



ONLINE HARASSMENT

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Online Harassment



OVERVIEW

Fact-checkers are often at risk of online harassment, which ranges from nasty comments to severe bullying to explicit sexual and death threats via email, social media and text messages. They might face **organized attacks** from state-sponsored trolls, people paid to post inflammatory or aggressive comments online; other organized groups; or simply the general public.

The trolling can be particularly intense during election periods, when fact-checkers work to counter misinformation and disinformation. As trainer Naseem Miller has explored in [The Journalist's Resource](#), **newsrooms have often struggled to find the right response or not done enough to protect their staff from this abuse.**

“Political actors often use narratives about censorship to undermine the trustworthiness of fact-checkers... in some cases, there are also narratives labelling fact-checkers as foreign agents or claiming they are paid by figures such as George Soros.”

“I Never Put my Name on a Door Bell”, a [report](#) by Faktograf and the International Press Institute



Did you know?

Fact-checkers are being increasingly targeted by hostile actions to prevent them from doing their jobs effectively, according to a survey by the [European Digital Media Observatory](#) (EDMO), which showed that **66% of respondents**, including academics, fact-checkers and journalists, said they had been **victim to incidents** like online harassment, intimidation, physical threats or harm and doxing (publishing private or identifying information about an individual online).

At particular risk of [online harassment](#) are women, people of color, ethnic minorities and people from LGBTQ+ communities, all of whom are more likely to face violence and abuse in offline spaces as well. The prevalence of online harassment, and the fear and anxiety that come with it, is prompting some professionals to leave social media or even quit their jobs.

“When journalists suffer online abuse, they write less, they struggle to concentrate, they think a lot more before posting a comment, and they feel their reputation and their life are at stake,” psychologists Ana María Zellhuber and Juan Carlos Segarra write in this [guide](#) from the International Women’s Media Foundation.

There is always the fear that online violence can escalate into offline attacks as in the case of Croatian fact-check journalist and documentary filmmaker Melita Vrsaljko of [Faktograf](#), who said she was physically attacked while documenting illegal anti-environmental practices.

Fact-checkers often feel **a conflict between the pressure to build an online community and brand, and the need to protect online safety**: “I do share pictures of food and exercise, but that’s as personal as I get,” one fact-checker said during the [Mental Health Leadership for Fact-Checkers Program](#). Sometimes, fact-checkers and their managers have to accept that online abuse and potential trauma are the unavoidable price they pay for their jobs.

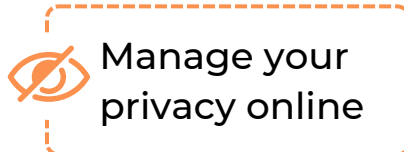
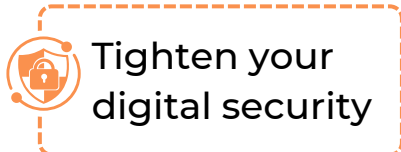


Please note that online harassment is a complex phenomenon that can have a devastating toll on fact-checkers’ emotional wellbeing, and **this guide is focused on some of the mental health effects and warning signs**. What’s crucial is approaching work with open eyes and preparing a plan of action for supporting yourself and your colleagues before an event occurs. At the bottom of this guide, we link to many resources for developing action plans and general safety plans.

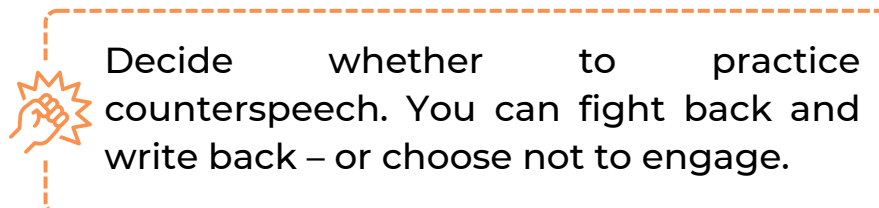
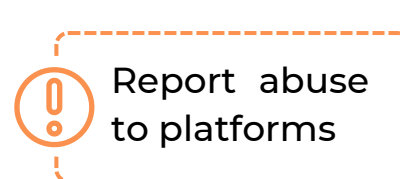
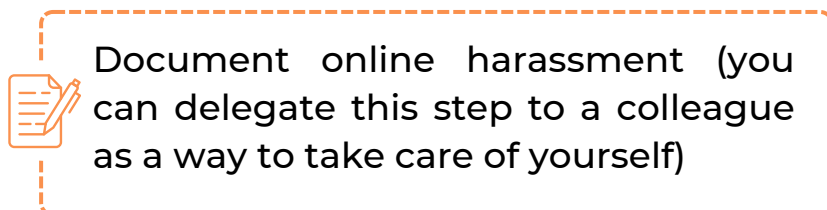
TIPS FOR INDIVIDUALS

Preparation: [PEN America](#) advises a three-pronged approach for dealing with online harassment; **prepare, respond, and cultivate self-care.**

① PREPARE



② RESPOND



Did you know?

A 2020 [survey](#) of U.S. journalists showed that **nearly all journalists experience at least some online harassment** but that such harassment is generally infrequent overall and especially in its most severe forms. Nevertheless, online harassment against journalists disproportionately affects women (particularly young women) and those who are more personally visible in the news.

③ CULTIVATE SELF-CARE



Breathing and mindfulness: The International Women's Media Foundation recommends [breathing exercises](#) or mindfulness to help you cope with stress, anxiety and [insomnia](#).



Seek support: Speaking to others about online abuse can be helpful. This [guide from the Thomson Reuters Foundation](#) suggests you can reach out to your editor or newsroom manager, colleagues, [peer support networks](#), as well as family and friends, who might also be targeted by trolls. [Here](#) are some steps for talking to your professional contacts. It can also help to seek support from mental health professionals.



Acceptance and values: [Sometimes](#), particularly in countries where there is little prospect of a response from social media platforms or prosecution from the authorities, reporting online harassment or trying to fight back may not be the best course of action. Instead some participants in our workshops have adopted a different strategy, namely, trying to [accept](#) that external behaviors may currently be outside their control and focusing more on self-care and community support. It also helps to affirm your [values](#) and [remind yourself](#) why you became a fact-checker or a journalist.

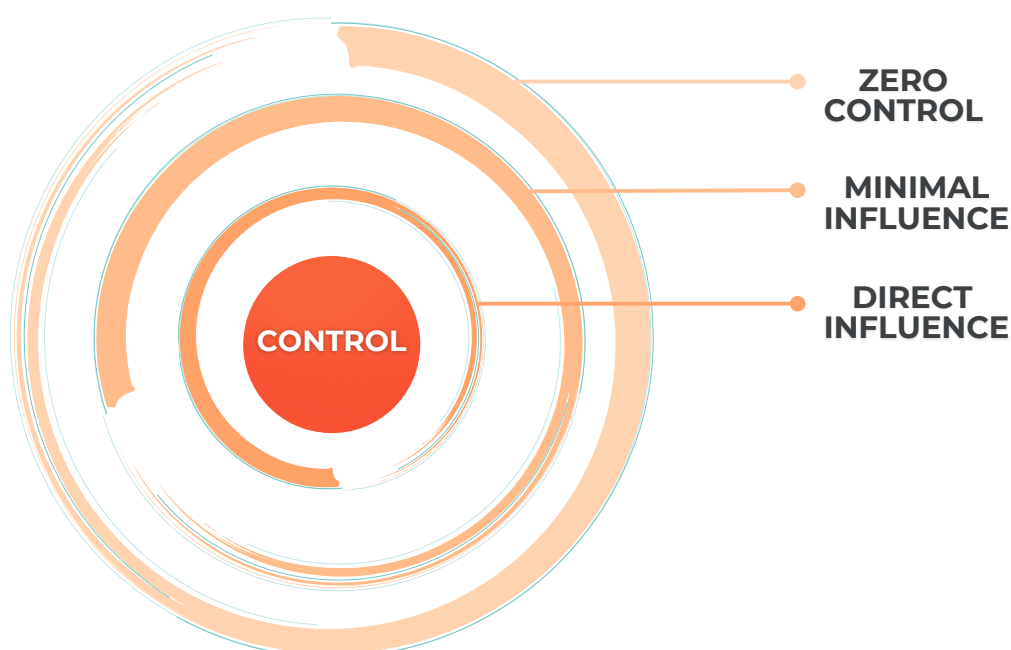


Did you know?

A [UNESCO-ICFJ](#) global survey in 2021 showed that **73% of the women journalists surveyed reported having faced online violence while doing their job**. They are often targeted in coordinated misogynistic attacks. Of those, 26% said online abuse caused them mental health issues and 12% sought medical assistance.

Finding Your Zone of Control

Fact-checkers must bear witness to issues and challenges far outside their zone of control while also managing their own work in the newsroom and their personal lives. One exercise that can help with acceptance is to work out what you can **control** or influence and focus on concrete actions, rather than ruminating on things you are powerless to change.



Did you know?

A [survey](#) in 2023, conducted by Faktograf in cooperation with Tijana Cvjetićanin from the Zašto ne (Why not?) association, showed that **90% of fact-checking organisations in Europe experienced smear campaigns and online abuse from politicians, government officials, media pundits, and public figures**. Out of 41 fact-checking outlets that participated in the survey, 70% that experienced online harassment were subjected to campaigns which include prolonged and/or coordinated behaviour such as stalking, smear campaigns, hate speech, “doxing” or gender-based violence, among others.

Get to know more about the different types of online abuse in this [PEN America Glossary of Terms](#).

TIPS FOR MANAGERS

Online abuse is often seen as an occupational hazard for journalists and fact-checkers, but as trolls have become more organized and vicious, responding has become a matter of media freedom.

The [European Fact-Checking Standards Network](#) recommends that organizations “put in place measures that aim to address the risk of trauma or harassment experienced by staff as a result of the operation’s activities, including but not limited to providing training to prevent and identify symptoms.” Newsrooms should also protect their freelancers, and [IWMF offers guidance](#) on how to do that.

Here are some steps organizations can take to protect their reporters’ mental health:

- ① Use [safety assessment](#) procedures to decide whether a story is worth the risk and ensure you have practices for safety. Know your trolls: are they local, global, campaign-specific? Do they follow any patterns? Are your systems blocking as much abuse as possible?
- ② [Develop clear guidelines](#) on how staff use social media and share personal data and [protocols](#) of response if an attack occurs. See some examples from these newsrooms: [The Seattle Times](#) and [Cicero Independiente](#).
- ③ **Communicate what support is available to staff who suffer abuse**, including any [peer support networks](#) and legal support when necessary. Staff should know that their newsroom has their back. If you decide to engage publicly, consider a public [statement of support](#), especially if coming from the media outlet directly.

- 4 If a colleague is under attack, help them to get off the platform and shut down the account: **don't engage with trolls.** [The International Press Institute \(IPI\)](#) recommends that, if possible, the person being targeted should not be the point-person in dealing with the attacks. Try to take care of your co-workers and share the burden.
- 5 **Reach out to the fact-checking community** and keep them informed.

Mental Health in Action



My organization has adopted new harassment protocols that include a communications procedure so team members can inform managers if they need legal or psychological support.



Blanka Zöldi
Editor in Chief, Lakmusz



I was able quickly to determine steps and react adequately to help a team member who faced online harassment by a social media user whose claim had been fact-checked. I expressed support, reassured the journalist that the company has their back and provided instructions to help them respond. I also checked on them later to follow up and make sure the journalist is doing all right. As a result, the journalist felt safe and secure so the incident left no psychological impact.



Katarina Subasic
Editor, fact-checking team
for Europe, AFP (Serbia)





ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

[Coalition Against Online Violence Response Hub](#)

This is the main resource hub on online abuse and harassment. You can find concrete actions to take if you are a victim, a newsroom or a colleague who wants to offer support. It also provides information on how and whom to ask for emergency assistance.

[Fact-checkers around the world share their experiences with harassment](#) (Poynter)

A Poynter article about a meeting of signatories to the International Fact-Checking Network in 2022 on the issue of harassment of fact-checkers.



ONLINE HARASSMENT AND MENTAL HEALTH

[A Mental Health Guide for Journalists Facing Online Violence](#) (IWMF)

A comprehensive guide for journalists facing online violence from the International Women's Media Foundation, including a mental health self-evaluation chart and downloadable exercises. This is also available in Spanish, Farsi and Arabic.

["Coping with the emotional impact" video series](#) (International Press Institute and Dart Center Europe)

This six-part video series explains in-depth the potential emotional impact of online abuse and harassment on targeted journalists, including basic measures that reporters and moderators can adopt in dealing with hostile voices online and what managers can do to safeguard their teams.

[Psychological safety: Online harassment and how to protect your mental health](#) (Committee to Protect Journalists)

This article covers solutions to take care of your emotional wellness right after receiving an online attack, along with how to prepare in advance.

[You feel like shit: Interactive self-care guide](#) (Jace Harr)

This interactive flowchart helps people who struggle with self care and/or reading internal signals to identify what is happening to them. It also offers suggestions on actions that may make you feel better.



OTHER PRACTICAL GUIDES AND RESOURCES

[Online Harassment Field Manual](#) and [The Power of Peer Support](#) (PEN America)

These two guides offer in-depth resources for developing a response plan for online harassment, along with research and recommendations on how peer support can help mitigate the emotional harm of online abuse.

[A Guide to Protecting Newsrooms and Journalists Against Online Violence](#) (IWMF)

This guide details policies, best practices and case studies newsrooms can implement to better protect staff members and freelancers who are targeted by online abuse. It has templates to use on topics such as doing a risk assessment or creating an escalation policy. This is also available in Spanish.

[OnTheLine](#) (IPI)

This project systematically monitors online harassment against media professionals and analyzes the patterns these attacks take. It includes:

- [A protocol](#) that outlines a four-step framework that newsrooms can take to more effectively protect targeted journalists from the professional and emotional impact of online abuse, available in eight languages (English, French, Portuguese, Serbian, Slovene, Spanish, Turkish and [Swahili](#)).
- A [database of online threats](#).
- A [series of video tutorials](#) on legal remedies for online harassment and coping with the emotional impact.
- Research on the topic, such as [this report](#) on newsroom best practices in five European countries.

[Protecting journalists from online abuse: a guide for newsrooms](#) (Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism)

Guidelines for newsrooms from Gideon Sarpong, director of policy and news at iWatch Africa, for a more resilient response to online abuse.

[Safety Of Journalists](#) (Thomson Reuters Foundation)

A suite of resources from the Thomson Reuters Foundation – in collaboration with UNESCO, the International Women’s Media Foundation (IWMF) and the International News Safety Institute (INSI) – for journalists, media managers and newsrooms to strengthen responses to online and offline abuse.

[Safety Kit](#) (Committee to Protect Journalists)

A four-part guide including basic safety information on physical, digital and psychological safety resources and tools.



ONLINE COURSES AND VIDEOS

Online Harassment: Strategies for Journalists' Defense (Knight Center for Journalism in the Americas)

In this course, done in partnership with IWMMF, you will learn about online privacy and how to better protect yourself while working as a journalist. You'll also learn about the global context of online harassment and hear from female journalists who will speak about the strategies they've used to deal with it.

Digital security training for activists and journalists (Totem)

This series of online courses for journalists and activists focuses on topics such as digital security, psycho-social first aid, knowing your trolls, securing your online data and protecting against doxing. They are available in several languages beyond English.

Online Violence Response Hub Trainings (Coalition Against Online Violence)

Ready to level up your skills in a training environment? This website details a range of options on topics like privacy, digital safety and knowing your trolls.



THE SELF-INVESTIGATION ACADEMY

Videos from the Mental Health in Journalism Summit

- *Online Abuse Self-Defense: Don't Forget Psychosocial Support* by Jeje Mohamed, Susan McGregor and Kate Porterfield.
- *Decoding Online Harassment: An Analytical Approach to Tackling Online Hate and Smear Campaigns* by Javier Luque.



AMY EDMONDSON'S WORK

Ready for a deeper dive into the work of Amy Edmondson? The Self-Investigation has assembled a range of articles and videos on her research into psychological safety.

[Strategies for Learning from Failure](#) (Harvard Business Review)

An article on the importance of failure for learning.

[Building a psychologically safe workplace](#) (TEDx)

An engaging video covering key frameworks like the Learning Zone and acknowledging your own fallibility as a manager.

[Psychological Safety and Learning Behavior in Work Teams](#)" (Administrative Science Quarterly)

One of Edmonson's first key papers on the topic, based on a study of 51 work teams.

[The Fearless Organization: Creating Psychological Safety in the Workplace for Learning, Innovation, and Growth](#) (Wiley)

This book offers a step-by-step framework for establishing psychological safety on team, along with illustrated scenarios and practical guides.



THE SELF-INVESTIGATION ACADEMY

Videos from the [Mental Health in Journalism Summit](#)

- *How to Ask "Are You Okay?" Without Being Afraid of the Answer* by Ute Korinth
- *Building Resilience: How Journalism Organizations and News Leaders are Supporting Mental Health* by Samantha Ragland, Ute Korinth, Michael Sanserino, Katy Katopodis and moderated by Dr. Kortni Alston Lemon
- *Mental Health as a Collective: The Newsroom as the First Place of Support* by Laura Aguirre
- *Psychosocial Safety in Broadcasting: Why a Compassionate Perspective Leads to Better Journalism* by Julie Freeborn and Peter Kinderman

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- ① **Practice active listening:** If managers can master the technique, they often find it liberating as they no longer feel under pressure to fix everyone's problems. Often, a team member who feels truly heard will feel supported to come up with their own solution.
- ② **Model vulnerability:** Show your own humanity and humility as a leader. This can be uncomfortable at first so [Dan Cable](#), professor of organizational behavior at London Business School, has this advice: "When we are feeling vulnerable, we need to talk to ourselves and others with phrases like, "The brain is a muscle that gets stronger with practice," and "Nobody ever walked before they fell."
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Tighten your digital security



Manage your privacy online



Find support

② *RESPOND*



Document online harassment (you can delegate this step to a colleague as a way to take care of yourself)



Report abuse to platforms



Block and mute



Decide whether to practice counterspeech. You can fight back and write back – or choose not to engage.

③ *CULTIVATE SELF-CARE*



Breathing and mindfulness: The International Women's Media Foundation recommends [breathing exercises](#) or mindfulness to help you cope with stress, anxiety and [insomnia](#).

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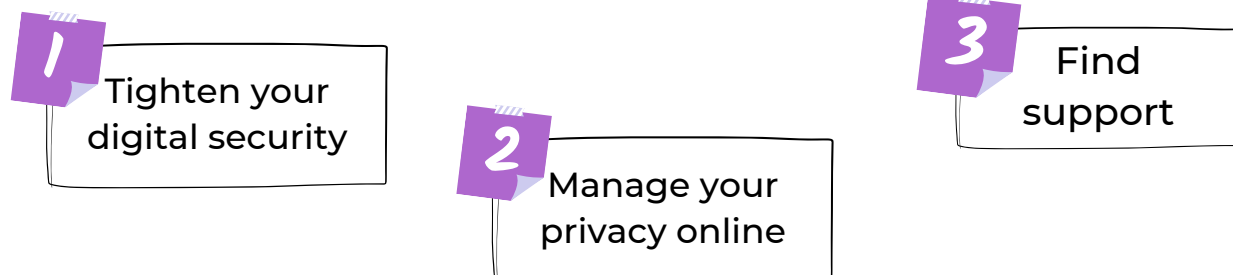
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Do's and Don'ts of Psychological Safety



BE CONSCIOUS OF CULTURAL DIFFERENCES

The idea of psychological safety is very rooted in Anglo-Saxon organizational culture, where challenging authority is more acceptable than in other parts of the world. Employees from countries like Serbia, Nigeria and India that have a tradition of respect for hierarchy, might find it harder to express disagreement with their managers than colleagues from countries like the United Kingdom and the United States. Likewise, it might be easier for a manager in a flat-hierarchy start-up to admit fallibility than a boss in a large top-down traditional media house.



DIFFERENT GENERATIONS MAY HAVE DIFFERENT EXPECTATIONS

Managers often perceive that younger reporters, particularly Gen Z, seem to need a lot of feedback and attention, which can cause tensions. But usually they just want to work in a place where they feel comfortable to speak up and make a contribution. That should be good news for everybody.



IT'S NOT ABOUT BEING NICE

To be clear, psychological safety isn't always about being nice and agreeing with everyone. This is not about creating environments where people think it is fine to slack off, or make mistakes without consequence. But if colleagues are afraid to speak up or experiment, organizations will miss out on open exchange, learning and innovation.



BE AWARE OF YOUR CONFLICT MANAGEMENT STYLE

Successful teams need to be able to disagree and deal with conflict in a constructive way. So managers need to be alert to their own conflict management style if they want to promote good teamwork and be prepared to vary their style depending on the situation. Sometimes, it pays to be more assertive, while other times a more collaborative approach works better.

RESEARCH

During her research into drug errors in hospitals, Amy Edmondson came to the counterintuitive conclusion that better teams seem to make more mistakes, not fewer. She eventually realized that doctors and nurses in these high-performing teams don't necessarily make more mistakes, but they report more because they don't fear retribution for being open about problems.

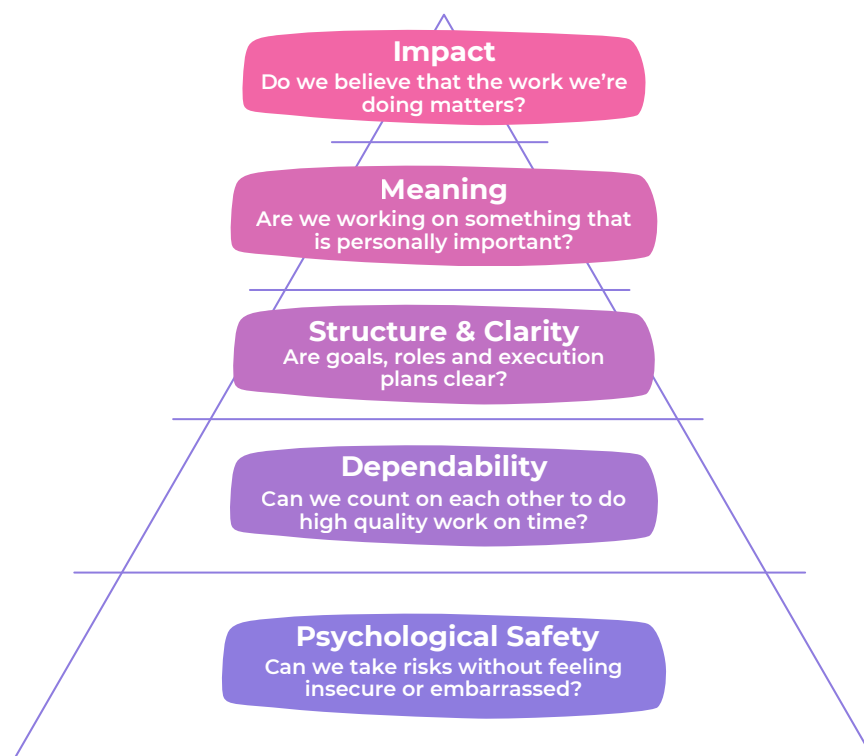
“My eureka moment was this: better teams probably don't make more mistakes, but they are more able to discuss mistakes”

Amy Edmondson
[Harvard Business Review](#)

Google studied thousands of teams in “Project Aristotle” and concluded that the top-performing groups had five dynamics in common, with psychological safety the most important of them.

The other key factors cited by Google are:

- **Dependability:** members reliably complete quality work on time
- **Structure and clarity:** a team has clear roles, goals, and plan
- **Meaning:** team members have a sense of purpose in their work
- **Impact:** members believe their work makes a difference



Active listening is key for promoting psychological safety

One of the most powerful ways leaders can cultivate this culture is to practice **active listening**, which involves **listening without judging or jumping to conclusions, and refraining from imposing your own opinions or solutions.**

Journalists think they are good at listening, but usually **we are trained to look for the key statement that fits into our story.** In active listening, **it's important to connect, not to remember.** There's no hidden agenda, no feedback, we're not trying to solve the other person's problems. **The goal is to connect from a deeper place with curiosity and empathy, not to gather information as we do when interviewing a source.**

“*For me, active listening is listening with the intention of understanding the other's world. Connection comes as a natural consequence of this intention that unfolds.*”

Aldara Martitegui
Co-founder of The Self-Investigation

We often find it hard to resist the temptation to interrupt, while we usually jump in to fill any uncomfortable silence in a conversation. Here are some tips for how to practice active listening:

- **Identify what kind of conversation you're having:** is it practical? Emotional? Social?
- **Face the speaker and have eye contact.** “Listen” to non-verbal cues too.
- **Don't interrupt.** Encourage the other person to share what they have to say.
- **Listen without judging, or jumping to conclusions,** and try to avoid planning what to say next.
- **Show that you're listening** by acknowledging how the other person is feeling and looping back what you've heard for accuracy.
- **Share how you feel,** and avoid imposing your opinions or solutions.

TIPS FOR INDIVIDUALS

A culture of psychological safety is often the responsibility of team and organizational leaders, who help set the tone of interactions amongst team members. That said, individuals have a number of tools at their disposal for encouraging psychological safety in a team.

1

Model psychological safety with peers, to show what it looks like in practice, including asking each other regularly how they're doing.

2

Practice upward management and internal advocacy.

3

Practice ostentatious listening: members of a team demonstrate they are actively listening by repeating what has just been said and making eye contact (a bonus - this kind of amplification of colleagues can help fight [gender bias](#)).

4

Learn communication skills such as **assertiveness**.

5

Identify opportunities to engage in **active listening** with audience and clients.



Did you know?

Boston Consulting Group (BCG) [research](#) shows that psychological safety is particularly effective at improving the workplace and reducing attrition for women, people of color, LGBTQ+ employees, people with disabilities, and people from economically disadvantaged backgrounds.

The BCG data shows that members of diverse and disadvantaged employee groups say they are much more likely to quit when in workplace environments with low psychological safety as compared with their more advantaged peers in the same environment.

TIPS FOR MANAGERS

Promoting psychological safety often demands a big shift in organizational culture. If a manager wants to encourage team members to admit to mistakes or suggest new ideas, they will need to acknowledge their own fallibility and be open to constructive criticism of their own leadership.

Here are some ways that a leader can promote a feeling of safety in a team. These tips can be applied in team meetings or one-to-one meetings:

- ① Practice active listening:** If managers can master the technique, they often find it liberating as they no longer feel under pressure to fix everyone's problems. Often, a team member who feels truly heard will feel supported to come up with their own solution.
- ② Model vulnerability:** Show your own humanity and humility as a leader. This can be uncomfortable at first so [Dan Cable](#), professor of organizational behavior at London Business School, has this advice: "When we are feeling vulnerable, we need to talk to ourselves and others with phrases like, "The brain is a muscle that gets stronger with practice," and "Nobody ever walked before they fell."
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- ④ Make space for everyone to speak:** To encourage sharing, you can implement a rule in meetings that no one talks twice before everyone has a chance to talk once. (This can also help value the different backgrounds, experiences, skills, personalities, and styles that each person brings to the table.)
- ⑤ Offer feedback, celebrate success:** Give as much praise as criticism.

- ⑥ **Hold regular one-to-one meetings.**
- ⑦ **Proactively address disagreements:** Address problems before they spiral out of control and acknowledge that every conflict has two sides and you might carry responsibility too.
- ⑧ **Encourage feedback of your leadership:** This can be a nerve wracking experience at first, but transparent feedback can help you improve as a leader. Try to react with openness and listening.
- ⑨ **Make sure you communicate your own boundaries:** Active listening and creating these kinds of spaces with your team demands energy and you can't be available at all hours.

Mental Health in Action

It can be tricky admitting failure. I tell junior staff: 'Here are some things I screwed up along the way'(...) At weekly team meetings we have a positive feedback mechanism to highlight the best work and why it was good. So much of the feedback from the audience is negative so we need to encourage each other with positives to take away.



Eric Litke

Senior Editor for the Fact-Check Team, *USA TODAY*
(United States)

We can conduct assessments within the team to see what skills we have and also to determine if someone is experiencing emotional burnout and identify solutions. If the person is dealing with a personal issue, we can offer them a few days off so they can return refreshed. And without any reproach.



Adriana Olivera

Journalist, editor and fact-checker at Bolivia Verifica

It is important that journalists understand that mental health doesn't care about your profession, or what you're expected to do, or how far you should do it, and all that. It can affect anybody.



Dr. Sa'adatu Adamu

Founder of Secure-D-Future International Initiative (SDF)



ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

[How news leaders can foster psychological safety](#) (American Press Institute)

This article by Samantha Ragland, Vice President of Journalism Programs at the American Press Institute, includes a [downloadable worksheet](#) to assess where you fall across the five dynamics of effective teams.

[We harness listening to build collective resilience](#) (Nieman Journalism Lab)

Mar Cabra, the co-founder and executive director of The Self-Investigation, writes on the importance of deep conversations.

[The Science of Effective Communication](#) (Happier Podcast)

Charles Duhigg, a Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist and author, speaks on four rules for a meaningful conversation, when to be vulnerable, and how to form the habits of becoming a "supercommunicator."

Psychological safety at Google (Google)

The company has conducted and released research on psychological safety in a variety of ways. Check out Project Aristotle, explained in this NY Times article "[What Google Learned From Its Quest to Build the Perfect Team](#)". Their re:Work page on "[Understand team effectiveness](#)" includes resources such as the [Team Effectiveness Discussion Guide](#) and a Guide on "[How to foster Psychological Safety on your teams](#)". Finally, "[Team dynamics: Five keys to building effective teams](#)", includes "7 questions to help gauge the level of psychological safety in your team."

[Psychological safety and the critical role of leadership development](#) (McKinsey)

This research shows how fostering psychological safety has to begin with the most senior leaders embodying the leadership behaviors they want to see across the organization, and the need for investing in leadership development programs to equip leaders to do that.

[A Guide to Building Psychological Safety on Your Team](#) (Harvard Business Review)

This article focused on avoiding blame culture, promoting diversity and letting teams make mistakes.

[How can leaders foster a culture of psychological safety at work?](#) (LinkedIn Community)

Tips on how leaders can model vulnerability, invite participation and other advice to promote better teamwork.