

When the news breaks the journalist: PTSD

BY FREDERIK JOELVING, REUTERS DECEMBER 17, 2010



Photojournalists and a cameraman work as Brazilian Army soldiers guard the entrance to the Morro de Alemão shantytown, on November 27, 2010 in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil in a file photo. A 2003 survey found that more than a quarter of war correspondents struggle with post-traumatic stress disorder, or PTSD.

Photograph by: Jefferson Bernardes, AFP/Getty Images

Chris Cramer, 62, was a fledgling war correspondent when one spring day 30 years ago he got much closer to the battle than he'd ever intended.

Just back from Rhodesia, now Zimbabwe, his boss at the BBC had asked him to fly to Tehran, where militants were holding dozens of Americans hostage at the U.S. embassy.

But as he went to pick up his visa in London on April 30, 1980, he jumped out of the frying pan and into the fire: Six gunmen stormed the Iranian embassy, taking Cramer and 25 other people hostage.

"I lasted two days before I became sick -- well, I actually feigned a [heart attack](#) to get out," said Cramer, now global editor of multimedia at Reuters in New York.

While the experience left his body unscathed, his [mental health](#) was in tatters.

"I went through real anguish for a couple of years," he said. "I had flashbacks, I had extraordinary [claustrophobia](#), which I'd never had before. For several years, I did not go to a cinema, I did not go into an elevator. If I ever went into a restaurant, I positioned myself near the door for a fast exit. For many, many months after the incident I checked under my car every morning before driving it. I was a basket case, I was a mess."

It is becoming increasingly clear that there is nothing unique about Cramer's case. In fact, a 2003 survey found, more than a quarter of war correspondents struggle with [post-traumatic stress disorder](#), or PTSD.

That's just shy of the 30 percent of Vietnam veterans who have suffered the mental breakdown, and nearly four times higher than in the general population, according to the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs. And there are signs that journalists may be facing more dangers now than ever, putting both their physical and mental health at risk.

"There are a lot of undetected emotional problems in the profession," said Dr. Anthony Feinstein, a psychiatrist at the University of Toronto, Canada, and one of the first to explore the psychological toll of war reporting. "Some of the big organizations are very aware of it, but many are not."

A CULTURE OF SILENCE

Like many of his colleagues, Cramer didn't seek help for his problems, although talk therapy is known to be a highly effective treatment.

"The last thing you wanted to do in those days was to admit to your boss that you kind of lost your nerve," he said. "Newsrooms were very macho places, you know."

That assessment rings true with Bruce Shapiro, who heads the Dart Center for Journalism and Trauma

