

FACT SHEET

REPORTING ON ALCOHOL AND OTHER DRUGS

People with alcohol and other drug (AOD) problems often have other problems as well. Journalists need to be mindful of the possibility that someone who uses AOD may have acknowledged or unacknowledged trauma in their lives. Insensitive treatment of them may result in serious, and even life-threatening consequences.

ALCOHOL AND OTHER DRUGS IN THE MEDIA

Research shows that people with mental health and alcohol and AOD problems are often stigmatized and discriminated against in the community. Stigma contributes to the problems they and their families face in seeking help, since the act of going public may be met with rejection and shame.

ALCOHOL AND OTHER DRUG USE, STIGMA AND DISCRIMINATION

What is often ignored is the link between pre-existing trauma from sexual abuse and subsequent AOD use.

LINK BETWEEN CHILD SEXUAL ABUSE, AOD AND TRAUMA

The negative image of people who use AOD has been exacerbated by sensationalized reporting in the media. However, experts acknowledge that the media have an important role to play in reducing the stigma and community prejudice related to trauma, mental health and AOD use.

A NEW APPROACH: TRAUMA INFORMED JOURNALISM

Increasingly authorities in the field of AOD and Mental Health sectors are adopting a 'trauma-informed' approach to care, going beyond the symptoms individuals may present with in order to understand and treat the possible causes buried within their lives.

TRAUMA, MENTAL HEALTH AND AOD USE

Trauma-informed care builds on the 5 principles of safety, trustworthiness, choice, collaboration, and empowerment to put the wellbeing of the individual and their families first.

A trauma-informed approach to journalism practice may help to encourage a better understanding of AOD problems in the general public and reduce the risk of further trauma for those who use drugs, their families and the community at large.



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WHAT IS TRAUMA-INFORMED JOURNALISM?

In the context of journalism practice the five principles of trauma-informed journalism are:

- **Trustworthiness:** TIJ requires time. It isn't a fly-in fly-out matter. You need to gain the confidence and trust of the source, which means being as open yourself as you expect them to be with you. It often requires, and results in, genuine long-term relationships that go beyond the story.
- **Collaboration:** In TIJ journalist and source are equal partners with goals they have negotiated together. The interview should be approached as a collaboration between journalist and source, with the wellbeing of the source paramount, even if ultimately at the expense of the story.
- **Choice:** In TIJ the source is given agency at every stage – the choice of whether to do the interview at all, the time, place and duration, whether to allow the finished product to be released for public consumption. There should be no pressure or coercion by the journalist on the source. Consent should be given with the source in full awareness of the consequences, positive and potentially negative, of going public.
- **Safety:** From the sort of relationship established under the preceding principles the source should feel a sense of safety that comes from feeling in control of events. The journalist needs to be prepared to 'protectively interrupt' the interview if it appears to be causing undue stress to the interviewee.
- **Empowerment:** Trauma by its very nature is a disempowering experience. The result of the interaction between journalist and source should be a restored sense of empowerment. The source has taken control of their narrative and with the help of the journalist has helped it see the light of day. It is done on the source's terms and many feel the satisfaction of their story contributing to the greater good.

Trauma-informed journalism prioritises the welfare of the source and the journalist (and journalism student). It acknowledges that dealing with traumatised people also exposes the witnesses of their stories (journalists, audience members, students) to that trauma and can lead to vicarious traumatising. It may even trigger memories of current or long buried trauma in the witnesses themselves.

This requires sensitivity and awareness at every stage of the journalism process, from the classroom into the workplace. It includes making provision for access to professional counselling as part of preparation for the story.



FACT SHEET

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