

Traumatic Media Exposure in Law Enforcement and National Security Work

Law enforcement and intelligence professionals are increasingly exposed to violent and otherwise disturbing media (videos, Web-streaming and postings, etc.) in the course of their work. This exposure can be incidental and unrelated to specific assignments; episodic, with certain cases requiring collection, documentation and analysis of traumatic images; or frequent/ongoing in mission areas like counterterrorism, violent crime, or child exploitation.

There is a wide range of “normal” responses to such images, some common ones being shock, horror, disgust, outrage and likely, heartbreak for any victims involved. “Mental toughness”, though important, might not fully protect against the detrimental emotional or psychological effects of such exposure.

The stress reactions often described as “vicarious traumatization” can range from brief to lingering upset; intrusive mental images or other sensory reminders; emotional “numbing”; autonomic (nervous system) hyperarousal, e.g., increased vigilance, difficulty relaxing; or acute anxiety, depression or trauma-based symptoms resembling those of victims or direct witnesses. If such reactions are not addressed, associated losses of judgment and perspective can impact professional effectiveness as well as one’s personal life.

For some, the effects of traumatic exposure are more diffuse - and arguably more difficult to remedy in their erosion of basic trust, hope, and faith. Seeing such depravity up close...its volume and scope ...the limited ability of anyone to prevent it, can take a toll. Thus can result an altered worldview of helplessness and disillusionment; a sense of separateness or alienation from others who have not seen (and might minimize) these awful realities; or accommodation to a loss of meaning/sustaining beliefs which was NOT in the job description.

As with other risky or high-intensity assignments, some of the best psychological protection is tied to supportive colleagues also engaged in this difficult work. Genuine understanding and concern from your leadership is also crucial, both in terms of validation, i.e., that anyone could be negatively affected by such toxic material and encouraging respite time & other flexibilities that bolster employee health and welfare.

Mitigation Strategies— Personnel can minimize negative impacts by thoughtfully structuring and managing work involving possible traumatic exposure. For example:

Use mental imagery and rituals to prepare & protect yourself, for example, by figuratively donning a hazmat suit or putting a waterfall between you and the computer screen. “Leave” bad images in the computer when you log off (turn off the screen for added emphasis); imagine that any residual toxic material remains in office when the door closes behind you at the end of the day, and that any more remains in the train/bus/car when its door closes, etc. Help yourself psychologically transition at home by changing out of work clothes, getting a quick shower, or power-walking around the block on days where you’ve viewed particularly bad images.

Minimize your exposure, narrow channels of input and keep some distance:

- Don’t see or do more than you need to.
- Turn the volume off if you can; otherwise keep it low. Set images to black & white if colors are not relevant to the analysis or evidence collection.
- Hide identifying info; don’t use names of victims except where necessary.
- Strategic use of sticky notes on images (faces, other anatomy; anything very gruesome or discordant) that don’t need specific attention at the time.

Keep an operational mindset, using “task instructional self-talk”; this means talking yourself through with step-by-step reminders at each phase. And continue devising new and creative methods of compartmentalizing the disturbing material you encounter.

Incorporate small distractions or add “competing input”, e.g., music, office “fidget” toys, a small desk-top humidifier w/ shifting LED light displays.

Protect yourself in “symbolic” ways, e.g., not eating at your desk when working with traumatic material; moving personal items such as framed photos out of sight; wearing a religious pendant or something else with protective value.

Give conscious attention to managing particularly bad images that might get stuck in your mind. Imagine them being efficiently processed and then somehow ejected, such as on a factory assembly line. Picture the images being burnt away or evaporating like steam. Put them in a mental “container” that closes – like a box with a lid, a trash can, or a metal safe – and get them out of your way until (if) needed again for the assignment.

Increasing Resiliency – Some general approaches to increasing “stress tolerance” with problematic individual exposures or their cumulative effects:

Mental Preparation – Knowing the realm of possibilities re: what you might encounter in your online investigative or analytic work. Conceptual understanding of whatever criminal, psychological or radicalized/ sociopolitical dynamics account for the warped behaviors displayed and lauded in open source media.

Basic Self-Care – Consistently attending to food (regular meals, reasonable nutrition), sleep and physical activity lets you operate from a position of strength in this type of mission space. Regular self-care routines signal your body and psyche that things are essentially safe and under control, even when the awful images on your computer screen suggest otherwise....

Self-Awareness - *What types of media exposures do you find most disturbing? How might you react physically, emotionally? When is a response outside of “normal range” for you? What can help you re-regulate in these instances, and on an ongoing basis?*

Don’t Go it Alone – Ask others for help, support, and coverage for needed breaks. Let your partner or a close friend know when you’ve been dealing with particularly disturbing material (keeping the details very general for operational security & to avoid exposing the other person), so they can support you and help diffuse negative reactions.

Pace Yourself - Take regular breaks and try to make at least the last hour of your workday free of traumatic media. Use your leave and vacation time, making it an ongoing priority to decompress and genuinely live your life. Periodically reevaluate whether it might be time to transition to a different type of assignment, if feasible.

And, for however long you do this work, know that your sacrifice makes a crucial difference in safeguarding individual lives, mission viability and the security interests that keep our country safe and free!