

## Module 4: Interview with Ana Zelhuber

[00:00:12] Hi, everyone, welcome back. We've got a really wonderful conversation today with Ana Zelhuber, who is an emergency call psychologist who specializes in dealing with trauma, especially with journalists and freelance journalist. And she's based in Mexico City. Joining us today to talk through some of the issues that we brought up in the first session and to go over more of the effects that perhaps post traumatic events might have on us while we're working some of the preparation before we travel. Some things we can do whilst on the ground and some advice about when we return back from a stressful job workplace. So, thank you for joining us.

[00:01:01] Thank you for inviting me for giving me this chance to address journalists. Thank you so much.

[00:01:07] Yeah, thank you. And it's been a subject that's been really much more visible in the last few years. But I wondered if you could share with us with your experience why it's so important that we look after our mental health in relation to our safety as journalists.

[00:01:29] OK, first of all, let's understand that if we are in a good mental shape, in good physical shape that is taking care of ourselves, we're going to be less likely to make mistakes. And when you're going to a particularly difficult zone or a place, you are going to be in danger. Because you never know what can happen in one of those places, and if you are not sharp, if you are not in your best condition, then you are more likely to get hurt. So, it's not only to be OK and to be happy that it's important to all of you, but it's also to be alive, to keep alive, to not have any injured, to not have any kind of bad experience that then can become a traumatic experience or worse, even to lose your life. So, you have to be in a good mental health, because if you are, for example, grieving the death of someone close to you, you're not going to be with you with all your senses open to see danger to look for it. And you might get into something that is not going to be, you know, is not going to become a good experience. So, for addressing mental health. The funny part is that, first of all, you have to take care of your body drinking enough water, eating well, sleeping well, and at the most that you can. Obviously, it's not easy. But if you can have the less stress possible, whenever I work with journalist, with photojournalist or with patients who have dangerous work working environments because they go to zones and they go to places where risk is a part of it, I always suggest for them to do yoga or meditation and not because I'm a shaman or because, no, I'm a very practical person. My father was German and they are very practical. So, I'm very practical too. And it's because of all the effects that it has in your body, in your brain in terms of managing stress. And it makes you focus both yoga and meditation, make you focus also doing things like dancing or like doing anything that loses you, that stops the stress, makes your mind in a better place to take care of yourself. It's more attempt. It's more focused. So, you're going to be able to get better pictures if you're a photojournalist or get a better writing or a better interview with someone. If your focus if your mind is relaxing, your brain is oxygenated. And this part is particularly important in post-traumatic stress disorder, which happens afterwards, is that your mind is all over loaded with information and with things and substitute to being able to make good decisions and. At this point, I would like to say what a trauma is, because we talk a lot about trauma, but why? Why does the trauma become a trauma? Why does someone leave, for example, a kidnap and they don't go through trauma and another person suffers sometimes even some lesser thing, lesser thing in terms of danger to your life and goes to through trauma. Trauma is the encounter of a potentially dangerous situation. And it can be dangerous not only for your body, for your life, life-Threatening, but it can be also dangerous in terms of your integrity, of your whole

integrity, for example, losing your job, that that can be traumatic. If you don't have enough money saved, you don't have the means to keep surviving, losing something that changes you, who you are and change your life, your integrity, the way you look at yourself. That's what becomes drama. And it's the encounter of a situation that is risky with that assessment that you are not prepared to deal with that. If you face anything, whatever it is and you feel you manage it correctly, you respond to it properly and you are fine, then it's not going to be traumatic. You're going to be shaken. You're going to be like for a few days, like, OK, I have to take better care. I have to be aware there's going to be a little fear for a month or so. But you're not going to go to a traumatic experience. You're not going to post-traumatic stress disorder. But if you leave something that is threatening and you assess that, your answer to that was that was wrong, then you're going to go to post-traumatic stress disorder. That that is it's not as much it has to do with the event, the outside event that is happening, but it has to do more with your assessment of how prepared, how well you did in responding to that. And that is why the first thing I ever say to patients that have gone through traumatic experiences and are presenting post-traumatic stress disorder is you are alive. Then whatever you did, you did right. If you're alive, whatever it was you did, you did it right because you're alive, period. But sometimes it's funny how our minds work. And even though we're alive and even though we realize that still we feel we are traumatized. I had what is one journalist patient and he knows I use his example. I ask him for permission to do so. I never reveal his name or the place where he worked or so. But we started working and we started working on a very, very acute post-traumatic stress disorder. And we couldn't find why was he so traumatized? Because he was kidnapped and he himself managed to negotiate with the kidnappers, the freedom of himself and all his team that was also kidnapped with him. He was very, very good at it. And he thanks to him, he was alive and all of the others were alive, too. So, you say, well, what did you do wrong? Nothing. And as we advance on the sessions, one day he started crying and saying, I felt fear. And I'm a man of from the north of Mexico who never has to feel fear, so I'm not myself anymore. I don't know who I am. Wow. And that was the because of his trauma, not the kidnapping, but that he felt fear and that changed him forever. So, trauma is a very weird thing because he doesn't have to do so much, as I said about the event, but about how we felt that we changed or that we. Manage ourselves in front of it, and that is why the most important thing is to be prepared to prepare yourself prior to go into a zone. And I know I have I have so many patients throughout all these 15 years of working with journalists and photojournalists in this sense that I always hear the same. So, for all of you watching, this is not an excuse. I don't have time. And I say no, I work also my team and my company. We also work in in in in natural disasters. And when a natural disaster strikes, you don't have time for anything. You have to go through this again and be there. Yeah, and it's massive and it's chaotic. But we all always, always have the time between we hear about it. We go into a blast, a plane or whatever, and to get to that place and in that place, in the boss, in the plane, you can get prepared from the cell with time for it. And what is preparation? You are going to address it. But I went to. To go through some things, knowing the risks, knowing the safety routes to escape from those risks, knowing the context you can have there to give you support in case of an emergency, knowing the hospitals, knowing the places you can be safe, checking your camera, your equipment, whatever, to be safe with you, having your I.D. all the time, having snacks on your bag and water, enough water and enough back and doing this just for us. But that obviously you can have that preparation, you can be on the bus or you can be on a plane and you can be looking for the groups that are in that zone. Are the drug lords, are there are groups, are there politics fighting? What is the that the thing happening there? And what can you expect? What kind of problems have there been in that song? Are there massive confrontations? Are there kidnaps? Are there illegal detention of journalists or photojournalists? What's going on there and what can you do in that

situation? You can prepare yourself mentally for that and you can prepare to have enough food and water and that if you make in your mind like a map of what would you do in such a situation, who would you call? How can you fastly let someone know that something's happening? You have to have someone back home knowing where you're going and contacting that person all the time and a regular schedule so that they know that you didn't contact them at five o'clock. Something's wrong and they have to give the alarm to start looking for you or whatever. So, if you're prepared and you know you have a plan, you are less likely to have posttraumatic stress disorder. You also have to prepare yourself emotionally. Yeah. What are you going to hear? What are you going to smell? What are you going to see and how you're going to feel about that? Sorry you are going to ask something.

[00:13:23] So, it's more just to comment on everything you're saying about the preparation is what most of this teaching so far is being about. All this information and connecting it specifically to your physical and mental well-being is so important because things like risk assessments often get put aside as being almost a nuisance or a barrier to the work. But I think what you've highlighted about going to natural disaster, you still have to make risk assessment, even if it's really quick, you know, very dynamic. You still doing that because you're preparing yourself for saying something very difficult, but you have this plan in the back of your head so you can almost back yourself, I think, because you've got the facts. And that's the thing about believing in what you're doing and knowing that you've thought it through. So, yeah, it's just really reassuring to hear you say these things because I think. We often say our mental well-being is like some separate thing after a trauma, but it's really just it's so important on the reassignment side before we leave the door. And, yeah, please do share that. The next phase of this talk about the emotional preparedness, because this is really fascinating.

[00:14:47] One thing that I've worked with a lot with organizations like IWM are all the organizations that I work for, for journalists, photojournalists and human rights defenders, is the fact that most of the of the of the journalism for I'm going to address, because this is the group we're targeting today, they are kind of in the back. They kind of feel like they have the duty to save the world and they have to be kind of the heroes. And I always said something that is very strong, but I think it's necessary that you're not going to be able to help anyone. Mm hmm. Yeah. So how much does your life. How much you have to invest to assure your life? How much how much time and resources do you have to spend on assuring that you're going to be safe? How much time and resources do you have to spend on reassuring that you're going to be fine afterwards, that you're going to be emotionally OK to keep working? Because if you go to through post-traumatic stress disorder, I can guarantee you that in three, four, five months, the most six at most, you're not going to be able to work properly. You're going to be feeling so bad, so feels so overwhelmed. That you're not going to do your job and you're going to stop being helpful to all of us, and the example that I always use is the example that a very sad one of the firefighters at New York at the towers that went in to save people without making the place secure, without making the assessment of the place to be secure. And they died there to try to save others and they became victims. So, they didn't do your job. They didn't save anyone. And they become. Someone else to. To work for instead of someone that was working for yeah, so. If you don't take care of yourself because you have something emotional that tells you that you're less your life is less important than others or you. Have to save others. I will suggest getting in side of yourself, finding out why me. And keeping that in mind, when you go to a dangerous zone, because you're going to be more likely to put yourself at risk. You feel that your life is less important than all of us, or if you feel that you have to do whatever to save others. Yeah, yeah. So that's part of the emotional

preparation you have to do. And if you're going to a war zone, for example, or if you are going to a mass grave. Site, you're going to have this impact on you through your senses, you're going to smell death in a massive way, you're going to smell fear. Because fear has this particular very...you smell it, it smells ugly as much almost as much as that, and you're going to have these images impacting you and you are not made of stone. You're composed by a lot of things, one is emotions. Mm hmm. Yeah, and they are going to arise whether you can let them out or not, whether you let yourself feel them or not. But they are going to arise. They're going to be there. You you're going to be impacted by emotions that the more you keep them inside. That the worst is going to be over the time for you to keep on going. I'm not saying you have to let your emotions out when you are there, know when you're there, you have to block them, period, because that's going to make you more accurate, more precise on working and safer. But once you come back home, you have to let them out. And being ready is a three-time period. Preparation first to make the assessment, the risk assessment and prepare yourself for it, and when you're in the zone every single day, have time to diffuse yourself to something that diffuses you take a long bath. Mm hmm. Example and breathe and do some meditation or some yoga or dance or watch something funny on the TV or your iPad or play a little something in your or whatever, but do something at the end of the day that diffuses all the emotions. And once you go back home, do a briefing. And if you don't have someone you can debrief with, debrief yourself. Sometimes I go to the shower because that's my debriefing place. When I don't when I don't have the chance to do it with my team and I start crying and I start telling myself why this was hurtful, why this was particularly strong emotionally for me. And I tried to understand why this is happening in the world. And I tried to say, OK, awful things happen in the world, but also wonderful things happen in the world. And I'm one of them for helping, you know. And why do I put myself? Because it's important to give you love after something so strong. Yeah, and I know it sounds like it's more intellectual than you think to save this, because if you compensate, if you make an equilibrium between the awful things and the beautiful things between hate and love, then your life goes into equilibrium. That the protocol for post-traumatic stress disorder that I use and that we use in the company, one of the things we assess is what did you do wrong? But another thing that we use is how you compensate life. And that is, for example, if you are always working with death and violence and you need to do things to compensate and see the other side of life. So, yeah, what it's going to take a toll. It's going to take a toll on you. So, this is the kind of things that you have to work on in the after, during and prior, during and after an emergency, a possible emergency.

[00:22:17] That's wonderful advice. And I think it can. And I love the way that would just go alongside whatever you're doing or planning for. And now hopefully people will hear this and factor that into the decision making as well. Think about, you know, when was the last how long ago was my last assignment? Did I check in with myself after that one? How did I feel? You know, did I speak to my friends about it? And should I take this work? Because I think what happens, especially with freelancers, is they. Almost make a name for themselves by covering war zones, and then they feel like they're stuck in this sort of repetitive cycle of covering violence without losing themselves and realizing that they've now got stuck in that pattern. But I think the important message I'm hearing here is used to always advocate for yourself because your mind and body have had a doesn't have an it is not there forever. And also, neither is the work. And I think coming through being a conflict photographer, when my back started to hurt a bit more, my knees were getting a bit achier and it was taking me longer to decompress from certain assignments. I started to think this is starting to take a toll now. I don't think it's forever, you know, and I needed to put myself. First and just transition into other areas which would still support journalists, but without being so directly and in the front line, really? And yeah, you can't do that if you just single

mindedly put yourself into that one. You know, I'm only ever going to be this type of photographer and in dangerous environments.

[00:24:17] And there's two things very important. The one is why you have to be always at risk, why you love this adrenaline, because it's fascinating. I got understand it and I can relate because going to two dangerous zones myself or two for violence or for disasters, either of them is very accelerating. But this always I mean, the need is, OK, I have these thrills, these rushes, but I also need the peace and the calm. And if you cannot do that transition and I'm sorry, I'm going to make generalizations, but this this kind of causes for that. Most of the time it's because you don't want to face yourself because you don't like your life. Yeah, absolutely. I'm not saying that one hundred percent of you is there, but come on. Ninety nine percent.

[00:25:23] Yeah, I agree. I worked as a conflict photographer on and off for a decade, but I also did lots of other work because I only got asked to do that because of my military background, but actually very carefully chose when I was going to do because I didn't want to be in that pigeonhole, because the values myself enough to know that.

[00:25:52] And there's another thing that about what you said that is very important. Photojournalism journalism for journalists who are freelancers have one problem. They don't have a workplace environment which can help unloading the load. You just showed the same work. You are alone on that. And many times, you feel like you cannot burden your family or your friends with. That's why I was giving the example of the of the shower on my own, you know, because sometimes they don't have someone to talk to because they don't want to put the pictures and the images and the smells that they feel and they saw on the day that impacted them on someone else. But there's always someone you can talk to. That's always someone you can make a group of freelancers in your soul to together to once every month or every two months or every three months to deprive yourselves. Debriefing doesn't necessarily have to be done by a professional. It's best if it is because a lot of emotions arises and if you're not prepared to manage it, it can be a little tricky. But I think maybe I'm being very practical. But it's better to have a not so professional debriefing than none at all. You know, it's better to do something than nothing and you don't have a professional you can go to. The best thing would be to everybody. Any people who work this kind of job to have a therapist they can turn to, that would be the greatest thing. But if they don't have it and they don't want to because. No, I don't need it. And I what for now I'm strong enough and I worry the years will tell you that you did need it and you do need it and you're going to get there eventually, you know, but in the meantime, do something to do with yourself. What when?

[00:28:01] Sorry, Ana do you have a few examples of the sort of questions you might ask yourself as a debrief, because I know a lot of the journalists listening to this will be thinking about an interview. But what do you mean by debrief? What sort of questions would you ask yourself?

[00:28:17] OK, you have to consider three parts. The emotional part that the logical thinking process and the what would I do next? And the preparation for the next day or for the next assignment in the learning of something, we overcome things no matter how hard they were, no matter how strong, how painful they were when we learnt something from them. That's key if we learn something from it that makes us stronger, that makes us better. We overcome this; we process. So let your emotions out, contact them. What do what did I follow? What did I feel? Was I angry what I said was I fearful? Was I afraid? Was I enrage and let it out in your shower along or your house, grab the pillow and stick

things with it, or cry, cry and cry and cry? Let yourself let those emotions out, then understand where they come from, because they not only come from what you saw. But from the empathy of it and the empathy of it is OK. I saw a mother crying for the daughter that was taken from her because she was killed or because she was taken away or whatever. I think about my mother, if I get lost, if I'm. But yes, but I think about my daughters, how would I feel if I was in that situation? And that's what makes it even stronger in Texas when you prepare yourself for it. You have to know if you're going to encounter something that is going to match your story, what's going to be those kinds of things that are going to match your story and that are going to make it harder for you to manage those emotions. So, try to find out what was that that make you through empathy, be so impacted by it, then logically think, OK. I felt all of this, was that right? Yes, it was always assuring yourself that emotions are not right or wrong. There simply are. Yeah, and it's not wrong to feel them. What is wrong is to act on them. Yeah. Yeah. You can be outraged. It's OK. You can be outraged. Don't go hit someone punching someone in the face. Yeah. Don't go shouting and threatening others. Express. I am angry, I'm really angry and I need to be alone because I'm angry and that's fine. So, emotions are never wrong because it's not a matter of. You shouldn't feel that. Why not? Why I'm not and why shouldn't I feel whatever it is I feel they are going to come as they please.

[00:31:44] Yeah, I was just thinking about photographers here, because often you choose the image in the in the same in that situation, you're picking this one frame of a situation that's happening. And these somehow have to be incredibly calm to take the picture, even though the chaos is outside the frame potentially. But also, when you go back and you in your sort of safe place, your safe haven, which is your hotel room or back to your home, then you have to edit the pictures. And I think now that debrief process would be really helpful for photographers and videographers to think about as well, because they make a set of images. And then a few weeks later, a different editor myself would really like to use those pictures. So, you're going to have to go back to that place again.

[00:32:38] And that's when you usually hate them. Yeah, right. Yeah, that's in my experience, working with journalist and photojournalists when the admission process comes, that's what the emotions arouse. Yeah, so expose yourself to your photos before you see them and let their emotions out and then edit them.

[00:33:03] Yeah, and that's what I used to do with mine, because I had a background as an Army photographer and I would have to photograph repatriation and ramp ceremonies of killed British soldiers. And I had to do that as the army photographer for the family. So, my duty was to get the best photographs for them that was given to them after the service because they wouldn't be able to see it in Afghanistan or Iraq. And I did, even though that would be at 2:00 in the morning because we would do the ramp ceremony in the small hours when the runway wasn't open for normal aircraft. I would stay up till the morning like the following morning and edit all the photos and look at them all so that I didn't go to sleep, wake up again and then go through it all again. And I'm glad I did that because we did like 17 of those, one after the other. So that was a lot of death to photograph and witness. And I think with photographers, you have this kind of barrier. This can be an emotional barrier and sometimes can be helpful, but not constantly.

[00:34:13] It's helpful when you're in front of your camera. Your camera is a barrier. Yeah, and it's funny because I always hear the same comment. I feel safe when I'm holding my camera. I'm like, I'm away from the world. Like, I'm not seeing the world. I'm seeing something that is not there, because it's in my camera and I feel safe, I feel that my camera is what's saves me. It's always that feeling that the camera makes you safe. It's

not that you have to feel when you're in the zone. As I said, you have to do it, but you have to. And yes, of course, if you do these kinds of things long enough, your feelings are not going to be so strong. Why? Because you already work on them before. So, they are more in place. You understand better the situation. You understand better why this happened. And you have come to terms with this somehow. For example, OK, there's something I live in Mexico. So, yes, there's a lot of violence of drug related violence in my country. And it's why does this has to be like this? Well, that's the lesson we have to learn about values and about morality and this reality, this violence. There's always a reason for it, and it's not that I agree with it, obviously not, but I understand. I understand why. Yes, I do not agree with it. I hate it. Yeah, but I understand it. And I can understand that because of that violence, a lot of people come to be better person. Come to be it's like it potentially says the society is the worst and the best. And a lot of people fighting to make it better and those trying to make it worse, but well, I'm not saying this is an ideal situation to live in in this country, but there's some perks about it, this beautiful people you encounter along the way that are fighting it. So, you know, not to come to terms it.

[00:36:45] So interesting that through adversity we find some part of ourselves in that. Yeah, it shapes the sort of person we're going to be because it makes us question our morals and our values and shapes them as well. Right. Because we don't want to live as some neutral entity. You know, we all have some agency to affect some sort of change in our own lives and also perhaps how it affects everyone around us. So I think just as we get towards the end, I think what I'd love to know more about really is just some you talked about the de-brief side of when you return from a difficult assignment, but are there any other tips you could give to people listening about looking after themselves from a career point of view and also maybe a few things to notice in themselves if they're not OK, you know, things to be maybe little red flags where you think maybe I need to get some further support now, maybe speak to a friend, a colleague or a therapist.

[00:37:54] Yeah, well, about that, everything. Yeah, let your emotions out, put your mind at work in order to understand what why you reacted the way you did and make a plan for next time. Right. You know, OK, with this that I lived, what did I learn and how am I going to address things next time? That's very important. And give it time. Give it time to settle. Sometimes you don't have much because next day you're going to another place and in a week, you're going to another place and you are running all the time. But give the time to settle and try to look for someone you can talk to if you're having. I think that anger is the key to knowing that there's something wrong. If you're feeling very anger, very angry all the time, if you're feeling very irritated all the time, if you feel that you are not connecting with others as you should, that you're angry with everybody, that you don't want to see anybody, that it's like you would want to be in a shell all by yourself and not knowing anything about the world. If you feel that you cannot see the world, that you stop enjoying an ice cream or the breeze or the trees, if you stop enjoying life and you're angry all the time, and if you're really being, that will be relieving or avoiding situations of a bad experience that you have. If you're having these last two particular relieving and avoiding situations that. Put you in contact with that situation? Most likely, you have post-traumatic stress and you should contact someone, yeah, you should contact an organization that connects you to someone you should contact. I mean, a therapist in your area, that is it has to be someone that knows how to work posttraumatic stress disorder. Any therapist will do, but it's not as easy as it sounds. I mean, it has particular, but as if you went for a kidney problem with a heart surgeon. Yeah. He's going to help. But it he's not specialized in it. And it's not going to be as helpful as if you go with the kidney doctor, you know. So, try to look for someone that has worked prior to with emergency psychology, with post-traumatic stress disorder.

[00:40:44] That's really helpful. And I would say that the International Media Fund has an emergency fund as well for journalists who need to get help and signposted to therapists. They also have the Black Journalists Therapy Relief Fund that's been running. I'm still running. And there are the organizations such as the Repair Trust and others who have got a good place to sign post people, therapists. Yeah, I wonder to honor these the organizations I've mentioned quite international focus and it's important to find someone who's local to you. And I also wonder if there's any books or that you would like to share things that you've read that you found quite helpful or you think might be helpful to some of us.

[00:41:34] I don't usually I'm sorry, I don't usually refer books because self-help can be a double-edged plate. So, I'd rather not put myself in the situation of making someone burst because of a book. You know, I think it's always important to go to a and yes, it has to be someone local, but not necessarily. Sometimes there are no local specialists in your area. Yeah, I work with you with the IWM and I also work with either the APA and I work with Article 19 and I have patients, I have Journal and I have patients in Kenya. I have patients in London, in the UK, in Wales, for example, or in London. I have patients in Spain. I have patients in Cuba and Venezuela and in the US. So, find someone who knows what what's doing and try to find an organization that leads you to that person. Yeah, that's there's no need particularly for to have a session as impresses. You can do it by phone. Most of my sessions today because of the pandemic, all of my sessions are done by phone, not one, but not by some or by phone, because you don't need to see the other one. Usually in psychoanalysis, you have them laid down anyway. OK, yeah. And I work with patients all over the world. As long as the Spanish or English, I'm fine. OK, but there's always someone, for example, if you are in Japan or in China and you want with those languages or in the Arab world and you want that language, I mean well such for the organizations and they're going to leave you to someone that is not in your area that is going to be able to help them.

[00:43:38] I think that's really important. That's the kind of message I think we should leave our nation on, is that there is there is somebody out there for everyone to make the time to plan for yourself and your wellbeing. I'm sorry.

[00:43:55] One last thing. Post-Traumatic stress disorder and intervention. Psychological intervention is nine to twenty sessions. It's not a long-term therapy. We are not going to talk about your childhood until I tell you it has something to do with a traumatic experience. But mainly we are not going to talk about the child who died in the past. The talking is about that event and how to manage it. So, it's not that difficult. It's not that hard. It's not so long. So, if you're feeling that, go for it.

[00:44:36] Yeah. Brilliant. Thank you so much, Ana. So, such a lot of great information there for everyone.

[00:44:44] Thank you very much!

[00:44:45] And thank you for joining us. And yes, if you've got any concerns, then please do read. Out to us after this conversation, and we've got plenty of things online for you to look at in this module. OK, thank you so much, Ana.

[00:45:03] Thank you so much and pleased to be here and pleased to meet you.