

# Being a reporter, being a human

by Pieter van Zyl

**M**y most terrifying experience ever was visiting a crime scene where for the first time I saw a brutalised body. On that day I did irreparable damage by harassing the family of a man who had killed three of his colleagues and then turned the gun on himself. I was sent back to his family three times to get quotable reaction and a photograph of the murderer. I was shouted at, shoved out of the door and sworn at. Not only did I do mental damage to myself, but also to the people I attempted to interview. I want to do something to try to prevent this from happening again.

Young journalists often start out reporting on crime. Journalists can play one of two roles in reporting on crime: we can further traumatise victims and their families by not being sensitive in our reporting, or we can aid the healing process by creating a positive and safe environment for victims to tell their stories in such a way that it empowers them. If journalists have the tools to be empathetic listeners, their contact with victims could be the first step on the road to healing.

I believe there is a place for a manual on sensitive reporting, and I would like to contribute to it. Such a manual would have been useful to me as a cadet reporter.

“We, the bystander, have had to look within ourselves to find some small portion of courage that victims of violence must muster every day,” Judith Herman writes in her book *Trauma and Recovery*. “They remind us that creating a protected space where survivors can speak their truth is an act of liberation. They remind us that bearing witness, even within the confines of that sanctuary, is an act of solidarity.”

Herman was writing about the role of therapists, but the same could be said about our job as journalists.

For example: when you write about a “survivor of crime” – the preferred term – or any kind of traumatic experience, you should steer clear of “bulldog”-type interviewing. The person sitting across from you is vulnerable, not a corrupt politician or unreliable public worker. No ruthless grilling needed.

Most of the people I have interviewed, since I researched more sensitive ways of doing my work, have thanked me for the way I dealt with the information they gave me, trusting I would use it wisely. I hope this is something intrinsic to my personality and my experience with mental health issues and troubled times in my own life. I try to report on other people in the way I hope others would report on my life story and that of my family.

Recently I had to report on a 14-year-old girl who was held captive for 15 months in a hole in the ground as a sex slave. Two days after her abductor was arrested and she was found, media from all over the world pounced on her. She had to tell her story about cruel sexual abuse to men of the same age as the perpetrator, in a so-called safe house, but before therapists or welfare workers got to her. She was victimised all over again.

After this assignment I almost called it quits. But then I thought the best way to change the industry is from the inside. If I could persuade my colleagues to handle their



Francois Smit

## Triggering trauma: tips for reporting with care

**T**he scene is set and the main characters have been identified. As a reporter you will only play a cameo role. What is the impact that you want to make? A bad interview triggers re-traumatisation as the interviewee loses trust and control. You could give some control back by allowing the interviewee to set the pace, take breaks and end the interview when he or she feels like it.

**Don’t fake compassion.** Treat those you interview as you wish to be treated if you or your family were in the same situation. At the outset, establish roughly how long you are likely to need for the interview. Never ask the most overused and least effective of journalistic questions: “How do you feel?” If you were in your interviewee’s shoes, what would your answer be? Let your emotions inform rather than cloud your understanding.

**Listen!** The worst mistake a reporter can make is to talk too much. Shortly after an ordeal, survivors would rather have someone listening to them. Through active listening – tone of voice and body language that shows you are attentive – you may open up a person. You could, even just by switching on your sound recorder and allowing the person to unpack feelings and emotions in a safe space, unlock a memorable narrative.

**Being empathetic...** other people will be much more ready to accept our expression of our desires if we are willing to acknowledge theirs. This does not mean that we have to accept what others want. “We can disagree with others and still give them courtesy of letting them know we understand how they feel,” writes Chris L Kleineke in *Coping with Life Challenges*. “As a press photographer I quickly realised the day I stop caring about what I see and what I photograph is the day I stop making a difference,” says Lisa Skinner, *Mail&Guardian* photographer.

One of the single most traumatic mistakes a journalist can make is factual errors in a story. “A news article mentioned the day Jordan-Leigh was killed on her birthday. A few got the spelling of her name wrong. I would have preferred someone phoning me a few times to make sure of facts rather than reading it in print,” said Vernon Norton, the grandfather of the baby who was murdered more than a year ago.

When using photographs of dead or injured people, allow relatives to suggest which ones to publish. In a report on the rape of Springbok rugby star Schalk Burger’s sister René, a Sunday paper used a photograph of Burger with René celebrating with a glass of wine, together with a picture of the site where she was gang raped. This really upset the family.

subjects with more respect and sensitivity, that would help to soften the effect of crime on the psyche of our nation.

Journalists are also human beings, and the traumatic events we cover have an impact on us too. Every journalist has a way of dealing with trauma. “In *reiki* we learn: observe, don’t absorb. Care, don’t carry. This is a tremendous help to repeat this mantra to yourself when you have to cover a sad story,” says Marie Opperman, a magazine reporter. “In a way it makes it clear to you that this is the pain of the other person, not yours. Life gave him or her this load to carry. It’s not yours. All you have to do is report on it. I only got it after three decades.”

When journalists don’t deal with the responses caused by the stories they have to cover it can develop into post-traumatic stress. When we deny the mental impact of the work we do, dissociate from it by drinking or taking drugs, or take the violence we see at work and turn it into aggression at home, we become part of the vicious cycle.

“People ask: should we as journalists become soft and fluffy? The answer is: yes, sometimes,” says Dr Merle Friedman of the South African Institute for Traumatic Stress in Pretoria. “You need help to be able to switch off your emotions when you go out on a job and then switch them on again when you need to,” she adds. Know your limits and take a break after a series of emotional stories. You have to be able to say no and ask for help. That is the best stress management available. “If you don’t set boundaries on what you are willing to do and to which lengths you will go to get a story, no-one else will.”

Find a trustworthy colleague who is also a good listener for when the going gets tough. Every publication should have one. Natascha Kampusch, the Austrian girl who was held captive in a cellar for almost a decade, described her way of coping as “psycho-hygiene”. She constantly reminded herself that she was not going crazy and that her

abductor couldn’t take her sanity away.

Ask yourself: “Is this really going to matter a month from now? A week? A day?” Look at your expectations. Are they unreasonable or even irrational about your ability to change anything? One of the most fulfilling ways of dealing with the trauma caused by reporting is to follow the story to the end, through to the funeral and court case.

Simphiwe Nkwali of *The Times* said: “I was really tired, and angry that we as the media did not really do enough to try and track down the victims of the xenophobic violence recently. We just see them, take pictures because they are unconscious, and download them on the system and put the caption down as: ‘unidentified victim’. We did not do enough to give them dignity.”

So Nkwali decided to trace the family of the so-called “Burning Man” (see story on page 15) who became a symbol of the violence in the townships. He spent hours in hospitals and gave the man engulfed in flames a name: Ernesto Nhamuave from Mozambique. “I really wanted to follow it up and investigate who this guy was. In the first place to get accurate information, and for my own sanity. And I wanted to cover his funeral back in his country and tell his children and wife, the elders from his village exactly what had happened to him. It helped them get closure.”

“Helping fellow human beings is the greatest gift any of us can experience,” writes Frank Ochsberg in *The Reporter’s Humanitarian Role*. “It really is better to give than to receive. And your opportunity to give begins with listening. Then with learning. Then with understanding. Sometimes, all you have to do is be there.”

**For more information:**

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