Handling Traumatic Content

1. Introduction

CIR is committed to protecting the wellbeing of its staff, contractors and partners. We recognise that in the course of CIR's work, individuals may - at times repeatedly in the course of an investigation - be exposed to violent, graphic or distressing footage or content. This is a particular risk for researchers, investigators and analysts processing user-generated content (UGC) or eyewitness media on social media, for example in documenting human rights abuses or the activity of extremist organisations.

Viewing these images can cause vicarious trauma – when individuals experience symptoms of distress similar to those they would experience if they had been present at the event. There is a risk that vicarious trauma – particularly with repeated and/or extreme exposure to traumatic events – can lead to post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) – an anxiety disorder caused by stressful, frightening or distressing events. [1]

This policy sets out protocols, guidance and tools to help those working with and for CIR minimise both their exposure to traumatic content and the impact of that exposure. It also provides guidance on the warning signs of vicarious trauma and how to respond to these, as well as details of support available. It must be stressed that vicarious trauma affects people in different ways. The emphasis in this policy document is therefore twofold. Firstly, supporting individuals to recognise their own risk factors and triggers and find coping strategies that work for them. Secondly, to develop organisational protocols that support this and mitigate risks across the organisation.

2. What is Vicarious Trauma?

If you are exposed to distressing experiences, even when you are not physically present, your brain has the capacity to experience symptoms of distress similar to those you would experience if you had been there. Our brains are wired to take steps to protect us from perceived threats to our safety. Chemicals such as cortisol are released in the body to ready us for action, affecting our mental and emotional state. Though these triggers may be relatively small, sometimes consciously imperceptible, they can produce a cumulative effect, which means the experience of vicarious trauma can build over time.

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[1] American Psychiatric Association. (2013). Diagnostic and statistical manual of mental disorders (5th ed.). Washington, DC; Anthony Feinstein, Blair Audet and Elizabeth Waknine. Witnessing extreme violence: a psychological study of journalists in the newsroom. J R Soc Med Op 2014; 5(8)

Signs of Vicarious Trauma:

BEHAVIOUR AND RELATIONSHIPS

Boundaries — difficulty separating work from personal life OR feeling disconnected from people even while communicating with them.

Withdrawal — from social interactions or pleasurable activities.

Moods — irritable, intolerant, agitated, impatient, needy.

Escape (or addictions) involving nicotine, alcohol, food, other substances, sex, shopping, internet.

PSYCHOLOGICAL SIGNS

Intrusive thoughts and images coming to mind against your will

Unrealistic expectations of yourself

Cynicism

Hopelessness, loss of idealism

Guilt about your own survival/ pleasure

Anger

Disgust

Fear

Disturbed sleep or nightmares

Problems concentrating

Being easily startled

Feeling numb

Feeling unable to tolerate strong emotions

Increased sensitivity to violence

PHYSICAL SIGNS

Headaches

Fatigue without clear reason

Gastrointestinal trouble

Changes in appetite

'Journalism and Vicarious Trauma: A Guide for Journalists, Editors and News Organisations', First Draft, 2017

3. Handling Traumatic Content – Organisational Protocols

Central Support

CIR has an assistance programme in place, which is free, confidential, and open to all employees and consultants working with CIR. It provides remote and face-to-face support in multiple languages including:

- 24/7 in-the-moment counselling support for anything (work or otherwise).
- Psychosocial support and therapy sessions, including high-intensity cognitive behavioural therapy and eye movement desensitization and reprocessing (EMDR) therapy (subject to clinical need) and relationship counselling.
- 24-hour remote GP and private prescriptions (cost of medicine is paid for by the individual)
- App, meditation, and wellbeing support
- Legal, financial, and debt advice
- Care and special educational needs advice

CIR is also rolling out training tailored for those in management and leadership positions to support them to i) identify and reach out to colleagues who may be struggling and ii) hold constructive and supportive discussions with teams around mental health.

If you have thoughts on how we could improve our mental health provision, or need advice or support from within the organisation in handling an issue, please contact [CIR focal point].
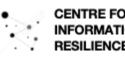
Project Protocols

CIR has the following protocols in place for the handling of traumatic content. It is the responsibility of the Project Director to ensure these protocols are in place for each project, that implementation is regularly reviewed, and that improvements or updates are made as necessary.

1. At project outset, the extent and nature of exposure to traumatic content should be assessed as part of the project risk management strategy and documented in the project risk register. Where the risk of vicarious trauma is high, the Project Director should consider what additional support might be required for staff and incorporate provision for this into project plans and budgets.

2. The level of exposure should then be assessed for each individual team member. Role descriptions or taskings should describe whether exposure to traumatic imagery is likely to be involved, enabling individuals to make informed decisions on whether this is an appropriate task for them. There should be no detrimental treatment of any contractor or staff member based on this decision.

   The project management team should consider how different members of staff may be affected differently by traumatic imagery (e.g. relating to gender, or the treatment of specific groups) and ensure workloads and tasking take this into account. It may be appropriate to introduce rotation patterns, shorter working hours, or scheduled breaks in work or tasks to break up exposure to traumatic content.

3. Depending on the extent of the risk, all team members should attend a briefing and/or training session on handling traumatic content at the project's outset. This should cover how to recognise the risks and signs of vicarious trauma and how to respond to them, as well as organisational and individual protocols for the handling of traumatic content. This should be followed up with an individual-level discussion.

4. Operating protocols should be put in place for the storage, distribution and processing of traumatic imagery. While these will be bespoke to the project, standard practices should include:
   a. A data coding system for traumatic imagery. This should typically include both a 'red/amber/green' rating reflecting the overall level of violence, tags or descriptions that alert individuals to the type of traumatic imagery involved (e.g. sexual and gender-based abuse, gunshots) and a privacy rating for the protection of victims and survivors.
   b. Saving traumatic content in clearly marked files and folders, restricting access where necessary and changing settings where possible to avoid the use of the 'thumbnail' image view.
   c. Workflows which minimise exposure to traumatic imagery, particularly for less experienced or more closely affected team members. For example, verification of

the most graphic material may be assigned only to the most highly experienced and trained personnel or those who are not as directly affected by the content.

d. Identifying and activating appropriate technological fixes e.g. disabling auto-play or auto-download features on workspaces and collaboration platforms.

e. Privacy reviews of all products prior to dissemination, following the checklist set out in Annex 1.

5. Files and internal communications related to traumatic content should be clearly signposted and distributed only to those who need the material. Wherever possible, traumatic imagery should **not** be shared directly e.g. as a photo in a group chat or Signal Group. Instead, a link to the imagery should be distributed only to those who need it, clearly stating the type of material contained.

6. Team leaders and/or line managers should ensure regular check-ins with staff viewing traumatic content to understand how they are coping and whether additional mitigations need to be implemented. Team leaders/line managers should consider assigning buddies or mentors to staff working on traumatic content to provide additional sources of support.

4. Handling Traumatic Content: Personal Protocols

Vicarious trauma impacts people in different ways. Different strategies for minimising exposure and impact will be more effective for some individuals than others. Trauma research shows that the greater the sense of control people have over how they experience traumatic exposure, the more resilient they tend to be.[2] For these reasons, CIR encourages individuals exposed to traumatic content to develop their own personal strategies for handling traumatic content, using techniques which work for them. Below is a list of options, drawn from research by the Dart Centre for Journalism and Trauma and First Draft (see Section 7, Further Resources), which have been shown to help some people handle traumatic imagery.

Make conscious decisions on what to do when:

- **Try and avoid working on traumatic content late in the day or when you are tired**. Our brains are less effective at processing traumatic material when we are tired. Viewing traumatic imagery later in the day can make the transition from work to personal life more difficult and is more likely to affect sleep.

- **Hit pause** – take a moment before opening any piece of traumatic imagery (or hit pause if it catches you mid-task) to remind yourself of your procedures and ask yourself: Do I need to see this material? Is it essential to the task I need to do? Do I need to see it all, or just sections? And do I need to see this now or would there be a better time to do so?

- **Use technological fixes** – Like disabling auto-download or auto-play on your apps and devices to help you have more control over what you see and when.
  - You can use these plug-ins to automatically blur all the images on a webpage:
    - Double Dudes (Chrome)
    - Chrome Image Blur

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[2] Hartley, C. A., & Phelps, E. A. (2010). Changing fear: the neurocircuitry of emotion regulation. *Neuropsychopharmacology*, *35*(1), 136-146, p139-142; and, Hobfoll, S. E., Watson, P., Bell, C. C., & Bryant…, R. A. (2007). Five essential elements of immediate and mid–term mass trauma intervention: empirical evidence. *Psychiatry, 70(4), p293-6.*

- Blur for Firefox
  - Turn off autoplay on X, Meta Apps and web browsers using Wired's guide to disabling autoplay.
  - Help avoid doomscrolling with One Sec App which forces you to press pause before opening specific websites or social media. Calm for Chrome and Mindful Browsing are plug-ins which prompt you to breathe before you check specific websites.
  - Warn Me is a Chrome plug-in that allows you set up trigger alerts to block specific content.
  - Video editing tools such as iMovie or Viva Video, allow you to extract the audio from a piece of footage, so that you don't have to listen and watch at the same time.

Prepare yourself for viewing the content:

Simple ritualised acts can be good "disrupters": devices for freeing up headspace, building in distance, and ensuring one takes a more deliberate approach to the next stages of engagement. This could include:

- **Changing your viewing position**: Staring out of the window or looking at something that is living, like foliage or an indoor plant, may boost the "resetting" effect. Particularly if you work from home, or are exposed to content through your phone, **consider where you are when viewing content** – containing it to a dedicated workspace and avoiding viewing content in the space where you sleep for example – may help maintain distance.

- **Steeling yourself**, by putting on imaginary protective clothing of some kind, such as a raincoat, or visualising that bulletproof glass exists between oneself and the screen. Forensic investigators use these techniques.

- **Taking one or more deep breaths.** Deep diaphragmatic breaths help calm the body's distress responses, and are used by other professionals in high-stress environments. Breathe from the belly, inhaling slowly through the nose and out through the mouth, making the out-breath somewhat longer than the inhalation. The military call variants of this "tactical breathing".

Build in distance by altering how you view content:

- Consider **changing the position of the window on your screen and making it smaller**. This disrupts the narrative flow of the material and builds in distance.

- Try **lowering the sound, or turning it off** altogether. Sound is often the most affecting part of a video. You can always turn it back on later if you need to.

- **Reduce colour vibrancy** by adjusting the saturation controls (if the equipment allows). Turning saturation all the way down should switch the image to black and white.

Minimise unnecessary exposure while viewing content:

- **Try taking notes** to minimise the need to go back and forth repeatedly over distressing footage you have already seen. If you are comparing videos or images, you may find that taking partial screen shots of clothing, architectural features, or perpetrators faces is all you need to track down the location, or make a match with other footage.

- **Scrolling through, or dragging your cursor through the timeline**, in order to locate aversive sections. If you don't need to look at them in detail, then don't.

- **Change the volume**. If you need to listen to audio, toggle the volume up and down as if tuning an old-fashioned radio to the correct station.

- **Blocking out the most distressing sections of an image**. Consider using a black marquee box – in software; or for a low-tech solution, try propping a book or a piece of cardboard against the screen. Some people find concentrating on certain details, such as clothes and avoiding others (such as faces) helps. Sometimes, the most distressing sections may not be images of actual injury. A child's personal possessions or clothes, for example, might be more difficult to look at if they remind you of your own children.

- **For film editors**: Avoid using loop play or working with dynamic trim rollers when cutting around images of death or body parts; and consider setting clip thumbnails to images that are less intense. (But don't forget to colour-code, label or title your clips in a way that makes it clear that they contain disturbing content.) Use temporary mattes wherever possible to avoid unnecessary repeat viewing.

- **For translators:** Using video editing tools such as iMovie or Viva Video, it is possible to separate out the audio from the visuals, so that translators don't need to see the footage in order to translate dialogue. Even if you need to listen to audio and see the footage to understand the content, experiment with ways of building in some protective distance. For example, you might try looking away when you are typing and focusing on some abstract quality of the subject's speech, such as their accent or their individual choice of words.

Take regular breaks:

Research shows that we are most vulnerable to emotional overload when feeling fatigued. If you start to feel tired, agitated or spaced out, never let the material wash through you; do something to shift that pattern. For example:

- Take **regular screen breaks and shift your viewing position**. Getting fresh air and moving your body by walking somewhere is often a good idea.

- **Pay heed to basic physical needs**. Not eating properly or skipping meals, being inadequately hydrated, and drinking too much caffeine can all impair the brain's capacity to deal effectively with disturbing emotional content.

- **Make time for conscious breathing.** Try five or more deep diaphragmatic breaths.

- **Attention switching.** Bring to mind an image that makes you feel safe or connected. Make it a conscious process as you switch between the image and the content you are working with.

- **Identify how you are feeling**. Simply itemising your own physical and emotional reactions and giving a name to them can help bolster a sense of control.

- **Use a recognised grounding technique** if you start to feel "spaced out", unusually "floaty" or that you are being sucked into the content. It can help to break screen contact and look around the room or out of a window to remind yourself that the events depicted in the video are not happening in the space around you. But if that

doesn't work, try other more deliberate techniques, such as counting backwards, trying to remember the colour of the socks you are wearing, or tallying a certain category of object in the room. Actions that put you back in touch with your body – like stretching, squeezing, shaking a limb or using a self-massage technique, such as padding oneself with a softly-furled fist – can work to disrupt that overly-wired, spaced-out feeling.

Putting a lid on the work

Using a ritual or doing something pleasurable can help "park" the content when you take a break or finish work for the day. This makes it less likely that the content will spill into whatever you are doing next. You could try:

- **Distraction files**. Spending time looking at pleasurable images – such as cute puppies or beautiful landscapes – or playing 10 minutes of a fun non-violent video games such as Tetris – can be a useful way of transitioning out of verification work.

- **A more deliberate transition ritual**. Examples might include walking around the block, washing your hands or face, or physically tidying the space that you are working in. If you used a visualisation technique such as putting on a raincoat when you started work, you might imagine taking it off when you finish.

- **Creating a buffer between work and home** – This could include doing something physical or unrelated to mark the transition between work and home (e.g. going for a run, or reading a book on your commute). If working from home, you may want to go for a walk around the block.

- **A practice that acknowledges the reality of what happened in the material you have just engaged with**. Some people may want to take a spiritual, religious, or humanistic approach to mark the transition away from a period of working with traumatic imagery. For instance, they might take an inward moment to acknowledge what has been documented, to register compassion for the suffering of those who have been filmed or photographed, and to wish that others are spared of such experiences.

Develop a self-care plan:

- **Maintain a balance between work and personal life** – When working on an important and pressing issues, it can be tempting to work twice as hard. Exercise and finding time for friends, family and outside interests are important ways of restoring balance and maintaining resilience.

- **Use your support network** – You may find it helpful to talk about what you are going through with others you trust, or friends with similar interests and values. Asking colleagues or line managers to help look out for signs of stress, or for additional support, can help you monitor and manage the situation and help create an open and supportive work environment**.**

5. **Recognising the signs and seeking help**

Section 2 lists some of the warning signs of vicarious trauma. Some of these may be temporary and manageable through self-care. However, it is important to monitor your, and your colleagues, responses, acknowledge changes and consider how these can build up over time.

If you feel comfortable to do so, let your line manager or team leader know that you're finding things difficult. CIR is committed to supporting colleagues without judgement, and working with you to implement strategies that can help. If you prefer to speak to someone outside your team – or you are a line manager/team leader seeking help on how best to support a colleague – you can contact our People and Culture Lead for support. You can also contact our Employee Assistance Programme for free, confidential advice and support at any time (contact details below).

Particular warning signs that someone might need more professional support can include:

- Marked changes in character

- Unusual irritability, or explosive anger that fires up without apparent reason

- Images or thoughts related to a project intruding at unwanted times, which are unusually persistent and don't diminish over time. *Particularly if they involve situations in which you imagine yourself being followed or attacked.*

- Unusual isolation or withdrawal

- The sense that life has become meaningless or foreshortened

- A persistent and general feeling of being numb or deadened inside

- Increase in self-medication (alcohol, drugs, compulsive overworking, etc.)

- Sustained difficulty falling asleep and/or upsetting dreams

- Bodily reactions (such as fast heartbeat, stomach churning, dizziness) when recalling material

In this instance, our Employee Assistance Scheme, BHSF Rise also offers specialist psychosocial support. They can be contacted directly, or via a management referral, via phone, website or app.

6. Handling Traumatic Content: Guidance for Team Leaders and Line Managers

Team leaders and line managers play an important role in mitigating the impacts of traumatic imagery on the team and building resilience. Training is available for team leaders and line managers on how to hold effective mental health conversations, please contact our People and Culture team for details. Important things you can do include:

- **Create an open and supportive atmosphere** – take time to talk about risks and issues relating to vicarious trauma and reassure staff that it is neither weak, unprofessional nor career-threatening to experience or acknowledge distress from trauma exposure.

- **Acknowledge and show appreciation for the work** that colleagues are doing, give words of encouragement and watch criticism – people's sensitivities are heightened when expose to trauma and feeling valued is important to emotional resilience.

- **Encourage self care**. Healthy eating, exercise, time with friends and family and sleep are vital. Look out for staff working long hours and consider how their workload can be reduced or restructured.

- **Allow staff to take adequate breaks**, and, if necessary, to rotate out of work that requires repeated exposure to traumatic content.

- **Respect people's needs** to develop their own workflows and strategies for handing traumatic content and intervene gently if you believe this may be having a negative impact on others.

- **Instigate a system of regular checks-in** with staff working with traumatic content. Keep an eye out for any of the warning signs that all is not well and consider (with the person affected where possible) what steps can be taken to address these (e.g. restructuring their responsibilities, rotating onto another task, referral to external support).

- **Set appropriate boundaries for the use of humour as a coping mechanism**. While humour can be an important distancing mechanism, it is important it does not spill over into disrespect for victims and survivors or lead to an emotional tone-deafness which makes it harder for people to respond effectively to trauma.

- **Always consider the risks of vicarious trauma when assigning work or taskings**. Be sensitive and respectful of differences between team members. If there is a particular type of content that one staff member finds more distressing, consider whether this can be assigned to others who are less severely affected.

- **Remember that you too are affected.** Monitor your own emotions and don't be surprised if you also feel some of the symptoms above, even if you are less directly involved in the handling of traumatic content. Remember to prioritise your own self-care, and to reach out if you need additional support.

7. **Further Resources**

Vicarious Trauma and Resilience Resources:

The Dart Center for Journalism and Trauma: Guidance and resources on vicarious trauma for journalists and open-source investigators, including on developing organisational operating procedures

First Draft- Journalism and Vicarious Trauma: A Guide for Journalists, Editors and News Organisations and online webinar

Citizen Evidence Lab - Resources on taking a trauma-informed response to open-source research

 - A Study of Eyewitness Media and Vicarious Trauma on the Digital Frontline

Berkeley Human Rights Centre: Toolkit for human rights investigators to promote restoration and resilience

Mind: Vicarious Trauma Guide for Journalists and Newsrooms

Managing emotions and stress:

Emotions wheel - sometimes the best place to start is to really identify how we are feeling. The emotions wheel helps you do that. Name that feeling, notice and acknowledge those feelings.

Smiling Mind - this a free mindfulness and meditation app. Like Calm or Headspace

How not to let your worries keep you up at night - a blog post by a Wellbeing and Performance coach from Unleashed with practical tips on managing racing thoughts at night

Mindful breathing - a video to follow along with to focus on breathing

BetterUp's Mindfulness Activities - BetterUp is a coaching organisation for businesses and they produce some great content. This piece has tips for mindfulness exercises for anxiety, to find calm, tips to help you at work like the Pomodoro technique etc.

Fun Quick Tips - just a fun share on Instagram with some quick exercises as and when you need them.

Annex 1: Privacy Review (extracted from CIR's Editorial and Report Writing Guidelines)

The objective of the privacy review is to ensure that CIR does not publish any information which could compromise the privacy, dignity, security or otherwise cause harm to data sources or subjects (i.e. people who feature or are referred to in report contents. This includes both victims/survivors and alleged perpetrators). The privacy reviewer is responsible for ensuring the report complies with CIR's editorial guidelines in relation to Confidentiality, Informed Consent and Minimising exposure to traumatising content.

Check	Think about:	Action
Links	Consider whether revealing the source could create a security risk or risk of doing harm e.g. if it's a personal social media account, a channel belonging to an armed actor which gives away information which could be used for military advantage, or an account which disseminates hateful language or extremist content which we need to avoid amplifying. If so, archive and remove.	FLAG all personal accounts or accounts where there is a risk of harm. Where present, once archived, remove the link and **write: Source redacted due to privacy/safety concerns** Broken links: FLAG. The investigator then needs to replace this or work out if there is an error. Archive check: double check all links are archived, FLAG any that are not. Remember when redacting sources always to provide a description that allows the reader to judge reliability. E.g. that the image was posted by an armed group active in the area, or by a Facebook user claiming to be a local resident
Geolocations	Do they provide the details of someone's home? Could they place someone in danger? Could revealing this location have repercussions for any individuals/groups?	Provide the closest approximate location and remove coordinates and/or crop any geolocations which could cause danger to victims/survivors or data sources. Note: Where geolocations are critical to establishing attribution e.g. a firing location of heavy weaponry, the reviewer should make a public interest assessment of whether they should be included, despite potential repercussions for the armed actor involved.
Images	Are individual faces or personally identifying information (such as number plates or house numbers)	Blur all faces (except of known public figures, such as senior military commanders) and personally identifying information.

	visible?	Blur any elements of the image which could place people at risk or compromise their dignity.
	Do the images reveal too much about a person/location?	Blur any graphic parts and blur faces of deceased/injured.
	Do the images preserve the dignity of those pictured (e.g. people in a state of undress)?	Where an image or video is particularly graphic or sensitive (e.g. sexual and gender-based abuse) it should be removed entirely, and a written description provided, using respectful language and avoiding unnecessary detail.
	Are they graphic in nature? Could they retraumatise survivors or be triggering for readers?	**Remember: Dignity is culturally-specific.** An image of a women with face and arms uncovered might be culturally appropriate in one context, and cause serious harm in another. Consult with members of the team who know the local context if unsure.