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Back to index

# We need "coverage" for post-traumatic stress

## By Katherine Tam

Two years before Ian Stewart was shot in the head while covering Sierra Leone's civil war in January 1999, he knew something was wrong.

"I was covering the Cambodian coup," says the former West Africa bureau chief for the Associated Press. "A man who was guiding me around was blown up when he got caught in a booby trap. I held his hands as he was dying."

"My brain snapped."

That incident led to Stewart's developing post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). However, it wasn't until he was recovering in a London hospital from his near-death in Sierra Leone that with the help of his psychiatrist, he realized he was suffering from PTSD.

After September 11, not only are more Canadian journalists likely experiencing PTSD or acute stress disorder (ASD), but in many cases they won't get the help they need.

That's because few journalists are covered as well as Mike Hagens, a Canadian anchor and editor with Deutsche Welle Radio in Cologne. He has been "a walking zombie" since September 11.

"My employer offers considerable time off and we have agreements with various local businesses and institutions that allow us to have several options to deal with the stress," he says. "We also have a full medical facility staffed with doctors and nurses."

But in other newsrooms, there's very little help or even acknowledgment of PTSD or ASD.

"There is a stigma that if the word gets to the assignment desks, the journalists affected will no longer be given conflict stories," says John Owen, the former director of the Freedom Forum's now-defunct European Centre who spent 20 years at the CBC. "There was a French photographer who had just been released after being held hostage in Chechnya, and we asked him to

come to a London conference on PTSD and ASD--and he refused. He later hung himself."

"When I was with the CBC, no one labeled it then or tried to figure out its impact. The news business was mostly male, and it was assumed that one either drank it off with friends, or took it out on one's family."

For Murray Hiebert, the problem was not knowing how to recognize the stress and subsequently getting it mistreated. Before taking on a new job as the *Far Eastern Economic Review's* Washington bureau chief, he spent four weeks in a Malaysian jail in 1999 on contempt of court charges for writing a 1997 article that angered a judge's wife.

"I only recognized after I arrived in Washington how stressed out I had been," he says. "I thought I'd be excited in my new assignment, but instead I found myself to be pretty depressed. I tried to overcome this on my own for six months and eventually talked to my doctor about it. He suggested that I try an antidepressant, which I did for about a year."

"In hindsight, I think I would have recovered from the stress and depression much more quickly if I had tried counselling for post-traumatic stress. I didn't think of it then and nobody else suggested it to me."

There is also a misconception that PTSD and ASD only happen to war correspondents, says Robert Frank, one of the two Canadian founders of Newscoverage Unlimited, a non-profit, self-help organization for journalists suffering from trauma.

"I started Newscoverage Unlimited after observing the journalists coming back from the crash site of Swissair Flight 111," he says. "I was in Halifax, and reporters told me how they were feeling. Frema Engel, a Montreal trauma expert and the other Canadian founding member of Newscoverage Unlimited (which also has American, British, and Australian founders), taught me how to see signs of PTSD."

Since September 11, PTSD and ASD have become much more "legitimate."

"We just had a training session in Manhattan, and we've also gotten requests to do sessions throughout the U.S.," Frank says. "Until September 11, the idea of dealing with PTSD/ASD was a tough sell. Now suddenly, we are looking for more resources than we can ever imagine, and we have a great need for financial support."

But before September 11, journalists had started to speak out about PTSD and ASD. In the U.S., this started after the 1995 Oklahoma City bombing and the 1999 shooting at Columbine High. More recently, the deaths of journalists Miguel Gil Moreno de Mora and Kurt Schork in May 2000 in Sierra Leone, led to a Freedom Forum conference in London about the safety of frontline journalists. At this event, war correspondents complained that

news organizations had not trained them much, if at all, in protecting themselves physically and psychologically.

Here in Canada, University of Toronto psychiatrist Dr. Anthony Feinstein became interested in the subject two years ago after having a war correspondent as a patient. Dr. Feinstein himself had been traumatized while serving as a conscripted medical officer in the South African army during the Namibian war in 1983. He found very little documentation about how PTSD and ASD affected journalists, so with the help of the Freedom Forum, he did one of the world's first studies on journalism and trauma.

Released last April in London, his report noted that like the general population, most of the war correspondents who participated in the study turned out okay. However, Dr. Feinstein found that of the 169 war correspondents he studied, close to 30 percent have a "lifetime prevalence of post-traumatic stress disorder," and that 21 percent were suffering from major depression, compared to only eight percent in the general Canadian population.

After September 11, the number of journalists affected is likely to rise.

"Newspapers used to take a more reticent approach in dealing with PTSD and ASD," says Owen, "but the *New York Times'* executive editor Howell Raines recently wrote an interesting memo to his staff telling them to take time off or get help, so I think things could be improving."

Ian Stewart advises employers to get educated and get help. Stewart, who has just finished writing a book about his ordeal in Sierra Leone, says: "Get basic literature on PTSD or ASD from the Canadian or American psychiatric associations. Educate staff before they get into this. Make counselling available to staff and freelancers before and after they go through this, and offer post-event briefings if necessary. Anybody who witnessed what happened on September 11 is vulnerable, and it's an ongoing condition."

It also helps to listen to your staff, even if you can't always help them. Kirk LaPointe, senior vice-president of CTV News and a newsroom manager since 1985, believes this. "Ninety percent of problems can be solved by listening to people. We're all time-pressed, but you'll be amazed. I saw someone whose problems I couldn't solve, but she later wrote me a note saying that having me listen to her for 25 minutes made a huge difference."

Hobbies outside of journalism can also relieve stress. "Even before I got shot in Sierra Leone," recalls Stewart, "I loved writing in my journals, and I occasionally painted. It was while painting that things I witnessed but not fully understood suddenly came into my brain and onto the paintings. And writing in journals is considered to be a classic part of PTSD treatment."

And perspective also helps. "Getting traumatized is a normal reaction," says Frank. "It's not a character flaw. Most people will get over it. If a news

organization can unburden for its staff the anguish, the blame, and the numbing, it will probably lead to better reporting. It's not worth it to lose your staff's talent and expertise over this."

For more information:
-American Psychiatric Association: Taking Care Of Yourself
-The Poynter Institute: Covering The Attack--Connecting With Your Staff
-PTSD 101 by Dr. Frank Ochberg
-When trauma won't go away (Chris Cramer's personal account of dealing with PTSD)
-The Dart Center For Journalism & Trauma at the University of Washington
-Last taste of freedom (more about the closing of the Freedom Forum's European Centre--best viewed with Internet Explorer)