When journalists are exposed to trauma and graphic imagery, the impact can go well beyond their stories.

BY CHARLOTTE WEST

Carrying the Weight

rymaine Lee, a news correspondent for MSNBC, made a name for himself as a young Times-Picayune reporter whose coverage of Hurricane Katrina led to a Pulitzer Prize.

"Going through Katrina was when I first noticed just the weight of it, seeing bodies and dealing with people who lost not just all of their worldly possessions but also their loved ones," he said. "And I remember after getting through the initial... devastation, my fuse was much shorter. I was stressed out. I would occasionally lash out at people close to me. Later, when I was older and had more understanding, I realized that what I was going through was a degree of trauma. In so many ways, trying to be a voice for the voiceless, I was carrying and also projecting their pain."

As his career progressed, Lee continued to cover violence, crime and poverty. He recently interviewed a woman whose son died violently. Acknowledging that witnessing other people's trauma is part of the job, he said he felt a "twinge of something," a feeling that he was intruding on a private moment.

"When it comes to journalism, part of letting people understand the depth of the human experience is that you need to feel a little bit of this woman's pain," Lee said. "So if I have to carry some of that weight and put it on a TV screen for you to truly understand what this human is going through and the broader policy implications or whatever it is we're trying to say as journalists, that's kind of the toll."

SECONDARY TRAUMA IS COMMONPLACE

The anxiety that Lee experienced from the subjects he covered is common among journalists, said Elana Newman, a psychology professor at the University of Tulsa and research director of the Dart Center for Journalism and Trauma.

While post-traumatic stress disorder among journalists covering disasters and wars on the ground is well-documented, trauma also happens when journalists are exposed to disturbing images and content secondhand. Editors and producers often encounter graphic images, including user-generated content, in their day-to-day work. A 2014 study by psychiatrist Anthony Feinstein, published in the Journal of the Royal Society of Medicine Open, found that frequent, ongoing viewing of violent content increases the likelihood that media professionals will experience anxiety, depression and post-traumatic stress disorder.
"The journalists who are professional witnesses are being steeped in what we’re calling secondary trauma. They are witnesses to grief and they are witnesses to graphic imagery," Newman said. "Not only are people steeped in vicarious trauma, which is the grief and the horribleness, but there’s this other set of secondary stressors that further complicate and make it much more difficult for journalists right now."

According to Newman, the current political climate, which includes a lack of civility in online comments and public attacks on journalistic integrity from politicians, is another source of anxiety. Journalists themselves also have been the target of physical attacks, such as the shooting at the Capital Gazette newsroom, bomb threats and the assassination of Saudi journalist Jamal Khashoggi.

In addition, journalists don’t always receive training in how to deal with the emotional ramifications of their job. A 2018 study from the Journal of Applied Journalism & Media Studies found that most university journalism programs in the United Kingdom aren’t teaching students about the risks of PTSD within the profession or how to handle it.

"When you train journalists to be more objective, it’s sort of like emotions don’t come into the conversation until you’re talking about conveying the information," Newman said. "We need to help journalists acknowledge the emotional issues, but that’s a hard conversation to have in that discipline."

Lee said that journalists often turn to vices to deal with the stress stemming from their jobs.

"We don’t do a good job of addressing ways to process, so what we do is we drink, adopt dark humor and pretend that we weren’t impacted in any way by this exposure," he said.

Different journalists have different responses to covering traumatic news and events. Individuals often have reactions that can be categorized as "flight or fight," according to Newman.

"This is a stressful time to be doing journalistic work. The reaction to trauma is that you either approach it or you avoid it. People are either like, ‘I got to go in there and fight’ or ‘I’ve got to retreat.’ Those are our two orientations and both are healthy mechanisms. Most of us do both," Newman explained.

Freelance writer Ajah Hales, who is black, had to take a step back from writing about
Politics in 2016. She was exhausted by the number of white people who were surprised about what was happening in the country in terms of politics and race relations.

"People were sending me videos of black women being beaten and lynched, black men being shot in the streets, black children being victimized," she said.

Since then, Hales has shifted the topics she writes about. "I used to write about race, privilege and power. I felt unable to write about systemic racism anymore. I stopped pitching politics. I wrote mind-numbingly boring copy because it was what I could handle," she said.

Other journalists have dealt with the negative news by continuing to engage with it, but being more selective about the topics they cover. Jamie Seaton was a full-time freelancer when Donald Trump was elected and she felt the need to write about everything the new president said or did.

"I had all of these ideas, I'm going to write a story on this, I'm going to write a story on that," said Seaton, a former foreign correspondent for Newsweek. "I quickly drove myself crazy, so I made a conscious decision that there was no way that I could respond as a journalist to every single thing that was happening."

Seaton said she decided to focus on stories about women, children and education and limit her intake of unrelated news. She recognizes that there's a certain privilege that comes with being able to filter out some of what is happening.

"I'm white and I'm heterosexual and I'm American and I'm Protestant and if I were not a journalist, I probably could just stop watching the news and my life would pretty much be OK. But then I also feel an obligation to be really informed and to keep..."
fighting for all those people who don’t have that privilege,” Seaton said.

WHEN THE NEWS LOOKS FAMILIAR
For some journalists, news events can trigger memories of personal experiences or may touch on core aspects of their identities. Newman said that people who have experienced trauma may face more psychological consequences covering traumatic stories. At the same time, they may do a better job because they can draw on their experience.

A 2018 article in the New York Times detailed the ways in which the news itself can be a source of trauma for survivors of sexual assault. Some survivors struggle with the rapid-fire pace of news, which can cause flashbacks to their own experiences, according to author Julia Jacobs. In the wake of #MeToo, writer Jamie Beth Cohen felt compelled to write about an incident of sexual abuse she experienced as a child at her local swimming pool. She wrote that she had never considered herself a survivor of sexual assault, but stories about famous men abusing their power made her wonder whether the incident had impacted her in ways she wasn’t aware.

“I was compelled by the idea that we were never going to be able to expose all the criminals, so we needed to give our kids new language to expose bad actors,” she said. “There were probably two people who knew about the assault on me before I published that piece … I had never felt compelled to talk about it. But after the Harvey Weinstein articles, I felt safer. And it felt necessary to show how many different ways these assaults take place.”

DEVELOPING COPING MECHANISMS
For Lee, the first step for dealing with trauma is accepting it.

“I think the first [thing to do] is acknowledging the actual feelings and thoughts,” he said. “Understanding that it is totally normal to feel whatever it is you're feeling, not to pretend that you're not feeling that because you're supposed to be a tough journalist with this shield, right? You don’t have to be that. You’re a human being, just like the people you’re covering.”

“The idea of the stoic journalist — ‘just the facts, ma’am’ — is outdated. That means I can sit there and allow my eyes to get a little wet talking to a mother who’s lost her oldest child. That’s different than losing our composure,” Lee said. “Part of our role is to connect on a human level, to take those stories, those narratives about life and death and surviving and striving and project that out into the world. It’s OK to not be a machine, even though sometimes that’s what editors [and] producers expect us to be.”

Newman said that creating a separation can be a vital coping strategy, especially for freelancers and others who work at home.

“There is something about having rituals when you do your work and when you don’t do your work,” she said.

For journalists working from home, she adds that there are physical things people can do, such as lighting a candle when they are writing, to set mental boundaries. She also said that journalists should seek support from other members of their community.

“Having a sense of social support is one of the most important resiliency builders,” she said.

Managing when they consume news is another important strategy for many. Seaton has removed Twitter from her phone to avoid checking the news when she wakes up, saying that it helps “because I was getting bad news the first thing in the morning when I opened my eyes.”

She also waits to turn on the news, making breakfast and spending time with her son. “The dumpster fire is still burning, and I don’t have to watch it right this second. That’s a big change for me,” Seaton said.

Hales has prioritized self-care in the last two years. “I gave myself permission to take time off from being an eyewitness. My life is so much better now,” she said.

Charlotte West is a Denver-based freelance writer who covers education, juvenile justice, housing policy and politics for publications including Teen Vogue, Mic and Huffington Post. She’s a 2019 Kiplinger fellow.