



Vicarious Trauma and Moral Injury

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The Self Investigation

Vicarious trauma

OVERVIEW

Trauma is often understood as something experienced directly, but it can also be experienced from afar, including through digital media. **Journalists can experience vicarious trauma**, also known as secondary trauma, which is defined by the [Dart Center for Journalism and Trauma](#) as “psychological changes resulting from cumulative, empathetic engagement with trauma survivors in a professional context.” In a fact-checking context, this can also arise from **witnessing traumatic events**. As the [Headlines Network defines it](#), “Vicarious trauma is exposure to someone else’s trauma.”

In other words, journalists can experience vicarious trauma by witnessing and reporting on traumatic events, even if they do not directly experience the event themselves. It can be a pathway to psychological injury, including **social withdrawal, anxiety and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD)**.

This is a particular risk for fact-checkers, who are tasked with verifying distressing content that is often full of conflict, violence, misinformation and abuse, especially in visual and audio form, which can elicit stronger emotional reactions compared to plain text. While audiences can turn away or switch off graphic imagery and news in social media, fact-checkers usually must engage directly as part of their day-to-day work.

“Fact-checkers are exposed to material that our brains struggle to process because of its violence, and this creates distress. Even if the event has not been experienced directly, it is experienced through the person affected. This wears the person down emotionally and lowers their defenses to deal with the trauma.”

Juan Carlos Segarra

Psychologist and cofounder of Vinland Solutions

Here are some key points about **vicarious trauma**

- Images on a screen (and audio) can take on a **life-like quality** in the brain.
- **Viewers feel shame:** “How can I be distressed? I’m not reporting from the field.”
- Images might be a reminder of **personal experience**, which creates risks for retraumatization.
- Compared to reporters on the ground, **viewers don’t know the full story**. There is no context for the images they see online, nor a natural beginning or end.
- It is a **different route to PTSD**, not a different condition.
- Journalists of color, LGBTQ+ journalists and others from marginalized backgrounds are at higher risk, particularly if they report on communities they belong to.

Moral injury

OVERVIEW

Not everyone experiences the severe symptoms of vicarious trauma. However, fact-checkers might experience **moral injury**, defined as perpetrating, failing to prevent, bearing witness to, or learning about acts that deeply transgress their moral/ethical values. This is distinct from vicarious trauma, but might also result from watching traumatic events online.

University of Toronto psychiatrist Anthony Feinstein, a leading researcher into the mental health of journalists, described moral injury as “a wound on the soul, an affront to your moral compass based on your own behavior and the things you have failed to do.” Feinstein said that many reporters who covered the 2015 refugee crisis in Europe suffered from a **sense of helplessness**, for example, because they couldn’t save people from drowning as they fled the civil war in Syria. That same sense of helplessness can also strike fact-checkers witnessing events from afar.

Moral injury is not classified as a mental illness nor a clinical diagnosis, although some experts suggest it can [coexist](#) with PTSD. While vicarious trauma results from witnessing death, serious injury or sexual assault, **moral injury results from a violation of your ethical code**, perhaps because you failed to help when witnessing violence, even from a distance. Moral injury can also be triggered when a manager or an employee's own organization acts in a way that contravenes their moral code.

Moral injury may prompt **feelings of shame, guilt, outrage, sorrow, disgust and despair**, which can make it hard to seek help for the condition, and more difficult to detect.

Fact-checkers are at risk of vicarious trauma and moral injury, but may be too ashamed to ask for help.

Viewing distressing content online can carry some of the same risks as reporting from the field, but people who are affected might not seek help because they feel shame that they are not putting themselves at the same physical risk as reporters or protagonists on the ground.

Katarina Subasic, editor in AFP's fact-checking team for Europe, explains the internal monologue that might occur when fact-checkers dismiss their own pain after viewing distressing online content: "Who are we to feel bad? We are not the ones who are suffering." She added that some journalists are concerned about the impact on their careers if they admit weakness: "If they say they are affected, people are worried they won't get the big assignment."

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*We need to break the selfless-activist mindset.
It's OK to care about yourself.*

Naseem Miller”

Senior health editor at The Journalist's Resource,
Harvard Kennedy School

What to Look for with Trauma and Moral Injury

Consider these signals an internal alarm system. If you suspect that you might be experiencing any form of trauma, don't keep it to yourself. Speak with a colleague or your boss, a health professional or find out what support is available through your company. [Reporters Without Borders](#) has assembled some of the signs of **post-traumatic reactions** that colleagues can look for. These can include the following:



For detecting moral injury, one of Feinstein's students, Jonas Osmann, developed a journalism-specific measurement methodology called the [Toronto Moral Injury Scale](#) which asks questions including how journalists responded (or didn't respond) when they witnessed morally compromising actions by subjects or their own news organization.

TIPS FOR INDIVIDUALS

At work

- ① Meedan has assembled a [variety of tips around helping newsroom teams who view graphic content online](#). This includes a few from India's BOOM Fact Check: **Don't view triggering messages on your phone** and **don't carry around traumatic images and videos on your phone**.
- ② Schedule time at least once a week to **delete traumatic content from your phone**.
- ③ **Hang on to hope**, for example, actively seek out solutions/constructive stories.

At home

- ① **Create boundaries:** Don't watch triggering content after work hours, especially closer to bed time.
- ② **Have a ritual** to signal to your body and mind that your working day is over (especially when working remotely): light a candle, read a book, take a walk (pretend you are commuting on a train), change your clothes.
- ③ **Find hobbies** and activities that bring you joy.
- ④ **Try a mindfulness or spirituality app** like [Headspace](#), [Calm](#) or the free [Insight Timer](#).
- ⑤ **Seek access to professional help.** However, in some places, seeking therapy is still **taboo**, or there are few therapists available or their help is very expensive: "In my culture, we don't go to therapists," one participant said.

Moral Courage: Antidote to Moral Injury

Professor Anthony Feinstein argues that moral courage and the actions it motivates can be seen as the “antidote” to the distressing emotions of moral injury.

He says **there are three prerequisites for moral courage:**

- A dangerous environment;
- A strong moral compass;
- The agency, energy, and endurance to speak out against the acts that transgress one’s moral compass.

He says journalists can avoid moral injury by documenting those acts and bringing them to the public’s attention.

“The moral courage that they display is a kind of moral courage that we need in our society for us to live our lives in a democratic way,” he told [The Varsity](#).



Did you know?

- [Research](#) over the past 20 years from the Dart Center for Journalism and Trauma suggests that between **80 and 100% of journalists have been exposed to a work-related traumatic event**. That said, most journalists exhibit resilience. This is evidenced by relatively low rates of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and other psychiatric disorders, despite high trauma exposure.
- According to the results of a survey conducted by Eyewitness Media Hub, cited by [Free Press Unlimited](#), **more than 50% of journalists are exposed to shocking source material** multiple times a week.
- A [study](#) commissioned by the International News Safety Institute showed that **moral injury rather than PTSD or depression was the biggest psychological challenge confronted by journalists** covering the refugee crisis in 2015.

TIPS FOR MANAGERS

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.”

Here are some tips we recommend considering:

Help minimize your team’s contact with distressing content

- ① Encourage colleagues **not to check videos on WhatsApp or outside of work**. Only look at it on computers/laptops: don’t take it to bed with you!
- ② Create a **rotation system** so that not only one fact-checker/editor is working on triggering stories.
- ③ Encourage colleagues to **put videos on mute** unless you have to listen.
- ④ BOOM Live insists that fact-checkers **include a trigger warning if they share disturbing content or images on WhatsApp**. As Managing Editor Jency Jacob notes: “If I am not in the mood, I will click later.”

Provide structures of psychosocial support

- ① **Check in on staff regularly**: managing vicarious trauma and moral injury is a conversation that never stops. Keep having that conversation.
- ② **Create support networks** of colleagues.
- ③ Provide training for your staff to identify signs of vicarious trauma and know how to act if they start feeling them
- ④ Work with a professional to develop a **debrief process** for people working on potentially triggering stories.



EMOTIONAL DEACTIVATION OR DEFUSING

This is a tool that psychologist Juan Carlos Segarra recommends after exposure to a difficult case: **the work team meets and talks freely and without interruptions to share how the work went**, what each one felt, and if there were any points of friction.

“Defusing [during a meeting] brings the team together,” says the psychologist. He also recommends initial meetings prior to difficult coverage periods. “This way we avoid magical thinking: we believe that by not talking about ugly things, they won't happen. But obviously things don't happen like that.”

Mental Health in Action



Participants were better enlightened and teammates became more open to talk about their stress-level or vicarious trauma experience and connected to organisations where they could freely access professional therapy.



Opeyemi Kehinde
Editor, Nigeria FactCheckHub



I worked with my coach and also used session materials to build a mental health one-pager for our team that gives them key education and resources on vicarious trauma, harassment and stress.



Eric Litke
Senior Editor for the Fact-Check Team, USA TODAY

After 8 p.m. we actively discourage discussion of work. People should do something else in life. Nothing is breaking news for us. Why push people to work late at night?



Jency Jacob
Managing Editor, BOOM Live



ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

A number of Journalism Support Organizations have developed comprehensive and thoughtful guides that offer a closer look at vicarious trauma and moral injury in the newsroom. This includes the groundbreaking and important work of the [Dart Center for Journalism and Trauma at Columbia Journalism School](#). We recommend starting with these in-depth resources from the Center:

[Covering Trauma: Impact on Journalists](#)

An overview of research on the occupational hazards for journalists covering traumatic events, the risk factors, and some mitigation strategies.

[Self-care tips for journalists \(plus a list of several resources\)](#)

Tips to build resilience from Dr. Elana Newman, research director at the Dart Center.

[Leading Resilience: A Guide for Editors and News Managers on Working with Freelancers Exposed to Trauma](#)

A collaboration between ACOS Alliance and Dart Centre Asia Pacific, this guide helps editors and managers understand and support their teams. It's tailored for journalists in Ukraine and includes useful examples of developing a trauma management plan and handling assignments.

[Trauma Aware Journalism](#)

A compilation of videos, study guides and tip sheets on how to minimize harm when speaking to people affected by trauma from the Dart Center for Journalism & Trauma; the [Canadian Broadcasting Corporation](#) (CBC/Radio-Canada); and the [Canadian Journalism Forum on Violence and Trauma](#).



ADDITIONAL VICARIOUS TRAUMA RESOURCES

In addition, we recommend the following resources from organizations who have worked directly on this topic for many years with journalists:

[Vicarious Trauma: A guide for journalists and newsrooms to recognise vicarious trauma and mitigate against it](#) (Headlines Network)

A look at vicarious trauma's impacts on journalists, along with signs, symptoms and practical suggestions for both newsroom leaders and individuals.

[Vicarious trauma: mitigating graphic content in newsrooms](#) and [Safer fact-checking: Developing best practices for managing mental health](#) (Meedan)

Practical tips on mitigating vicarious trauma and managing mental health when viewing challenging content. This includes resources from the [Ekta](#) news coalition in India.

[Journalism and Trauma](#) (RSF)

A five-part series from Reporters Without Borders (RSF) exploring the impact of psychological trauma, including working with trauma survivors, personal repercussions, and strategies for care.

[Journalism and Vicarious Trauma: A Guide for Journalists, Editors and News Organisations](#) (First Draft)

A multi-layered guide for people at different stages of their newsroom careers, from those just starting off to senior leaders and human resource managers. It also includes tips for students and educators.



ADDITIONAL MORAL INJURY RESOURCES

[Moral courage: an antidote to moral injury?](#) (International Journalism Festival)

Professor Anthony Feinstein, author of *Moral Courage: 19 Profiles of Investigative Journalists*, speaks with Hannah Storm, Founder and Co-Director of the Headlines Network, in an engaging exploration of moral courage, why it's so important right now, and how it could be an antidote to moral injury.

[How moral injury is impacting the news industry and what you can do about it](#) (American Press Institute)

A closer look at how newsroom managers can help teams who might be struggling with moral injury, and what to look out for.

[What is moral injury, and how does it affect journalists covering bad stuff?](#) (Foreign Policy)

A column by former Reuters reporter and bureau chief Dean Yates, who has also written the critically-acclaimed [Line in the Sand](#), a gripping account of his own personal experience with PTSD and moral injury, along with his journey toward healing.

[On Moral Injury: Can a new diagnosis help heal our souls?](#) (Harper's)

Janine di Giovanni, a senior fellow at Yale's Jackson Institute for Global Affairs, offers an essayistic reflection on moral injury, in conversation with learnings from Anthony Feinstein.



THE SELF-INVESTIGATION ACADEMY

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

- ***Trauma-Aware Journalism: A News Industry Toolkit*** by Ariel Ritchin, Dave Seglins and Jane Hawkes
- ***Moral Injury and Moral Courage: How Journalists Can Protect Their Mental Health When Faced with Stories That Impact Their Consciences*** by Anthony Feinstein and Michelle Shephard