Portland-based KATU News took an unusual step this week by preempting its morning and afternoon newscasts to allow staff members to attend a Poynter training program about stress and trauma.

“In almost 25 years as a photojournalist, I’ve never seen a newsroom do this,” tweeted KATU News staffer Mike Warner. “But it’s been a crazy time filled with a raging pandemic, out of control violence, political unrest, riots, and ongoing death & destruction. Personally speaking, seeing bodies daily gets to you #stress.”

Hundreds of surprised and supportive reactions from journalism Twitter followed, with many sharing stories of the impact the last couple years had on the well-being of reporters, editors and newsroom leaders.

For the last five years, Poynter senior faculty Al Tompkins and his wife, licensed mental health counselor Sidney Tompkins, have delivered training to thousands of journalists from dozens of countries around the world about dealing with stress and trauma.

“Sidney and I started this teaching which marries her more than four decades of clinical therapy work with my more than four decades of journalism,” Al Tompkins said. “We first realized we should be having these conversations when we were teaching journalists from conflict zones across Africa and Eastern Europe. But starting with the 2016 election season compounded with mass shootings, a pandemic, and racial tensions, journalists keep adding layer upon layer of stress and pressure to their lives. Sidney and I found packed convention halls at our workshops for IRE, SPJ and virtual workshops for NABJ and NPPA. We help journalists recognize their stressors and understand what reliable new research says about how people behind the scenes, not just those on the front-lines, are subject to traumatic stress. We are also interested in how various demographics in our newsrooms experience trauma differently according to their age, gender identification, race and ethnicity. And we want journalists to understand one of the most important ways to recover from “moral injury” which is a form of traumatic stress, is to realize that the work that journalists do matters. New research says journalists suffer trauma stress at rates that are similar to first responders. Journalists are first responders and last responders. We are there when stories begin and we stay there long after the ambulances and fire trucks leave.”

“Al and I have heard from journalists who are attacked for reporting the truth,” Sidney Tompkins said. “We repeatedly talk with families who have lost loved ones to covid while the journalist also has lost someone to the pandemic. We have heard from journalists who are trying to produce newscasts from home while trying to help their children go to school virtually. And managers tell us they are desperate to help their staff keep it together while also covering some of the most important stories of their lives. One journalist told us about having seizures that his doctor

linked to his job stress. A video editor who watched hours of images from the January 6th insurrection talked openly about how the repetition of watching those violent images stuck in his thoughts for weeks. Women journalists often tell me they do not want to say they feel stress because they worry their bosses will think they are too soft to do the job. A lot of our work in these seminars is to educate everyone about what traumatic stress looks like and how to talk openly about it."

"KATU decided not just to talk about the value of mental health but to invest in it," Al Tompkins said. "Sidney and I have been honored to work with hundreds of local and network journalists and their leadership groups in the last year. We have taught these constantly updated sessions more than 60 times in 2021 alone in markets that range from LA, New York, Boston, Miami and Chicago to one news operation that had a dozen employees. Their stories and worries are remarkably similar."

And the Tompkins' said when they work with newsrooms they ask the station to carve out some time just for newsroom managers to talk about the stress they are managing. "These newsroom managers have spent so much time caring for their team that they have neglected their own needs," Al said. "Managers have told us they have not taken vacation time in more than a year, they are spending unprecedented amounts of time recruiting people to fill open positions and at the same time, they, just like everybody else have parents and children they are caring for. Sidney, who is a retired United Methodist minister has great advice for new pastors. She tells them 'make sure we feed the shepherd or soon he will eat the sheep.' It's true for news managers too."

Warner and other KATU journalists Tweeted after the workshop:

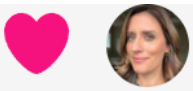




Alison Dorf @AlisonDorf · Sep 28

Replying to @atompkins @KslMatt and 2 others

It was so incredibly helpful and valuable! Thanks for talking to our team today.



Angelica Thornton liked a reply to your Tweet

THANK YOU to you and your wife for a very informative session. Extremely helpful for me. I appreciate your message that our jobs are important - that what we do matters. The ugliness of the last couple years had me uncertain. #LiveOnK2 #Mentalhealth

Are you interested in scheduling training from Poynter for your newsroom? Email tompkins@poynter.org for information.

Al Tompkins
Poynter Senior Faculty
tompkins@poynter.org
727-409-9717 (c)
@atompkins Twitter
Read my daily email newsletter for journallists:
https://www.poynter.org/subscribe-to-covering-covid-19/