

## Reaching for an emotional flak jacket

Talking about mental health has long been one of the big taboos for journalists. Rachael Jolley looks at why and what has changed

“It's really difficult to adjust when you haven't got a life or death decision, and you're not seeing horrible things every minute,” says Peter Wilson, former Europe editor for The Australian, talking about returning from a war zone.

One day he was covering Wimbledon and the next Wilson was covering the war in Iraq. In 2003. Wilson, his photographer and translator hired a car in Kuwait and drove across the Iraq border, where they were captured by Iraqi soldiers about a week later. “Initially, they thought we were spies. And eventually we convinced them we were journalists.”

Wilson remembers: “It was terrifying.”

“There are literally tanks blowing up around us. And we're in a sort of SUV. And it felt like it was made out of plastic because it was kind of bouncing around the road with the shockwaves of explosions. So, it was a pretty long and hairy drive.”

Wilson then spent time reporting from Baghdad. When a fellow journalist was killed by incoming mortar, he used his basic first aid, but the reporter died before reaching hospital.

Back in London, where he was based, Wilson was offered some time off to write a book about his experience, and he feels that helped him cope.

Looking back the journalist, now 61, says he believes that in those days there was little preparation at the time for any mental health consequences to reporters or their teams, or any expectation that they might need specific counselling to prepare themselves before heading off to cover a conflict.

But he remembers some colleagues and other journalists did have problems after difficult assignments and it was not handled well. “It was considered your fault that you had a bit of an issue if if you couldn't sleep, or you're drinking too much, or your marriage broke up, afterwards.”

“I would hope that if I was the news editor doing that today, I'd be a little bit more aware of the vulnerability and what's at stake for that person, and that there could be lifelong damage.”

Wilson, who is also a former deputy editor and news editor of The Australian, feels things have changed. There are some signs that taboos around mental health issues of covering difficult and dangerous stories are starting to be lifted, at least a little, but not for every reporter in every situation.

Ela Stapley worked in Mexico as a journalist until 2016, and is now a digital security consultant for media organisations, based in the UK. She says she doesn't know any journalist in Mexico who hasn't been held at gunpoint or threatened with a knife at some point.

“The trauma impact for them was very high, whether they would realise that or not, or admit that or not.”

“With Mexico, everything you cover really leads back to organised crime in some way.”

“I left Mexico because I just I just couldn't do it anymore,” says Stapley. She thinks newsrooms are still well behind on mental health support for journalists.

“I don't think even now there's still really sufficient conversations around how you support people going into difficult and dangerous places,” says Hannah Storm, co-director of the Headlines Network who runs mental health training for newsrooms.

Storm worked as a journalist in post-conflict and environmental disaster zones including Haiti and Libya. In 1999 there were conversations about flak jackets but no real discussions about dealing with emotional problems caused by working in hostile environments. “You were just expected to have a few drinks and get over it.”

Along with taking the right kit, there needs to be emotional and psychological support as well, she says.

Stuart Ramsay, Sky TV's longest serving foreign correspondent, recently told the podcast Behind the Headlines with Headlines Network, about being shot on assignment in Ukraine, and how he copes with the stress.

He talks about how he decompresses after coming back from an overseas assignment. “Everyone deals with things very differently. One thing is not to

go on the lash the minute you get back. Control the partying. And do mundane things.”

Big newsrooms are not ignoring the issues around mental health both as a taboo and as a health issue, says Sarah Ward-Lilley, who was managing editor of news at the BBC until 2021, and previously head of the BBC’s international bureaux.

Trauma awareness and PTSD awareness started to be built into hostile environment training about 20 years ago at the BBC. “We started saying, ‘Look, these can also have an effect on you emotionally, it’s not unusual to feel this, please look out for each other.’ Acute reactions can be quite powerful. But they are your normal reactions to abnormal events.” She acknowledges there has been resistance along the way from journalists. “There is a feeling that if I am struggling in any way to do any of this story, or any of this work, I’ll never get sent on the big story again.”

“it’s just been about chipping away at that and trying to normalise it, and actually trying to just keep saying over and over again that if you are struggling with your mental health, if you don’t do something about it, the chances are it will fester, it’ll get worse.”

However, recent research from Middlesex University found UK journalists said newsroom culture and supervisors’ lack of understanding were obstacles. Researchers say that until recently any discussion of emotions appeared “to be at odds with the principles of the profession”. There were widely held perceptions in the media that being a journalist involved “having a thick skin” and “being able to cope”.

In the early days of the pandemic in Europe, when cases were rocketing in Italy, freelance journalist Alessio Perrone was inundated with commissions from UK and US newsdesks to report on how the virus was spreading. He remembers talking to families about loved ones who had died and one funeral director saying that mass graves were being dug. “I would work from 7am to 10pm, it was the busiest period of my life.”

“In some ways work was a distraction and helped me cope.” Then a friend got in touch, and suggested talking to a therapist, and, says Perrone, he was able to share his experiences, and getting support was really important.

“I doesn’t feel like a taboo. I don’t know if it’s a generational thing. But I’m surrounded by people that I could talk to about these things.”

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