



## SELF-CARE FOR MEDIA



# SELF-CARE FOR MEDIA



## GOAL OF THIS SECTION

To provide practical suggestions and tips to promote your safety and well-being while covering a public health emergency.

### WHAT THIS SECTION INCLUDES

- › Tips to help you manage the major risks
- › Recommendations gathered from a variety of organizations for approaches that may help you be better prepared physically and emotionally

### WHAT THIS SECTION DOES NOT INCLUDE

Guidelines are not included for confronting specific public health emergencies.

## THE IMPORTANCE AND CHALLENGE OF SAFETY

Reporting on a public health emergency can make your career, but only if you take precautions to make sure that you do not become a victim of the emergency that you are covering. Regardless, the event will prove to be a stressful experience for even the most seasoned professionals. You have probably interviewed crime victims and others who have experienced trauma, but relatively few journalists have worked in an environment devastated by a terrorist attack or profound public health emergency. Adding to the stress and potential danger is the fact that the nature of the threat may be unclear, particularly in the early hours of an emergency.

Many issues complicate reporting during such events, including:

- › Physical and mental trauma or “burnout”
- › Potential exposure to pathogens, poisons, and other health threats
- › The challenge of covering a story when you and/or your loved ones are part of the “affected public”
- › Individual distress responses that may manifest as irritability, depression, anxiety, or other posttraumatic stress symptoms (see “Distress Responses” box)

The large scale of a public health emergency almost certainly means there is a limitless amount of work to do, and you may feel the need to push yourself beyond your usual limits. It can be difficult to leave the scene and go home or to take a break. But it is important for you to monitor your needs and well-being so you will be able to stay focused.

What you do in your role as a reporter may have as much impact on public safety as those providing medical assistance. Therefore, it is very important to ensure your physical safety and well-being.

### DISTRESS RESPONSES

**Distress responses are virtually universal when confronting trauma and usually resolve over time. In some cases, they may persist and interfere with personal relationships; impair functions; cause suffering; or develop into psychiatric disorders, such as post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), major depression, substance abuse, phobias, or other anxiety disorders. Distress can also manifest as irritability, social withdrawal, new onset or exacerbation of physical illness, and changes in behavior or personality. Editors, producers, and colleagues should keep an eye out for these persisting signs so that an affected journalist (or other members of the news team) can be offered help.**



## SELF-CARE DURING THE EMERGENCY

### PHYSICAL CARE

#### **Personal Safety Policies**

When breaking news of a suspected terror attack occurs, you will want to protect your personal safety as much as possible while covering the story. Because policies and procedures for sending media staff into hazardous situations vary from newsroom to newsroom and bureau to bureau, you may want to become familiar with policies in your workplace.

#### **Standards of Safety**

Policies and standards for protecting media personnel, both in the newsroom and in the field, are evolving rapidly in the wake of September 11 and the 2001 anthrax attacks. Both the International Federation of Journalists and the International News Safety Institute have published safety codes for journalists facing danger in covering assignments. These codes, developed by more than 100 media organizations and journalistic associations, suggest standards for journalist safety. Among other provisions, both codes urge news organizations to consider safety first, before competitive advantage, for journalists in dangerous environments. Although originally designed for journalists covering wars and civil emergencies overseas, much of this guidance may also be useful at home during a terrorist attack or other public health emergency.

The box on page 160 presents 11 steps for personal safety, which have been gathered through a review of safety tips from a variety of organizations, such as

the International News Safety Institute, the Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ), and the American Press Institute.

#### **Working In Teams**

You may want to consider working with a partner or a group, if possible, when out in the field. Some situations may require putting aside competitive pressures and instead collaborating with other media personnel to increase security. In addition, your teammates should be aware of your movements and able to alert others if a situation arises. CPJ recommends making sure that at least one person, preferably a supervising editor, knows where you are, with whom you are meeting, and when you will return (CPJ 2003).

#### **Personal Protective Equipment**

Media professionals who work in areas where biological or chemical agents of terrorism may have been in use face particular dangers. Some newsrooms have purchased “escape hoods” for the employees in their offices, while others have outfitted most of their news vehicles with full biochemical protection suits. Still, other news organizations have, after careful consideration, decided against issuing biochemical suits, concluding that they may give a false sense of security.

Training and practice are crucial for using protective gear. For example, according to the U.S. Army Medical Research Institute of Infectious Diseases’ Medical Management of Biological Casualties Handbook, a complete biochemical protection suit

### CARRYING IDENTIFICATION AND OTHER INFORMATION

CPJ recommends ensuring that all personal identification is secure but accessible, along with required press credentials and any personal medical alert emblems. In some situations, copies of vaccination records should be carried as well.

(CPJ 2003)



TIP

### PROTECTING IMPORTANT DOCUMENTS

Keep these records in a waterproof, portable container:

- › Will, insurance policies, contracts, deeds, stocks and bonds
- › Passports, social security cards, immunization records
- › Bank account numbers
- › Credit card account numbers and companies

**Note:** You may also want to keep copies of these documents in a safe location outside of your home or workplace.



TIP

Most news organizations agree ... that issuing protective gear is not for the purpose of outfitting reporters and crews to go into a hazardous situation, but rather to protect them and allow them to get out of danger.

– “Girding For Terror”  
*American Journalism Review*, April 2003



## “ I JUST TRY TO TELL PEOPLE TO STAY SAFE.

I may not always know the short-term or long-term effects of the story—or even the competitive aspects of the story. But I do know how it will affect this newsroom if they are not here tomorrow.”

*Angie Kucharski, vice president of news and station manager, KCNC-TV, Denver, CO  
From an interview about her staff and its coverage of Colorado's historic wildfires in 2002.*



**TABLE 1: SAFETY AND THE STORY—11 STEPS FOR PERSONAL SAFETY**

1. Be physically and mentally prepared for the situation you will be facing on assignment. It may be advisable to enroll in a biohazards hostile-environment course that includes basic first aid training before your assignment in a biohazardous situation.
2. If you are going into a physically risky situation, make sure to take a well-known, frequently used travel route.
3. If you have to make a road trip into a dangerous area, you might consider taking two vehicles, so that you will have a backup in case something goes wrong with one of them.
4. It is almost always wise to buddy-up with another correspondent for mutual protection when traveling into a hazardous location.
5. Let someone you can count on know when you are leaving and when you expect to return, and have him or her get word to the office if you do not get back in time.
6. If the situation at a hazardous site suddenly turns explosive, make sure you have figured out an escape route and how to flee as soon as possible. It is a good idea to park a car with nothing blocking its escape.
7. If you have a biohazard suit, it is important for you to know that it takes a minimum of 10 minutes to unpack the suit from its vacuum-sealed container. If you think that you may be in danger of sudden exposure, it may make sense to repack your suit into a sealed plastic bag.
8. Keep emergency phone numbers at hand, programmed into mobile phones, with a key (24/7) contact number on speed dial, if possible. Know the location of hospitals and their capabilities.
9. It is always a good idea when covering a hazardous assignment to review your current vaccination and immunization history. A general practitioner can either advise you on necessary vaccinations or refer you to someone who can provide advice and inoculations. Carry blood-type identification and information on any medical conditions on your person in the field.
10. In any situation that requires covering stories involving viral or bacterial agents, it is even more important than in normal circumstances to wash your hands carefully. Be sure to use good quality soap and plenty of warm water. (The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services' (HHS) Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) recommends that you wash for 15–20 seconds.) When soap and water are not available, you can use alcohol-based disposable hand wipes or gel sanitizers.
11. Consider whether there are other ways to get a story. In some cases, it might be possible to cover a story from a safer location.

Sources: American Press Institute 2001; CDC 2004; Centurion Risk Assessment Services Ltd. 2004; CPJ 2003; Franklin 2002; International News Safety Institute 2004b; Paterno 1998





typically consists of a protective mask, full-body overgarment, protective gloves, and overboots. Both the respirators and the overboots come in a wide range of sizes and must fit properly to be effective. However, this equipment may not fit properly if the wearer has long hair, glasses, or facial hair (Paterno 1998).

Depending on the circumstances of a given situation, a respirator may be used even if a full body suit is not. Respirators and masks come in different types and each type is designed for use against specific kinds of airborne contaminants. Thus, it is critical to choose the right type of respirator for a given purpose. Further, to be effective, a respirator must be used in a total program of proper selection, training, maintenance, and fit testing (to ensure that contaminated air does not leak around the edges of the mask). If you are unsure whether your company has a safety program that would include the use of a respirator, ask your employer.

Among the different types of respirators that you may have heard of are “escape hoods” that are designed to provide short-term protection and are intended only to provide a short amount of additional time (generally 15–30

## STAYING IN TOUCH MEANS STAYING ALIVE.

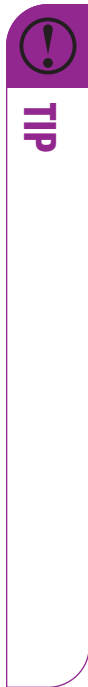
minutes) to escape from a dangerous situation and move to a safer location. Other types of respirators provide more robust and more prolonged protection against the dangers of inhaling hazardous particles, gases, fumes, dusts, and vapors. You may be familiar with respirators sold in hardware and home improvement stores; the simplest form of these are masks that fit over the nose and mouth and are held in place with an elastic band. Whatever the design, a respirator will be effective only if it has been tested and certified for use against a given type of contaminant and is used as part of a total program of respiratory protection. CDC’s National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health provides information to help you understand the purpose and use of respirators (<http://www.cdc.gov/niosh/npptl/topics/respirators/factsheets/respfact.html>). At the time of an event, public health officials may also provide guidance about the use of masks and respirators, depending on the situation.

### **Staying In Touch**

Staying in touch means staying alive. Several people, both in the field and back at the office, should have a list of emergency

#### **MONITORING SUBSTANCE USE**

It is not uncommon for people who typically use alcohol or drugs to increase their use during stressful situations. It is also common for people who are in recovery to start using substances again. People should be cautious of changes in their alcohol and drug use, because use of these substances may impair their ability to work, as well as their judgment, in potentially hazardous environments. These changes in substance use may be an indication of a need for more support. They are usually temporary; however, if the increased use continues, the individual may want to consider seeking professional help.



contacts as well as detailed instructions on how to get in touch with them. Typical communication arrangements for personal security include receiving clearance from a supervising editor before travel, letting associates and editors know arrival and departure times, and checking in with a designated contact on a regular, predefined basis.

## “ WHEN CONSIDERING WHETHER TO ENTER

an area affected by a terrorism event or other public health emergency, journalists should also be concerned about the welfare of their equipment. In many cases it is difficult or impossible to decontaminate electronic equipment. As a result, cameras, audio equipment, and sound trucks could be declared contaminated. In such a situation, the only alternative would be to leave them behind, with unknown chances of recovery. ”

*Vincent T. Covello, Ph.D. director of the Center for Risk Communication*



“A BUNCH OF OLD FELLAS, MYSELF INCLUDED, ALL SAID, ‘All right, Whew!’ Took a deep breath and said, ‘Where are we going from here?’ I’ve seen some stuff after 21 years, 22 years. [Reporting on September 11] put me through a whole range of emotions that I never felt before in this business.”

*Charles Stroble, chief photographer, WBAL-TV, Baltimore, MD*

*From “Running Towards Danger: Stories Behind the Breaking News of 9/11”*

It is also critical that you stay in touch with friends and loved ones during such events. According to Sunny Mindel, former press secretary for Rudolph Giuliani, many first responders felt more focused on their work during the response to September 11 after having checked in with loved ones and letting them know that they were OK.

## EMOTIONAL CARE

Taking emotional care of oneself is particularly important in a public health emergency, because you may also be a survivor of the emergency. You may wish to look up the Dart Center for Journalism and Trauma (<http://www.dartcenter.org>), whose mission includes creating and sustaining partnerships among media professionals, therapists, and others concerned with trauma and encouraging peer support among working journalists. A helpful resource on this site is “Tragedies & Journalists: A Guide for More Effective Coverage,” by Joe Hight and Frank Smyth. Even if you did not experience the same kind or degree of trauma as those whom you are interviewing, you may still be coping with the event. Few people who respond to a mass casualty event remain untouched by it. You may experience anxiety, sadness, grief, or anger—but postpone your need for rest and recovery while covering the emergency. This can work up to a point, particularly with practice, but such strategies have their limits, and experts recommend that you develop other psychological coping strategies, such as those described in the following sections (“Setting Boundaries” and “Self-Monitoring”), both for self-care and possibly in support of colleagues. It is most helpful to get together and talk after you have had a hot shower, a few warm meals, and a chance to catch up on sleep.

## Setting Boundaries

An important tool in protecting your emotional health during a crisis is one you probably use already in other aspects of your life—setting personal boundaries. By determining these before the crisis occurs, you will be better able to take care of yourself. Personal boundaries require a realistic assessment of your limits and what you need to be effective in covering the event. Keep in mind that it may be harder to maintain personal boundaries in a crisis because you also may have endured the event that you are covering, and this can make it harder to remain emotionally detached. Two examples of personal boundaries that you might set include:

- ▶ Setting work hours (e.g., limiting shifts to 12 hours or less after the initial emergency phase of the event).
- ▶ Limiting exposure to the event during “off” hours. Although it is natural to want to keep on top of the developments in the story while at home, constant exposure to a traumatic event takes its toll. A study on psychological responses to the events of September 11 indicated that the number of hours of television coverage an individual watched per day in the days following the attacks correlated with his or her development of PTSD or symptoms of clinically significant psychological distress (Schlenger et al. 2002). It is unclear whether this association is actually causal or only correlational (i.e., Does television coverage lead to increased psychological distress, or do those who have more psychological distress seek out more television exposure than those who do not?).



Regardless of the story you are following, it is clear that taking some kind of break from work is important for refueling yourself emotionally and physically. For example, perhaps it's possible to rotate jobs so that you are not constantly on the front line of the disaster.

### **Self-Monitoring**

Even the most seasoned professional needs to be attentive to his or her own stress responses. Continual self-monitoring is an important component in managing stress. Though this may seem obvious, when you are involved in covering a public health emergency, self-monitoring may seem like a luxury. Functioning well will depend on many factors, such as stamina, expectations, prior traumatic experiences, and even eating habits. The way you function in your regular role may be very different from the way you function in a crisis. Therefore, continual self-monitoring is critical to make sure that stress is at a manageable level. You may find it helpful to partner with a colleague (“buddy care”), so that you can help monitor each other’s stress levels to determine when relief is needed.

The Self-Monitoring Checklist developed by HHS’ Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (see appendix H [p. 245]) is a useful tool for measuring stress levels during and following a public health emergency. Experiencing a few of the listed symptoms generally does not constitute a problem, but experiencing several symptoms from each category may indicate a need for stress reduction. By taking care of yourself, you will be better able to do your job and, for that matter, to return to “normal” personal functioning after the event.

### **Excessive Desensitization**

A potentially harmful coping mechanism to both the media and the community is the effect of desensitization to others’ emotional pain and psychological distress. While it is sometimes possible to compartmentalize your emotions temporarily to get through a difficult period and do what it takes to get a story written, it is harmful to stop feeling altogether or to put away the emotions for too long. You need time and encouragement to process your emotions—to deal with your feelings of sadness, anger, horror, or confusion and not repress them (Bull & Newman 2003).

How can you tell you’re becoming desensitized? One sign is projecting negative feelings experienced on the job onto others at home in angry or abusive ways. Sooner or later, compartmentalization, an effective short-term coping mechanism, breaks down. “Walling off one’s feelings” may even hinder a reporter’s ability to cover the story, because his capacity for empathy has been diminished. Reporters who retreat into an emotional shell may find it painful to build rapport with and listen to others who have experienced alarming or tragic circumstances.

### **Talking With Others**

Making mental health services readily available for those who need them has proved helpful after many community tragedies. This may be a particularly good strategy for media employers to use in providing support for their journalist employees. However, the benefits of the common practice of group debriefings (voluntary or mandatory and whether facilitated by a certified professional or not) has been debated. (Institute of Medicine of the National Academies 2003; National Institute of Mental Health 2002).

## **“THERE IS A FEAR IN NEWSROOMS**

**of being labeled as weak or unable to do a story. Culturally, journalists need to realize that they are entitled to grieve.”**

*David Handschuh, photographer, New York Daily News*

*From an interview reflecting on the severe physical injuries and emotional stress he experienced as a result of covering the attack on the World Trade Center in New York City on September 11, 2001.*



## “ YOU RESPOND AND YOU KEEP DOING YOUR JOB.

And I think because you become so focused, that's where [it becomes] easy for a lot of people who do what we do to sort of compartmentalize and focus, and not realize ... the effect of how a tragedy might hit them.”

*Angie Kucharski, vice president of news and station manager, KCMC-TV, Denver, CO  
From an interview about her and her colleagues' experiences covering the Columbine High School shootings and their aftermath in 1999.*

Organizations may find it helpful to offer mental health services to their employees (e.g., through an Employee Assistance Program) and to create an environment that supports seeking these kinds of services when needed. A mental health consultant or counselor can also serve as a resource for disaster mental health questions and can provide names of professionals with expertise in particular areas.

The Institute of Medicine's Committee on Responding to the Psychological Consequences of Terrorism further noted that:

Some workplace environments have a culture that is not conducive to seeking help for psychological issues. Seeking help or publicly sharing fears may be seen as a weakness. Alternative strategies may be necessary in such cases. An easily accessible anonymous service outside the workplace may be preferable to ensure confidentiality, and initiatives, such as group debriefings, may be less useful (Institute of Medicine of the National Academies 2003).

It is important for employers to de-stigmatize the act of seeking mental health support so that everyone can feel comfortable accessing these services. Peer support is also beneficial. Often there are individuals in media organizations whom troubled employees can seek out for empathy and friendly counsel. The persons providing this counsel, however, need to be careful not to become overwhelmed by others' emotional pain (Bull & Newman 2003).

### SELF-CARE BEFORE THE EMERGENCY

Making preparations before you get an assignment to cover terrorism or another public health emergency can make a big difference in your physical and emotional health when the time comes. Fortunately, recommendations have been developed by

professional societies, news organizations, and journalists for actions that can protect you from injury or illness in those stressful times. The following are some considerations as you start to plan for an emergency event and determine whether you're ready:

- › **Management structure and support.** Is your media organization prepared to respond to a public health emergency? Has there been special training/education in disaster reporting?
- › **Social support.** Do you have a strong support network of peers, friends, and/or family to count on?
- › **Competing demands.** Do you have family responsibilities to deal with? Are there ways to plan ahead of time to meet those responsibilities?
- › **Physical health.** Do any health considerations limit your ability to work in certain conditions or environments? Do you have a lot of stamina? Do you take care of yourself when under stress, or do you tend to get sick or experience stress levels that interfere with getting your job done? Do you take any medications?
- › **Prior traumas.** Have you experienced prior traumas of any sort (e.g., disasters, accidents, abuse, sexual assault) or the recent death of a loved one? Will certain situations have personal significance due to prior experiences? (Note: Prior traumas or losses may make coping with a dramatic health emergency more difficult for some people but easier for others. You will need to decide for yourself whether to get involved, based on whether you have resolved the emotional issues surrounding the earlier trauma or grief.)
- › **Prior mental health issues.** Do you have any past mental health issues that may affect your adjustment or functioning in a disaster setting?





## MAKING PERSONAL PREPARATIONS

Only you can decide how close you get to the actual disaster scene and whether you will interview survivors. These decisions depend on you knowing yourself, including your reactions and limitations. Whether you do this kind of work or you simply know that such an assignment may come your way, you can help yourself adjust to working in a disaster setting by taking the following steps in advance:

### › **Make arrangements for personal responsibilities.**

Confidence and security in the field begin with the sense of well-being that comes from knowing that plans are in place for those you love. If you have children, elderly parents, financial responsibilities, or other personal demands that may compete for your attention during a disaster, you might want to try to make arrangements ahead of time. Information on how to prepare a Family Disaster Plan can be found in appendix E (see p. 239).

› **Create a self-care plan.** You may want to consider how you will take care of stress and your health while doing disaster work.

› **Participate in drills and other disaster training.** Although training can never completely simulate a disaster, it can help prepare you for some of the issues that may arise in a disaster setting. Some larger news organizations have enrolled their front-line reporters, editors, and photojournalists in “hostile-environment training” programs or safety courses tailored for journalists. The central focus of such courses is to improve knowledge and security awareness skills so that journalists can avoid life-threatening situations in the field. A variety of American and international companies offer security, first aid, and emergency response training as well as

biological, chemical, and nuclear weapons training. Consider approaching local emergency management and public health agencies involved in planning and response for these events to explore whether you can participate in their training exercises. The benefit to the media is that such participation helps media understand local response procedures and build relationships with local public health officials and first responders. Media participation is helpful to officials as it can help test risk communication strategies. You may be more successful in gaining participation if you agree not to cover the exercises as a story but as a true participant.

### › **Work with employers to make workplace preparations.**

You can work with your managers and colleagues to develop emergency response plans and discuss the details of how work will change during an emergency (e.g., whether managers will reassess regular work, change shifts).

### › **Ensure that your employer has a plan for providing psychological support.**

This support, which may be needed during and after such an event, may be offered through Employee Assistance Program staff or contracted specialists. Assistance should be confidential to assure journalists that access to help will not harm their careers.

### › **Assemble a disaster supplies kit for home and workplace.**

If you need to evacuate your home or office or need to shelter in place, having some essential supplies on hand will make you feel more comfortable. You should consider preparing a disaster supplies kit in an easy-to-carry container, such as a duffelbag or small plastic trash can. (More information on disaster supplies can be found in appendix F [see p. 241].) The American Red Cross recommends that copies of essential documents—powers of attorney, birth and

## “ I CONTINUE WITH THERAPY AND WORK

through some of the issues of September 11. There are many, many newspapers and television stations that offer employee assistance programs. That’s a good thing; however, it’s reactive, rather than proactive. You as the person who responds to an event have to seek them out. And while many of them do a very, very excellent job ... many of these employee assistance programs aren’t trained to deal with traumatized journalists. ”

*David Handschuh, photographer, New York Daily News*

*From an interview reflecting on the severe physical injuries and emotional stress he experienced as a result of covering the attack on the World Trade Center in New York City on September 11, 2001.*



marriage certificates, insurance policies, life insurance beneficiary designations, and a copy of your will—should also be kept in a safe location outside the home. A safe deposit box or the home of a friend or family member in a different town is a good choice. (More information on preparing a workplace disaster supplies kit can be found in appendix G [see p. 243].) Additional supply checklists can also be found at <http://www.ready.gov>.

## SELF-CARE AFTER THE EMERGENCY

As the coverage of the event starts winding down, it is important to continue monitoring your behavioral, psychological/emotional, physical, cognitive, and social functioning, especially if you are experiencing challenges returning to your normal routine. Tips for reducing stress and renewing energy, developed by HHS' Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, can be found in appendix I (see p. 246).

There may be times when stress reduction strategies are not helpful enough. Research has shown that some changes associated with exposure to trauma may involve a change in brain chemistry and function. Antidepressants can be useful in reducing both PTSD and depression (Bull & Newman 2003). Cognitive-behavioral treatment models have also been shown to be effective for these disorders. The Disaster Mental Health Institute at the University of South Dakota provides the following guidelines (Jacobs 2003), which may help you decide if your reactions may require professional assistance:

- › When disturbing behaviors or emotions last more than 4–6 weeks
- › When behaviors or emotions make it difficult to function normally (including functioning at work or in the family)
- › Any time an individual feels unstable or concerned about his or her behavior or emotions



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