

Module 4: Self-care and mental well-being

Hi, welcome back to this final module of "How report safely: strategies for women journalists and their allies". I'm Ali Baskerville. Am I your lead instructor for this course? And I'm going to take you through some tips and advice for looking after our emotional well-being while reporting. And just a reminder that in the last three modules, we've covered a wide range of subjects and topics that affect our personal safety and also some tools on how to plan safely and also things to put in place when the worst case happens, specifically in relation to harassment, sexual violence and gender-based violence. So, in this final module, we're going to look more at our emotional well-being. We can't really talk about physical well-being without also thinking about emotional well-being alongside this. And the reason this matter is because journalists and photographers are more likely to put themselves in difficult and hazardous situations. If you were a breaking news reporter, you'll often be travelling into challenging and hostile environments, as well as being a documentary photographer who might be working on very difficult subjects over a long period of time. So just like physical first aid, we need to have some mental health first aid in place as well, because, again, we will hopefully outlive our careers and therefore it's good to protect our mental health and also have some strategies in place when we do face adversity through the course of our work. In the first session, we talked about exposure to risk around physical safety, but this is also about your emotional safety as well. So, once we've seen what the inherent risks are of the story that we're doing and we've put some mitigation in place and we've thought about what to do if the worst happens, we still have a residual risk. So, there are possibilities that we might encounter particularly difficult events whilst we're reporting. So, we can't really cancel out all the risk, but we can think about our exposure time and again. Whilst you might physically feel unsafe in an environment if you're emotionally triggered and you feel that that's make you feel emotionally unsafe. It's exactly the same as being physically unsafe. And you should make a plan to use those exit strategies to get away from what that perceived risk is. Again, nobody gets bravery awards for staying in a difficult environment for an extended length of time. You do have to think about how the effect of adrenaline is going to have on you and also on your nervous system and also how it's going to affect you potentially days and weeks after you've been in a difficult environment. So, again, exposure to risk is also, again, about your mental health first aid, as well as physical first aid. One aspect we've already talked about in hotel safety is that it's a safe haven and often referred to as a physical safe haven, but actually it's also an emotional safe haven. So, within your packing list, make sure you've got something that's potentially quite sentimental or something that relates back to yourself, whether it's a book, whether it's an item of clothing, maybe it's the way that you smell. Maybe it's a photo of someone that you love or something that you love to have with you so you can ground yourself back into a sense of who you are. And that's really important. If you've been exposed to something difficult, we have to get back to our center again and be back in the presence of who we are in that moment rather than the event that happened before and how it will affect us afterwards again. And as our hope is going to share some really good tips on how to get back into that sense of self in the second video. In recent years, there's been an enhanced awareness of the effects of reporting on difficult subjects for the journalist community, including some of the more severe impact of reporting on difficult subjects such as post-traumatic stress disorder, as well as thinking about the spectrum of mental health that we might experience throughout the course of our career. So just as we talked about in the first session around the risk assessment process, there's also some pre trip planning that we can do for ourselves before we actually go out on the ground. That relates very specifically to our emotional health. Just as we put on our personal protective equipment when covering a protest, we can also do some things that actually help our mental wellbeing and emotional wellbeing before we go

out. The first thing I suggest you to do is to have a check in with yourself. Have you been covering a lot of difficult situations over a protracted amount of time? Have you had a lot of exposure to traumatic events or situations? And remember, a trauma can be experienced, whether it's through a car crash, through witnessing a tragic event or experiencing yourself or even going into your hard drive and looking over images that might have some traumatic memories, but do have that check in and see how you're feeling at the time of you taking on this next assignment. We have got a conversation with Ana Zelhuber as the second part of this module, and she's going to talk more about this as a mental health expert. She's better placed to be able to share those kinds of advice with you, especially as a working psychologist. What I'm here to do is to give you some preparation tools to think about as well as during and after a difficult assignment. I've not only helped me, but other reporters in a similar situation. And again, if you've got any tips and advice on how you've supported yourself over the course of your trip, then we can put those into the discussion forum later on at the end of this module. So, let's go back to that Check-In then. What else can we do for ourselves to get us into that kind of frame of mind where we're feeling emotionally ready to do the work that we need to do? Some of this is also very simple, eating the right food, getting enough sleep when that sleep becomes disturbed. Is there something going on from a past job or something in our personal life that's affecting our mental health? This is another area to be focused on, a little bit to pay attention to, and sometimes people's effects of people and effects from people's mental health could be financial. They might be struggling with money. You might be a working freelancer where Fastnet finances are hard and you are taking assignment after assignment to be able to go out. And often we hear there's not enough time to think about myself. Well, that's always time that you should make for yourself when it comes to mental well-being. As I said earlier, we want your career to last or your mental health to last beyond your career, as in fact, you will probably, you know, be relying more on your mental well-being than you will on your journalistic career as you get older. So, we need to do some things to keep that in check and keep it balanced. And also, don't forget your reporting on difficult stories, and if you're traumatized or struggling with that, it will affect the way that you report on issues as well. So that's also a. Duty to those that we're sharing stories with to make sure that we're also OK in ourselves before we share that work, especially as more visual based practices such as photography and photojournalism and videography tend to put people at more risk because they're normally in the incident as it's taking place. But more on that in a second. So other parts of our preparation can also be around research. Now, if you're interviewing people who've been exposed to trauma or potentially traumatized, then it's worthwhile checking in with a resource such as the Dart Centre for Trauma and Journalism. And they've got really great tools on how to prepare and sort of questions we might ask somebody who's experienced difficult in a traumatic event. I would also start to get yourself mentally prepared for what you're about to experience when we do that research for a risk assessment. We also think about those more difficult scenarios that we might find ourselves in. Ask yourself the question whether you are prepared for that, not just physically, but also psychologically. Also, ask yourself the question, if you keep going into dangerous environments, is that about your commitment to the story? Is it something a bit deeper within you that's making you start making you put yourself at extended amounts of risk? So, these are some of the things we can do assignment to help prepare ourselves for what we might encounter on the ground. Another small but very effective technique to help get you out of that adrenaline state so you can help to make some of those decisions again is to get back into your breath. Often when we stress, we forget to take a breath. We forget to breathe even. And certainly, after this year, during the pandemic, which is still continuing, people have thought much more about mindfulness and more kind of gentle exercises such as yoga, tai chi and also things that help us to ground us when we're going through anxious and stressful situations. Anxiety is definitely being a common theme

throughout the last year and certainly in my time as working as a photographer. It's definitely being more present when I've been in more stressful situations. And remember, anxiety is a natural reaction to fear. It's designed to help move you on from whatever the threat is when we get an unhealthy relationship with anxiety, when it comes up in a normal setting. And again, if that is happening to you, to reach out to a mental health professional or to talk somebody, talk to someone you trust to go through that, but remember to breathe, take a breath, pause. Even in the most difficult situation, you will have time to do this. So, it helps us to look out a bit, step back. And obviously we will have been become so focused on what's happening, we forget to step away from the situation and then we can move back in and make a bit more of an informed choice, knowing that we're not highly adrenalized what we're doing here and also happen to YouTube. There are some great videos on breathing work and breastwork that you can tune into there and also some good meditation apps that might help you. Another area that I wanted to finish on is to think about post reporting, our sort of long-term relationship with our mental health. Now, over the course of the pandemic, most a majority of people have become more aware about their mental well-being and also have looked into more mindfulness practices such as yoga, just gentle stretching and breathing and also getting more into our bodies and having a better relationship between the connection between mind and body. I would also say that if you're a very energetic person and used to being on the go all the time as a reporter, then also find some other hobby. If you're used to being on the go all the time and you're very energetic as a person, make sure you have a hobby that's not related to journalism, or I'd advise you to have a hobby that isn't related to journalism. Find a sport that you love, a craft that you love, maybe learn a new language, maybe just do something that you're still engaged in but and focus then. But isn't related to the work that you do is often quite helpful. Sometimes it might be a change in the type of journalism you're doing. Perhaps you'd like to try doing more long-term photography projects, or perhaps you'd like to do long form story writing. Again, this really relates to your resources as well as I appreciate. Some of you will not be able to do more long-term stories, but have a look at grant applications and funding opportunities out there that could allow you to do this. It could be the kind of transition in your career that you need. So, what kind of support can we expect or potentially look for once we've been through a particularly traumatic event or we're starting to notice something different in ourselves, or perhaps even you've noticed something in one of your colleagues or friends that that that is concerning for you? Well. It depends on the nature of the work that you do if you work in a newsroom, for example, like Reuters, they have a designated mental health and well-being set up now for all of their journalists and photographers. And they will more than likely do a check in with a therapist before going on a difficult assignment and afterwards. And that's something I would recommend actually, as part of your pre departure planning is if you're able to do so, to actually check in with a mental health professional to actually see whether you are okay to go on that assignment. Again, this is not necessary. This is just an advice piece of advice I would offer to you, because whilst we may feel like we're okay, sometimes there might be stuff that we haven't quite worked through from perhaps the last story. This is really good to check that we are actually balanced and ready to go. But also, after an assignment, if you have come across something unexpected and it has put you in risk, then it's good to do a check in. And I would say that a lot of editors now newsroom safety managers will do regular check ins with you, just like we talked about at the start of this course around your physical safety. But also, this is a good opportunity to talk about your emotional well-being. And if you've come across anything that's caused some concern, again, if you're in the middle of a long reporting trip and you feel OK to carry on, but something did come up, just make a note of it, stick into a journal, put it in your phone, make sure you've got a record of it just in case you do need to go back and look at that at some point. As I said, I'm not a mental health expert. And what I'm sharing with you is based on personal experience and

the experience of other journalists and photographers. So, there are many other ways to approach this. And also, again, I encourage you to share any tips that have helped you and supported you throughout your career. I think one of the biggest things I'd like to share with you as well is about the stigma around talking about your mental health. I think generationally, more people are comfortable with talking about this now, and it's helping people to report on issues that they actually feel psychologically safe to do so. And they're also thinking about the people that they're interviewing and also their emotional and mental health. Because what the work that journalists do is dangerous in many ways, but also, it's risky in the sense that we are often working with people who are vulnerable based on the circumstances that they're in. So become more aware of what that means. I've mentioned the resource from DART and I do encourage you to read into that and get a little bit more cognizant of the effects of trauma on somebody, but also because it will help to support you if you are to go through any kind of traumatic event.