Journalist Wellbeing Resource
By Anna Kuliberda

Online harassment, cyberbullying, doxxing, verbal crime (hate speech) and any other form of online persecution deserve our attention. We no longer live in a time when the physical and mental health effects of such persecution are considered socially acceptable. They can hurt just as much as physical violence does, harm not only the direct target, and can prove much longer lasting.

Starting with our bodies - build resilience by completing the stress cycle each day.

When first responders first get to somebody, they assess what physical injuries their bodies have. We should also pay attention to this physical and bodily aspect, even if online harassment can initially feel like it's solely confined to the 'virtual' space.

Our brains can't really tell the difference between a physically present threat and an online one; they react in the same way, for example through an adrenaline rush, cortisol-fueled "Fight, Flight or Freeze" response (FFF). The stress cycle is activated, and the body knows it's time for "survival mode". This requires a lot of energy. The brain prioritizes the FFF over anything else (including thinking!). Our auto-pilot is on.

The 21st century is far more complex than the savannah and a hungry lion that our brains originally evolved for. It's going to take our whole brain power to navigate the complexity of the modern world, survive crises, and, moreover, to heal from them.

At the same time, from the body's perspective, we are still at the savannah and the FFF response leaves our bodies exhausted, even if we manage to survive. It needs more than information that the danger is finished. Dealing with the stressor does not mean dealing with stress itself. It is for this reason that "completing the stress cycle" is an essential activity. We don't just have to understand what it is, but also incorporate it into our daily mental hygiene. Completing our stress cycle means sending our body a signal that says we are safe.

Journalism is, after all, stressful by default. It's a profession that, by its very nature, involves dangerous situations and people, not to mention deadline pressure and decreasing job security.

It gets even more difficult when something as threatening as online harassment, doxxing or hate speech is added to the usually high level of baseline stress. That can overload the nervous system and brain. Stress management is key here. It's letting the body know that it is not defending itself from a lion, and that it doesn't need to put every single drop of energy into the FFF.

It is a good idea to close the stress cycle on a regular basis rather than only in crisis situations. It might sound like a new concept, but a lot of us already do it. Sport, connecting with people, playing with your dog, or creating art become more meaningful when we understand the purpose behind them.

Following these steps can help you create a habit of mindfully completing the stress cycle:

1. Plan some time for managing stress every day by completing your stress cycle. After an especially stressful day, it can take longer and maybe it will need more than one approach.
2. Make a list of your favorite ways of letting your body know that it is safe, maybe it is something you already love doing, or maybe the following list can inspire you:
   - Sport, movement (such as running, dancing, yoga)
   - Breathing (mindfulness, different breathing techniques, meditation)
   - Positive social connection: talk to your colleagues, share feelings or just discuss the latest TV show you have binged, especially if you feel isolated. Reach out. Show your body that not all strangers are a threat—an intentional small talk with a barista or a shop assistant will be a good start
   - Affection with your close ones: your partner, friends, kids, even pets: hugs, kisses, tender touch—it works wonder for calming our nervous systems
   - Cry! Let it go! Even put on the saddest movie you know, and let yourself feel
   - Laugh! Only true, deep-from-your-belly laughs count. Playing with children or your pets, watching some silly movie and letting yourself laugh out loud is a perfect way to convince your brain there is no lion anymore (nobody would dare laugh like this when the king of the jungle is around!)
   - Creativity & Imagination and Art (immerse yourself in other worlds and spaces: create or use art such as novels, poetry, visual arts, music) and find serenity there—your body will understand it!
   - Spirituality, Higher Meaning, and Nature—connect with something larger
3. Practicing the above daily and share it with your team will normalize it. It will make it just like brushing our teeth, a perfectly normal self-care practice.
4. Try to notice during the day if maybe a minute of breathing or a walk would help you when the situation feels overwhelming.

Having a deeper understanding of your own stress reaction and what works for you will prepare you to be stronger during crises.

Building resilient, supportive teams - the best crisis response strategies for an organization

- Create policies, rituals, and actions to support the mental health and wellbeing of your journalists. To begin, discuss the closing of the stressful cycle routines of everyone and how they can be supported. Find out what colleagues do to complete their stress cycles and support them in taking those actions every day.

- The media is dominated by a "macho culture", so if you want to implement the new approach you must make the culture shift visible and practiced. "We-care" implies celebrating and praising each other's successes, such as setting boundaries or taking time off, and praising one another for even the smallest things, such as going for a walk. Initially, it may seem unnatural, but find ways to:
    - Make mental health a source of pride for the entire team
    - Make asking for help a norm and proactively organize spaces to ask for it - look for signs of isolation in people and help them in reaching out
    - Make sure the examples and practices of your organization's leadership aren't inconsistent with creating a culture of we-care support (for example, non-emergency emails sent in the middle of the night are seen as a need to respond immediately).
- Your newsroom should become accustomed to talking about emotions and promote this as a modern and rational response against "macho culture".
    - It is crucial to practice speaking about your feelings prior to a crisis because you can then use those experiences of community to cope once a crisis occurs
- Managers, editors, and HR assistants would benefit from training in issues such as stress management, vicarious trauma, moral injury, and compassion fatigue. Check out this piece by the DART Center for a good example of such trainings.
- Consider the long-term mental health effects of journalistic work.
- Keep in mind the other types of stress that your journalists may experience (i.e., their life situations, their societal context (gender, minority stress, being neurodiverse in a neurotypical world)).
    - You should ensure that managers and editors understand the effect it has on individuals and can adequately listen without gaslighting them.

How to react

When you experience verbal violence (hate speech), online harassment, or doxxing, this is how you can protect your mental health:

- Stay connected! Don't let yourself feel like you are alone. Colleagues, experts, online communities of people going through the same thing can help.
- Practice closing your stress cycle on a daily basis. If things get overwhelming, find someone who will be there for you and remind you of routine's importance, help you figure out a new way to practice or even come with you when the going gets rough.
- Don't lie to your loved ones about what's happening and don't make it seem smaller than it is. There is no need to share every aspect of what is happening but sharing the difficulties you encounter and how you feel will ease feelings of isolation.
- Whenever there is a threat against your closest ones (spouse, a family member, a pet), ask for help figuring out how to keep them safe—don't try to be a lone superhero; this is not the time to rely on your own reasoning alone.
- Beware of where you seek advice, because the impact of online harassment can be hard for most people to comprehend or even relate to. This might also be the case for your family members. Even well-meaning family members or friends might inadvertently make the situation worse by asking questions like "couldn't you just delete your social media accounts?". While such questions might come out of an honest desire for help, they might end up minimizing your emotional hardship and fail to grasp the complexity of the situation for a

person working in the media. Never forget: if you find out that the situation isn't working for you, and if it worsens your mental condition, do not be afraid to leave.

- Do not be afraid to ask for refuge on a friend's couch, if necessary, even if you do not feel physically threatened. Late-night loneliness can be really damaging, too.
- It might be a good idea to distance yourself from the stream of hate you might receive, or you may want to protect yourself from it all (by using spam filters, blocking accounts, or having someone filter it for you before you see it).
- Get help in your organization: ask for help in monitoring, filtering social media and email inboxes, as well as in collecting evidence. This can reduce the impact of abuse on you.
- Don't go to the police alone if you decide to report the abuse. It may be overwhelming to face the institution as a target of harassment after usually acting as a journalist.
- Your body might be sending you many signals as a result of this unusual situation. You will better know what to do to survive a crisis when you pay attention to your emotions and can understand their meaning.

For a newsroom of organization that doesn't have an established online harassment protocol

- To begin with, make sure your journalist is taken care of! Listen, support and don't leave them alone. Encourage people to ask for help by creating a space for it. The point is not only to let people know your door is always open, but also to give them options of what support they can receive. Because every situation is different, remember to stay flexible and adapt your default solution accordingly. This helps to build trust and ease feelings of isolation. Inviting someone in distress to a coffee and discussing options together or making sure that you check-in every day for a minimum of 10 minutes can make all the difference.
- Look at the effect on the other team members. It's a difficult moment for the whole team, not just the targets of harassment.
- Identify potential allies who can assist you in navigating this challenge.
- Considering that this is a crisis situation, choose someone to act as an emergency responder and protect the target of harassment. If there is such a possibility, consider having another person to work on preventing the potential damage to the organization. When resources are scarce, both responsibilities can be handled by one person.

Plan ahead for crises: develop a protocol for addressing online harassment when it occurs in your newsroom

Consider these things:
- Those responsible for crisis response coordination
  - It is important to identify the team members and team leaders by name, and to make sure everyone knows what their role is in coordinating the response
  - Do the people you just identified need training? (i.e., mental health first aid, legal training, cyber-safety training, their own resilience training)
  - Do they have the strength and sensitivity to deal with such a crisis? Can they provide emotional support while organizing the evidence collection and support logistics?
  - In case of absence of the leader, who will take over?
- How to assess harm and potential harm
  - What is happening, who are the actors, for how long, what is the impact on the target,

what can happen if the attack persists or escalates?
- o How to collect and store evidence
    - ▪ Who?
    - ▪ Where?
- o Take into account that the close ones of the target might also be in danger
- How to make targets physically and mentally safe - the goal is to prevent them from feeling alone, isolated, or even in shame.
- Team morale and trust in the organization could be affected. Make sure that your protocols are grounded in reality and are intended to protect the target.
    - o How to organize a safe place offline
    - o How to organize mental health support
        - ▪ Team and community support
        - ▪ Crisis intervention expert help
        - ▪ Long-term mental health impact experts
- How to organize safety online
    - o Ensure the security of your network
        - ▪ Ask experts about cybersafety rules for crises
        - ▪ Establish ways to communicate outside of social media, not to expose targets and team to more harm than necessary
    - o Have a policy in handling social-media and e-mail of the target
        - ▪ Who can step in and filter messages?
        - ▪ How is this person empowered to undertake this task?
        - ▪ What do they need in order to quickly start managing the target's account?
    - o Is blocking of hate-based accounts an option?
    - o Is closing some accounts possible and reasonable?

Who are allies? And how to reach for their support
- Police: are they an ally or not?
- This is a case-by-case question, but decisions if and how to proceed should be informed and not automatic.
    - o Analyze consequences/impact of proceeding and of sustaining from it?
        - ▪ For the target
        - ▪ For organization
        - ▪ For the larger journalist community and society
- What are other organizations who can support targets or your newsroom in surviving this crisis?
    - o Make a list of contacts, such as:
        - ▪ Legal help and expertise
        - ▪ Community support (local, national, and even international)
        - ▪ Mental health experts
        - ▪ Organizations which went through similar crisis

Resources to Consider

Dart Center - The Dart Center for Journalism and Trauma is a resource center and global network of journalists, journalism educators and health professionals dedicated to improving media coverage of trauma, conflict and tragedy. It is a project of Columbia University Graduate School of Journalism in New York City, with international satellite offices in London and Melbourne.
https://dartcenter.org/resources/online-abuse-self-defence-guide

Books:
- Atlas of the Heart: Mapping Meaningful Connection and the Language of Human Experience by Brené Brown: https://www.goodreads.com/en/book/show/58330567-atlas-of-the-heart
- 21 Days to Emotional Literacy Dan Newby, Lucy Núñez: https://www.goodreads.com/book/show/41009665-21-days-to-emotional-literacy
- The Field Guide to Emotions: A Practical Orientation to 150 Essential Emotions https://www.goodreads.com/book/show/44792618-the-field-guide-to-emotions
- Burnout: The Secret to Unlocking the Stress Cycle by Emily Nagoski and Amelia Nagoski https://www.goodreads.com/book/show/42397849-burnout?ac=1&from_search=true&qid=38EKlSo4MS&rank=1

Webinar:
- Webinar: Managing stress, burnout, and self-care in times of covid: https://www.annakuliberda.com/post/webinar-recording-managing-stress-burnout-and-self-care-in-times-of-covid

Podcasts:
- Permission to Feel with Marc Brackett, Ph.D.: https://brenebrown.com/podcast/dr-marc-brackett-and-brene-on-permission-to-feel/
- 3x01 Having our act together – and other warning signs in journalism and human rights work (Andy Carvin): https://anchor.fm/megaphone/episodes/3x01-Having-our-act-together--and-other-warning-signs-in-journalism-and-human-rights-work-Andy-Carvin-e9i2p4
- Feminist Survival Project 2020 -Episode 02: Complete the Stress Response Cycle: https://www.feministsurvivalproject.com/episodes/episode-02-complete-the-stress-response-cycle
- Klára Kalibová - Online harassment in court: https://anchor.fm/megaphone/episodes/Klra-Kalibov---Online-harassment-in-court-e32asi
- "Project HOPE" - Podcast about a Game to Teach People How to Fight Online Trolls: https://en.hive-mind.community/blog/79,project-hope-podcast-about-a-game-to-teach-people-how-to-fight-online-trolls
  - Slides from Tomas's workshop: https://megaphone.techsoupeurope.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/MEGAPHONE-2020-WORKSHOP-7-Zen-fu.pdf

Other Resources:
- On culture change from self-care to we-care: https://voxelhub.org/communication/we-care-in-2021/
- ONLINE HARASSMENT FIELD MANUAL: https://onlineharassmentfieldmanual.pen.org/advice-from-a-psychologist/

- https://www.poynter.org/tag/online-harassment/
- https://onlinesafety.feministfrequency.com/en/#resources

Communities:
- Journalism and Trauma FaceBook Group: https://www.facebook.com/groups/46814643386958
- Crash Override Network: https://crashoverridenetwork.tumblr.com/post/113748237272/guide-talking-to-family-police