

Mental Health in Journalism Summit | Tue, 8 Oct, 14:00 - 14:50 CEST | [Program →](#)

The Challenges and Importance of Boundaries in Dealing with Vulnerable Sources in Journalism

Workshop

Session speaker/s

Tabea Grzeszyk, Friederike Engst

Resources

→ **other connected Workshops and Panels during this Summit, e.g.:**

- Mitigating Against Vicarious Trauma → Tue, 8 Oct, 15:00 - 15:50 CEST
Hannah Storm, John Crowley
- Trauma-Aware Journalism: A News Industry Toolkit → Tue, 8 Oct, 16:00 - 16:50 CEST
Dave Seglins, Jane Hawkes, Ariel Ritchin
- Getting Comfortable with the Uncomfortable: How a Breakdown Turned Out Not To Be a Bad Thing → Tue, 8 Oct, 17:00 - 17:30 CEST
Dhruvi Shah
- How Emotionally-Regulated Journalism Produces Better Stories → Wed, 9 Oct, 15:00 - 15:50 CEST
James Scurry
- Voices of Resilience: Overcoming Mental Health Challenges in Journalism → Wed, 9 Oct, 16:00 - 16:50 CEST
Nicola Morrison, Kuwarjeet Singh Arora, Al Albertson, Sneha Alexander, Aishwarya Varma, Arlinda Shehu, Michael VanZetta, Maissoun Khaled
- Moral Injury and Moral Courage: How Journalists Can Protect Their Mental Health When Faced with Stories That Impact Their Conscience → Thu, 10 Oct, 13:00 - 13:30 CEST
Michelle Shephard, Anthony Feinstein

... and many more on self-care

Special resources regarding boundaries, moral injury and sources:

- <https://dartcenter.org/resources/maintaining-boundaries-sources-colleagues-supervisors>
- <https://www.traumaawarejournalism.org/ethical-relationships-with-sources>
- <https://www.newstatesman.com/politics/media/2022/07/journalists-moral-injury-bigger-hazard-than-ptsd>
- <https://foreignpolicy.com/2017/09/07/what-is-moral-injury-and-how-does-it-affect-journalists-covering-bad-stuff//2017/09/07/what-is-moral-injury-and-how-does-it-affect-journalists-covering-bad-stuff/>
- <https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/sites/default/files/2021-02/Storm%20and%20Einstein%20-%20Emotional%20Toll.pdf>

More general resources regarding trauma aware journalism, including boundaries:

- Dart Style Guide for Trauma-Informed Journalism:
<https://dartcenter.org/resources/dart-center-style-guide>
- Covering Trauma: Impact on Journalists:
<https://dartcenter.org/content/covering-trauma-impact-on-journalists>
- Investigating War Crimes: Self-Care for Covering Traumatic Events:
<https://gijn.org/resource/reporters-guide-to-investigating-war-crimes-self-care-for-covering-traumatic-events/>

Great articles/self-reports by two of the other above mentioned speaker's of this summit:

- Mental health and journalism, Part 5: A conversation with Hannah Storm:
<https://ijnet.org/en/story/mental-health-and-journalism-part-5-conversation-hannah-storm>
- What's it like when your job involves wading through others' suffering? Dhruvi Shah:
<https://www.theguardian.com/science/2023/feb/16/whats-it-like-when-your-job-involves-wading-through-others-suffering-i-was-left-weeping-and-hopeless>

Session outline

In ethical journalism, empathy and a responsible approach to sources are of great importance. But what does that mean?

Friederike Engst, Psychological Psychotherapist and Trainer at DART Center Europe and Helpline Germany and Tabea Grzeszyk, entrepreneurial journalist and trainer at Dart Center Europe, repeatedly face questions addressing professional distance, doubts, and uncertainty in their respective roles. We want to discuss examples and the individual challenges of working with vulnerable protagonists (e.g., moral injury, vicarious trauma, feelings of guilt), the importance of boundaries—including one's own—and the circumstances under which they might blur. We will talk about how to create a safe environment and minimize the risk of causing additional harm.

Introduction: Who are we and why did we choose this topic? (session rules)

Interactive approach to the following questions:

- What signs indicate to you (in yourself: thoughts, feelings, body, behavior or while interacting with the source) that something might not be right?

e.g.

- Can't stop thinking of it. Rumination.
 - unusual irritability, excitability, tension
 - Not knowing how to end contact well,
 - Feelings of shame, guilt, insecurity, regret, anxiety
 - uncontrollable, intrusive (threatening) images or thoughts
 - unusual isolation or withdrawal
 - Feeling that life has become meaningless or limited. A persistent and general feeling of numbness and emptiness.
 - Increase in "self-medication" such as alcohol, drugs, compulsive overload, busyness, cynicism etc.
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- What are Risk factors and consequences?
 - Moral Injury
 - Vicarious traumatization
 - Burnout
 - Compassion fatigue
 - Harrasment/Primary trauma
 - Feeling of guilt, shame, anxiety etc.

- When and why are boundaries softened or crossed?

e.g.

- Shame and guilt due to, for example, moral injury, attempt to compensate for the moral injury
 - A guilty conscience because people's stories are being exploited, perhaps especially the particularly difficult ones
 - Sense of responsibility/duty (I have to help here, make a difference, give something back)
 - worked on a topic for a long time
 - Self-enhancement: "I am needed," "I can help," "I am the person who can handle difficult cases well."
 - (Mis)assumption that I have to open myself up
 - Worked on a topic for a long time
 - Assuming it could help the story
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- What can we do?

1. Consider it possible! Get informed!
2. Know and recognize your own early warning signals! (see collection above!)
3. Know yourself well with regard to your own "packages" (burdens, beliefs) and "sources of strength" (resources)
4. Know where your emotional distress (which is ok and normal) comes from and how to deal with it

Boundaries and (self)care e.g.

- Clarity and transparency: about one's own role, one's own limits (know your own limits), the relationship to the interlocutor, expectations; do not share private contacts
- Clarity on roles protects the other person, too: every person you talk to has a different personal disposition; Journalists are not therapists/friends; Help is okay, patronizing is not
- Supervision and peer support: The behavior of the interview partner is not a statement about the interviewer (-> consequences of trauma!)
- Especially when trust has been established, journalists are also targets of aggression

- Shame/feelings can be contagious. It may be that journalists perceive and record the feelings of the interviewee (-> boundaries).

Social Support and Peer Support

Talk can:

- increase a person's self-awareness
- give a sense of being understood and accepted
- help build meaningful relationships
- reduce shame and guilt and increase self-acceptance
- resolve problems and conflict



Session notes

Questions: What makes you uncertain?

(Many thanks for sharing! For further questions you can contact me, Friederike, @Linkedin)

- My protagonists often develop personal attachment over me: one guy fell in love with me. One girl required online contact every night during my time on the project with her.
- I have felt uncertain if I am doing the right thing when I press on to get more information from someone who is traumatized
- I didn't know how much I am allowed to do as a journalist, because I somehow felt the urge to fix the situation or contribute to it being better for that person.
- When they were expecting something in exchange from me having access to their vulnerable situation, like putting me in the situation of "making promises" to make them feel better
- Some marginalized guys I had deep interview with made me feel harassed by showing too much affection. One actually harassed me.
→ <https://dartcenter.org/resources/maintaining-boundaries-sources-colleagues-supervisors>
- I didn't know how much I am allowed to do as a journalist, because I somehow felt the urge to fix the situation or contribute to it being better for that person.
- I felt uncertain if I did not know how familiar my interviewees were with media production processes and why certain things are preferenced over others.
- Suicidal transgender female kept sending me texts of pills etc, eventually made me feel she was threatening for attention, support, care and money, which was normal for suicidal person according to the social worker I worked with.
- One of the challenges when engaging with a vulnerable person is whether to ask if they are getting the psychological support they need. Then, if they answer no, do I pass on the contact details of potential service providers. Or do I let a service know this person might need support? Is this crossing professional boundaries?

- This feels boundary adjacent, but I have a very hard time with figuring out how to explain to a vulnerable source that I am not able to pursue their story. How do you explain that to someone who is invested in their story being told without making it seem like you are belittling their experience?