

CIT Report – Trauma Literacy and Resilience Building

Session details:

Date: 19th October

Time: 11 AM – 12:30 PM

Workshop for: MA MC Journalism batch of 2022

Maximum Participants: 17

Objective of the session:

The objective of the session was to make students aware of how trauma affects reporters, and suggest them certain ways in which they can cope with stress and anxiety that often comes with covering difficult events and stories.

Brief of the speakers:

- 1) **Kimina Lyall** – Kimina Lyall is a deputy director for Dart Centre Asia Pacific, and is responsible for designing and delivering training programmes for journalists, fact checkers and media organizations. Kimina has been a journalist for 15 years at Time Australia and The Australian Newspaper. She was also a South East Asia correspondent for The Australian from 2001-2005. In her career, she has covered many traumatic stories including the Port Arthur Massacre, Bali bombings, and the Boxing Day Tsunami. She was also the survivor of the Tsunami and was a finalist on the Walkley Awards for associated stories. She published a book titled “Out of the Blue – Facing the Tsunami” in 2006. She was diagnosed with PTSD, and this led to her decision of quitting journalism. Kimina has been a board member for Dart for many years, and now she is the Deputy Managing Director. She is currently in the final months of training to become a psychologist.
- 2) **Nupur Sonar** - Nupur Sonar is a researcher, writer and producer with over 8 years of experience producing stories on human rights, culture, gender and health. She has worked at renowned organizations like Tehelka Magazine, Video Volunteers, VICE India, and All Things Small.

Report:

The objective of the session was to make journalism students aware of trauma and how it can affect them when they go out reporting on field, and also tell them coping strategies for the same.

The session was divided into two halves. The first half was taken over by Nupur who introduced the students to the concept of Trauma and why it is important for reporters to know about it. She said discussing trauma helps media professionals make better news choices, and share information about trauma with the community in a more informed manner. She also added that it helps the reporters to be more sensitive and ethical. Additionally, Nupur mentioned that reporters who are aware of their mental well being are able to conduct better reporting.

Nupur said that research in resilience shows that trauma for media personnel is the norm. Many journalists go through traumatic experiences while they report on various issues. However, the problem does not get the attention it deserves. Longer exposure to a shocking event result in greater traumatic experience, eventually having a dire consequence on the mental health of journalists.

She said that the impact of trauma is natural, and it is perfectly okay for people to feel the after-effects of it. Trauma response varies from people to people, but for all, it is a protection mechanism devised by our body. Trauma impacts the brain structure and chemistry, and can often cause physiological symptoms. She said it is important to understand and recognise what is happening. Being aware of your mental state is the first step in dealing with trauma.

Nupur also spoke about the “Human BEEP Response”. BEEP stands for Behavioural, Emotional, Existential and Physical response towards trauma. A Behavioural response could be withdrawing from usual activities, missing deadlines, not being able to work efficiently, and use of substances. An Emotional response entails a feeling of anger, guilt, sadness, and despair. Existential thoughts often include questions of self-doubt like “am I capable enough” or the feeling that the whole world is against you. Response to trauma can also be physical in the form of various bodily symptoms like headaches, cramps, indigestion, fatigue, and so on.

She also added that at the extreme end, a trauma response can manifest itself in the form of recurrent flashbacks, intense and prolonged distress, and intrusive memories. She said, it is therefore, important to consider self-care and get support.

Nupur then asked the students of the new things they learnt about trauma. Most students said that they didn’t know about the “Human BEEP Response”. Other student said he did not realise trauma can have such a wide-ranging impact on one’s mental and physical health.

In the second-half of the session, Kimina spoke about resilience. She started with her experience of covering the Tsunami, and how she dealt with the after effects of it. Kimina said that as a journalist, one cannot avoid trauma. There will be times when you will have to cover stories which are deeply distressing. It is a part and parcel of the profession. However, there are ways to cope it, and ample research suggests that these have been helpful.

Kimina said Resilience has three self-care strategies. Those are Before, During and After of covering a traumatic event. In the Before stage, when you know that you will have to cover a traumatic event, it is important to examine yourself, and see if you are stressed. If you are already stressed by something, covering the traumatic event is going to multiply that stress, and lead you to have a burnout. Moreover, the additional burden of covering the story first

only makes it worse. Hence, if it permits, you can give the assign the story to someone else. However, rarely does a journalist have an option of giving the story to someone when they have been assigned for it. In such a case, it is important to approach the story a little slowly. Being hassled about covering it first is going to exacerbate the stress. Perhaps, taking a slower mode of transportation to the location may help. However, again, with constraints of time, it is not always possible to take a story slow. In that case, it is important to tell yourself that you will be covering a hard event, and in a way, prepare your mind for what is coming. While going to cover the story, read something that makes you feel good, or watch something that you like.

In the During stage when you are at location where a traumatic event has just taken place, it is important that a journalist steps back and takes a cognizance of the situation. Journalists are often told to be good observers, and while that is extremely important, there is a fine line between observing and overexposing. Overexposing yourself to elements like blood is going to fuel your trauma. If it still gets too much, a simple breathing technique of 3-5-8 can go a long way in bringing back your focus. Inhaling for 3 seconds, holding the breath for 5 seconds, and then exhaling for 8 seconds is proven to reduce a rush of thoughts. It must be practised in case things get too overwhelming.

The class also took some time to do this breathing exercise. Initially the students were told to rate their stress level on a scale of 10. Then they were instructed to do the breathing exercise. Most students observed that their stress levels reduced slightly after doing the activity for just five minutes.

The After stage is when you are exhausted covering the story. But the stress is far from over. You have to write the story down and submit it. There is a repeat exposure of sorts here, as you are recollecting what you saw, and writing it. While that is unavoidable, till the time you submit that piece, it is crucial that you don't engage in another stressful story. It is also important that a journalist does not engage with the comments for their articles. Staying off from social media for those few days will help in not adding to existing stress.

Kimina stressed on reconnecting with your purpose. A journalist must ask themselves why did they chose the field. Answering that question can motivate you to pursue a traumatic story better, without stress overpowering you. Beyond that, it is also important to ask in what ways does the work you are doing will support that purpose. There might not always be a direct link with your purpose, but just telling yourself that it will have some impact will help you move forward with the story. Ample research shows that reminding yourself of the purpose is crucial in managing stress and completing the task at hand.

She also highlighted the importance of having a strong social support to go back to. Having a group of friends, or family members gives a journalist a certain sense of assurance which can be useful after they have covered a distressing event. She said that it is important to have at least one person with whom you can communicate about the story you would be working on.

The workshop also spoke about COVID specific strategies. COVID is an ongoing story, with new developments every day. The pandemic has caused a great human life destruction, and is panning out in uncertain ways. Covering the pandemic month on month can be traumatic.

Some of the COVID specific strategies were to focus on things that are in your control. It could be as simple as cleaning your room. Finding new ways of distractions, and engaging new and creative ways of interaction with friends and family can also help.

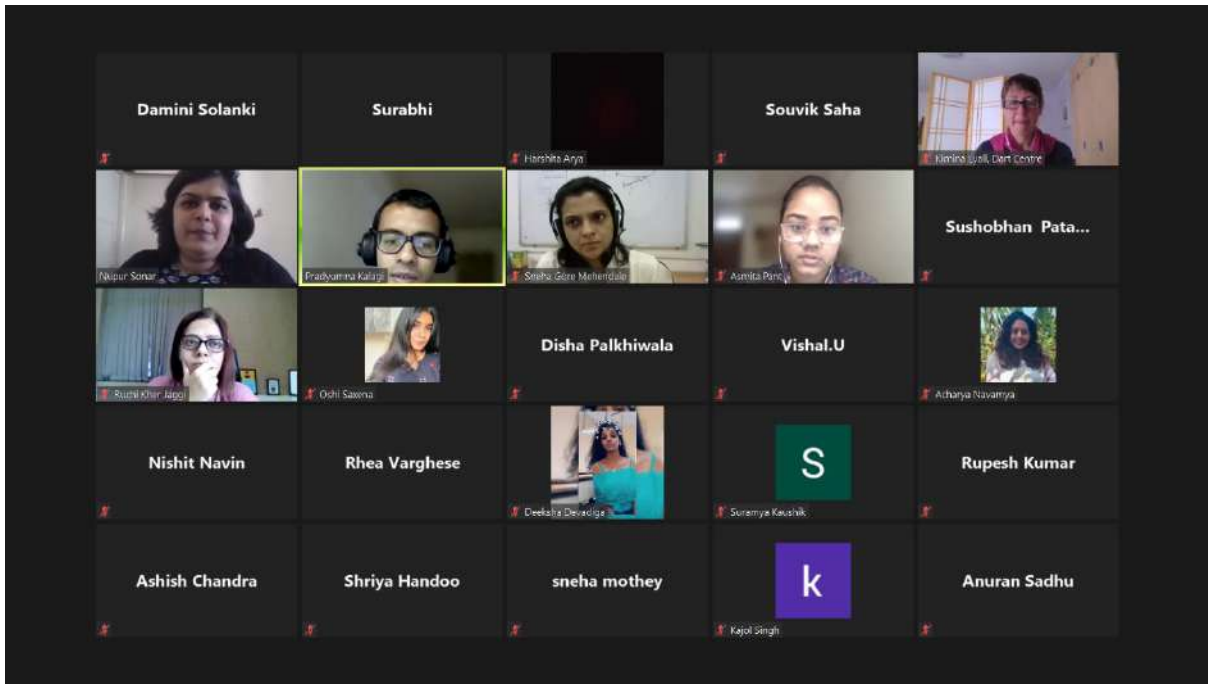
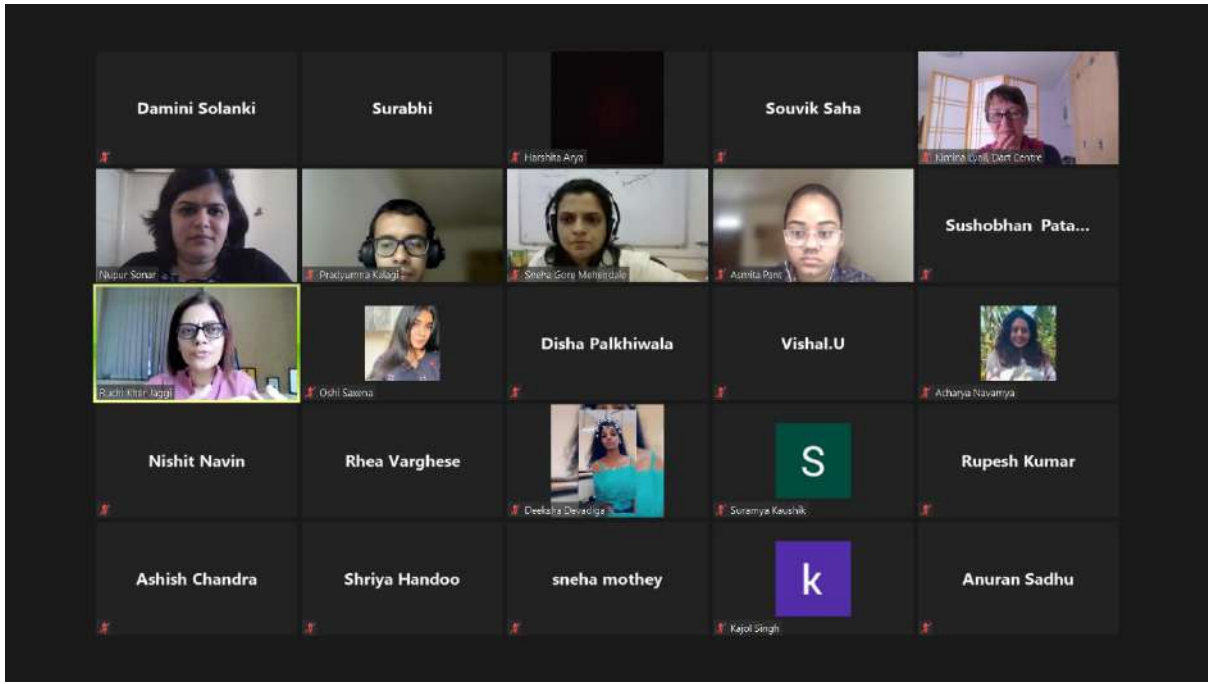
Both the speakers stressed on the importance of physical exercise for stress management. Exercise can greatly help in managing body hormones better and improving circulation which can aid in clear thinking, thereby reducing anxiety.

Finally, the class was encouraged to do their own resilience building plan. The students were told to think cautiously on three questions – who are the social supports that they can debrief with, what physical activity reduces their stress, and what are their reasons for working as a journalist. The speakers encouraged the students to write the answers down, and share them with the people closest to them. They added that the answers can change overtime and need not be fixed.

The final Q&A session saw a diverse set of questions. One of the questions put forth by a student was how to draw the line between deadlines and mental health. The speakers answered that most of the times it is not possible to skip a story. In such a case, being aware of your own experience and following the three resilience stages can help. The other question was how to overcome the institutional barrier when reporting about mental health. The speakers suggested to speak to retired officials, since they can be more open about mental health. Another question tried to understand the importance of journaling. Both the speakers agreed that journaling can be a great tool to manage trauma since you put down your thoughts which are troubling you on paper, thereby temporarily taking them out of your head. Moreover, the speaker said, journaling is like a personal safe haven for you to communicate.

The workshop is expected to follow a similar structure on the 25th October.

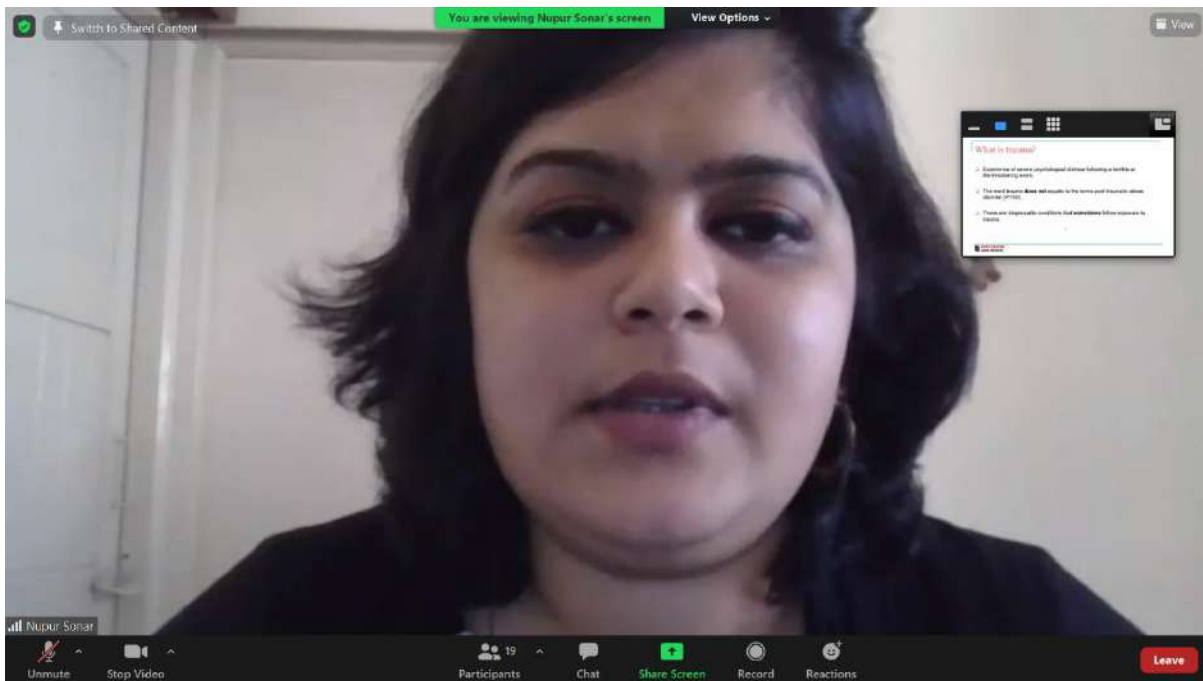
Screenshots:



Why should media professionals discuss trauma?

- Be better informed –

- make better news choices
- share information about trauma with the community in a more informed way
- Be more sensitive and ethical
 - Legal and ethical duty of care
 - Healthy reporters = Healthy reporting/journalism
 - Good business
 - Press freedom issue





RESILIENCE



Resilience

- The process of adapting well when faced with adversity, trauma, tragedy, threats, or significant sources of stress.
- Resilience can be learnt through strategies
- It is NOT...
- Never experiencing distress or becoming totally stress proof



