break, or decline to answer any question.
Question Quality	Avoid stereotyping, criminalizing, or blaming the victim. Be empathetic and use language that does not reflect prejudice.
Verification and Memory	Do not expect a completely consistent narrative; inconsistencies sometimes result from how memory works under threat. Verify the information and its accuracy!
Responding to Distress	If the person is unable to focus and form a narrative, remain calm and gently guide the questions. If they cry: kindly ask what they need, offer water... avoid touching.
End of Interview	Conclude with questions that reinforce the strength of the narrative power and inspire hope. Thank the source without making unrealistic promises.
Risk Analysis	Protecting sources comes first. Assess the risks of publishing by consulting from the outset with your editorial team, your source, and any relevant experts (legal or psychological). Avoid publishing sensitive details or graphic images. Do not allow the content of the journalistic material to re-victimize the survivor.



Third Model: Post-Coverage Protocols for Traumatic Events

Protocols for Covering Difficult Events	Explanation
Written Trauma Reporting Policies	Establish clear, written editorial guidelines and policies for covering distressing or high-risk stories. These policies aim to minimize psychological harm to journalists, sources, and the public.
Mental Health Support/ Counseling Access	Provide mental health consultations by therapists. These resources must be easily accessible to cope with stress, anxiety, and various types of disorders without stigmatization.
Post-Assignment Debriefing Procedures	Conduct organized review sessions immediately after difficult or high-risk assignments. The review session must include a discussion of editorial aspects, safety, and fact-checking, in addition to assessing the journalist's psychological and physical well-being to ensure they receive the necessary support.
Flexible Time Off after Difficult Assignments	Implementing a flexible leave policy allows journalists to take paid leave as needed to rest and recover after traumatic coverage. This reduces burnout and gives journalists the ability to take days off for mental health.



Interim Measures Until You Get Support

Finally, what should you do when you feel overwhelmed by constant anxiety and perhaps unable to engage socially? Often, the first step is to seek professional support if the circumstances and resources allow. It is crucial to understand that these techniques are not a substitute for professional mental health care but serve as interim measures to help regulate your nervous system when immediate support is unavailable.

If anxiety is significantly impacting your life, you can try to manage it by practicing deep breathing exercises and counting to five to slow your heart rate and calm down.

Step 1: Sit or lie down in a comfortable place where no one will disturb you.

Step 2: Place one hand on your abdomen and the other on your chest.

Step 3: Breathe deeply and gently through your nose, slowly counting to five as you inhale.

Step 4: Exhale slowly the air through your mouth while counting to five during this phase as well.

Step 5: Repeat these steps for three to five minutes.



It is important to pay attention to changes in behavioral patterns and utilize the many tools available to us. Despite the tragedies and violence surrounding us, remember that no therapy, support sessions, or special exercises are complete unless we integrate our thoughts, feelings, and actions. Simultaneously, practice gratitude regularly by focusing on the positives and writing a list of them. And let us not forget that setting small goals, building support networks, and bridging connections are vital steps to regaining control and building self-confidence.

These tipsheets serve as a foundation. Together we can work on integrating these practices into every newsroom protocol and every reporter's toolkit.



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5. For more information, please refer to the UN Plan of Action for the Safety of Journalists at the following link: <https://www.un.org/en/safetyjournalists>

Trauma-informed practices first emerged in the medical field, as the medical community began to understand psychological trauma and Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder PTSD. Despite the novelty of the term, covering traumatic events, such as natural disasters, sexual assault, homicides, and wars, has always been an integral part of journalists' work. Adopting this approach provides media content with humanity, depth, and a positive impact on society as a whole.

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