

Reporting Crises: Dangerous to Your Mental Health

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Photo: VOA Photo M. Rabiee

Photojournalist Kian Amani covered the violent aftermath of the Iranian election on the streets of Tehran last summer

Journalists are known for their tenacity in reporting dramatic news events as they unfold, whether it's a local news reporter covering a warehouse fire or a war correspondent embedded with a military unit. Sometimes that means risking their physical safety to get and tell the story. But research shows the trauma journalists witness up close could also have a lingering impact on their emotional well-being.

Today, photojournalist Kian Amani is starting a new life in Washington DC, but last summer he was covering the violent election aftermath on the streets of Tehran. Kian says he was arrested three times by security forces for taking images of the demonstrations. The ongoing violence he witnessed eventually took its toll.

"I was running away and they started shooting and a bullet hit the chest of a young man of maybe 18, 19. He died," Amani recalled. "This was a difficult scene for me and I had bad days afterwards, nightmares, stress. I became depressed. On the anniversary of the election, those emotions are coming back to me."

But Kian is not alone. Researchers say it's not uncommon for journalists who cover traumatic events - like 9/11, Haiti or the Iran elections - to experience high levels of emotional and psychological distress, even long after the immediate danger has ended. In effect, they not only observe the event they're reporting about, they're also absorbing it.

"They're there to cover the story, not to become the story," noted Dr. Suzan Stafford, a Psychologist in Washington D.C.

Dr. Stafford has treated journalists after 9/11 and Hurricane Katrina, and she says reporters have the same reactions under stress as the people caught in the news event they're covering.

"It's physiological and it's emotional," she added. "Physiologically, we have a tendency when we come into a situation that seems dangerous we get a lot of chemicals flowing through our bodies to help us stay alert, to be able to act if we need to act. So you have all these chemicals at high levels that you don't normally have in your body. And it can take days for them to get out of your body. Emotionally they are feeling empathy. They are feelings a lot of sadness. They may have even survivor guilt. Even if they weren't next to the person when it happened they may still feel guilty that they did not experience what these other people experienced."

Studies suggest nearly a third of war correspondents suffer from Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). It's a type of severe anxiety that's triggered by a traumatic event. Symptoms can include flashbacks, nightmares and memory problems, and can last for months or even years. In one study of photojournalists, 98 percent reported they had been exposed to events that mental health professionals would deem traumatic, while roughly one in sixteen met the criteria for PTSD.

"They have trouble sleeping," Dr. Stafford explained. "They might have some sort of nightmares or dreams about what they have seen. They become irritable. They become uncomfortable with going back sometimes. They might even have survivor guilt"."

Mike Walter is a veteran news reporter who covered the 9/11 attack on the Pentagon and was haunted by nightmares afterwards. He channeled his emotional breakdown into a documentary film about journalists who struggle with the traumatic violence they witness. Today, Walter works with the DART Center, an organization which helps journalists deal with the emotional stress of covering traumatic news events. He


thinks that last month - on the one-year anniversary of widespread street protests in Iran- many journalists there were reliving some of the stress of last year's election crisis.

"What happens when you get close to an anniversary is suddenly those images are back on TV. Suddenly you pick up the newspaper, you see the images in the newspaper. And it takes you back to that time," he noted. "I was astonished at my own reaction. [During] the lead up to the 9/11 anniversary, suddenly I was having the same kinds of nightmares I had shortly after the attacks on 9/11."

Dr. Stafford says people are enormously resilient and that patients, including journalists, with the support of family and friends, can return to a more "normal" life. She encourages her patients to try to go back to their old routines and to think positively about the future. She says the patients need to accept the fact that the trauma has happened, but that other and better things might happen still.

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