Resources for Mental Health Support

Introduction

The safety of journalists in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region is a growing concern due to the region's volatile political, social, and security environments. Journalists in this region face significant risks, not only from governmental authorities, non-state actors, and armed groups, but even their communities. These dangers extend beyond physical harm to include psychological challenges that can hinder their ability to perform their duties effectively. Ensuring the safety of journalists is crucial, not just for their personal well-being but also for safeguarding free expression and the integrity of the media.

This article aims to compile and highlight key resources provided by the Rory Peck Trust (RPT) that focus on the psychological safety of journalists in the MENA region. By offering an overview of the most important definitions, tools, and resources, this article seeks to inform journalists and other stakeholders about practical support that can help mitigate these risks.

The article is organized into sections that first outline the types of psychological risks that journalists face, followed by a summary of the most relevant tools and resources available. By directing readers to these resources, the aim is to enhance their understanding and use of these essential supports. Ultimately, this article serves as a practical guide for journalists, human rights workers, and civil society actors operating in hostile environments within the MENA region. By identifying and promoting the use of existing resources, we hope to contribute to a safer environment for those who work tirelessly to inform the public and uphold democratic values.

Psychological Risks Faced by Journalists

Journalists in the MENA region are exposed to significant psychological risks due to the nature of their work and the hostile environments in which they operate. Some of the most critical psychological risks include:

Exposure to Trauma and Violence: Journalists often witness traumatic events, including violence, death, and destruction. Reporting from conflict zones or on human rights abuses can lead to direct exposure to traumatic incidents, causing acute stress reactions and long-term psychological trauma.

Online Harassment and Cyberbullying: Digital threats are a growing concern, with journalists facing online harassment, cyberbullying, and threats on social media platforms. These attacks can include doxxing (publishing private information), targeted harassment campaigns, and cyberstalking, leading to significant emotional distress.

Chronic Stress and Burnout: The high-pressure environment of journalism, combined with tight deadlines and the need to produce constant content, contributes to chronic stress and burnout. This can result in physical and mental exhaustion, decreased productivity, and severe health issues.

Vicarious Trauma: Journalists covering traumatic stories may experience vicarious trauma, where they absorb the emotional pain of the events they report on. This indirect exposure to trauma can have similar psychological effects as direct exposure, including anxiety, depression, and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD).

Definitions of Key Psychological Concepts

Before exploring specific tools and resources, it is essential to understand some key psychological concepts that are relevant to journalists:

- **Trauma:** A deeply distressing or disturbing experience that can have long-lasting psychological effects.
- **Vicarious Trauma:** The emotional residue or strain from exposure to the suffering of others, particularly as a consequence of traumatic events.
- **Burnout:** A state of emotional, physical, and mental exhaustion caused by excessive and prolonged stress.
- **Emotional Resilience:** The ability to adapt to stressful situations and recover from adversity.
- **Self-Care:** Regular practices and activities that individuals engage in to maintain and improve mental and physical well-being.

Overview of Most Important Tools and Resources

Psychology Self-care for Workers In the Media Sector

This resource, by Palestine-based Filastiniyat, provides guidelines and practical advice for self-care tailored specifically for media workers, addressing common stress factors and promoting well-being. It helps journalists build a routine of self-care practices to manage stress, prevent burnout, and maintain overall mental health, which is crucial for sustaining their demanding work.

Resources for Wellbeing and Stress Management

This piece from Front Line Defenders, an international Dublin-based foundation for the protection of human rights defenders, defines stress as a reaction to pressures or demands, which varies depending on the individual, timing, and context. Symptoms can be psychological – feelings such as anger, anxiety, shame, depression, guilt, jealousy, doubt, and mood swings, behavioral – negative or aggressive behavior, irritability, increased consumption of food or alcohol, sleep disturbances, or physical – frequent colds or other infections, palpitations, shortness of breath, chest pain, fainting, headaches, indigestion. Recognizing these signs is key to addressing them, and it is advisable to consult a doctor if you are concerned about experiencing any of these conditions. Some of these symptoms may result from various medical conditions. If they are indeed symptoms of stress, your doctor can advise you on available treatments.

Effective stress management involves using tools like mindfulness exercises, engaging in supportive activities, and prioritizing self-care. Human rights defenders suggest various coping strategies, including writing, meditation, and connecting with others. Taking time to alleviate stress is essential, not just for personal well-being, but also for enhancing productivity and responsiveness to others. In short, there are many tools available to help reduce stress. The most important tool at your disposal is your mind. When you realize that you are experiencing negative stress, this is the time to do something about it.

Coping with Emotional Impact on Online Harassment

Chapter 2 of this resource by the International Women's Media Foundation focuses on the risk assessment process for female journalists facing online harassment. It helps identify specific digital threats such as hacking, doxxing, and cyberbullying. Key steps include analyzing vulnerabilities in personal and professional information, evaluating the impact of harassment on safety and mental health, and implementing preventive measures like strong passwords and encryption tools. The chapter also highlights reactive strategies for responding to online attacks, developing psychological resilience, and creating a personalized safety plan. Real-life case studies are provided to demonstrate best practices in mitigating the risks of online harassment.

Choosing a Psychotherapist

To help journalists access mental health resources, we aim to outline the work of prominent mental health institutions and platforms that can be referred to when needed.

ArabTherapy is an innovative online platform designed to bridge the gap in mental health care for Arabic speakers, particularly those living in the diaspora. The platform connects users with culturally and linguistically aligned psychotherapists, offering a safe space to address mental health issues in Arabic. Users can access live therapy sessions and engage in unlimited chat with their chosen specialists through a subscription model, ensuring continuous support and confidentiality. ArabTherapy is pioneering in its approach by planning to integrate AI technology to improve the matching process between users and therapists, making it one of the first platforms to offer AI-assisted mental health care in the Arabic language. This service not only enhances accessibility to mental health resources but also ensures that the care provided is culturally sensitive and tailored to the unique needs of Arabic-speaking individuals worldwide.

TherapyRoute is an international mental health platform designed to connect individuals with a wide range of mental health professionals, including therapists, psychologists, and psychiatrists. Launched in South Africa, this platform has expanded globally, offering a comprehensive directory that helps users find the right mental health services tailored to their needs. TherapyRoute.com stands out by providing free listings for qualified professionals and organizations, making mental health support more accessible to diverse populations. The platform also includes features like filters for identity, language, and specific issues, allowing users to find the most appropriate care. Additionally, TherapyRoute.com promotes mental health awareness by hosting a growing library of articles on various therapy-related topics. The platform's commitment to mental wellness extends to offering resources such as suicide hotlines and crisis helplines, furthering its mission to make mental health assistance universally accessible.

Embrace - Lebanon is a prominent mental health NGO that plays a crucial role in raising awareness and providing mental health support in Lebanon. Founded in 2013, Embrace focuses on breaking the stigma surrounding mental health issues, particularly in a society where such topics are often considered taboo.

One of their key initiatives is the National Lifeline (1564), which is Lebanon's only suicide prevention and emotional support hotline. This hotline has been a lifeline for thousands, offering immediate crisis intervention and support.

In addition to the hotline, Embrace operates the Embrace Mental Health Center (EMHC), which provides accessible, affordable mental health services, including psychotherapy and psychiatric consultations, especially after the Beirut explosion in 2020. The organization also runs awareness programs and community outreach efforts, collaborating with universities, schools, and municipalities to educate the public about mental health. Embrace's dedication extends to research through its CEDARS program, aiming to improve mental health policies and care in Lebanon.