When my book about the life and death of murdered psychiatrist Dr Margaret Zebin was published last year, I could hardly bring myself to look at it. This was more than my usual journalistic paranoia about discovering errors, omissions or sloppy writing. I couldn’t bear to look at the book because it was a reminder of so many traumas.

The most obvious of these is that Joseph Mabuso is about a murder and its impact - not a pleasant subject for a long-term relationship. Indeed, it’s the longevity of the relationships that you develop when researching a book that is both a blessing and a curse. Because you can spend so much time getting to know your subject, you hope to do a better job of researching and writing your story.

But you also become much more emotionally involved. In some senses, this is necessary and helpful. You are more aware than usual of the potential for your work to be hurtful. Emotional engagement exacts costs, both personal and professional. Boundaries are inevitably transgressed. You come to know people so well that they are more than professional contacts, more than sources for your book. You are more aware of the potential of your work to be hurtful.

So often in journalism, you mine someone’s story, package it up for retail, and then move on to the next subject, often in blissful ignorance of its impact on the lives of those involved. With a book, it can be more difficult to remain oblivious and to move on. After many years of covering health and medical issues, I’ve come to the conclusion that patients rarely give “informed consent” to have a medical procedure or intervention. Until they know what the surgeon’s blade or the pharmacist’s pill means for them, they cannot fully appreciate the implications of their consent. The emotional and psychological interludes can be helpful and/or harmful, and can change with time.

Too often the publication of a book has a range of unpredictable effects for those involved. When you write a book like Inside Madness, revealing intimate details about people and families, you have to accept the reality that you may be adding to their grief and trauma of those who have already suffered huge losses.

When you spend months investigating someone’s life and work, as I did with Dr Zebin, many difficult questions arise. What is relevant, what is true, which memories are reliable and which are not? Am I being fair, too tough, not tough enough?

What are the rights of the dead and the unrepresented? (Dr Tobin was declared, for example, not to have a sentimental bone in her body, yet I learnt of many sentimental gestures – I also reflected on my own contradictions and quirks, and wondered whether it’s possible to try to love someone else if you don’t know how something of yourself and your own biases.)

Joseph Mabuso is more than the story of a giddy woman and a terrible tragedy. It also examines our society’s inability to provide decent care and support to those with mental illness. The book was part of my response to the death of my brother Jeff, who killed himself the year before Dr Zebin was murdered. Writing the book was part of my own search for understanding about my brother’s life and death, and it was a painful therapy.

All of us are marked in some way by the work that we do. When researching the book I spent some months attending the trial of Eric Gassy, the deregistered psychiatrist who was eventually found guilty of murdering his former boss. During that time, a number of reporters told me of how their work in courts had adversely affected their own psychological wellbeing. Some had spent many weeks listening to the grisly details of the Stewarts murder, and this had left a profound mark.

Bells rang when I saw an article in The Valdosta Magazine last year, calling for applications for the 2006 Dart Ochberg Fellowship. Established by the International Society for Traumatic Stress Studies (ISTSS) and Dart Centre for Journalism and Trauma, the fellowship brings together a small group of journalists, mainly from the US, to discuss and learn about issues related to the coverage of violence and trauma, whether wars, disasters, crimes, illness or accidents.

Within hours of learning I had won the fellowship, the previous Australian recipient, ABC journalist Philip Williams, rang me to say it was one of the best things he’d ever done as a journalist. When I packed my bags to attend the fellowship in Hollywood last October, it was the emotional baggage which I was carrying which made me hopeful that the journey might be helpful.

Tinseltown is the last place where I would have expected to rediscover an enthusiasm for journalism. But that was the fellowship’s great gift, for me anyway. It brought together seven journalists from the US, one from Colombia, one from Germany and one from Australia, and supported us to discuss our own work and issues, and to hear from experts about the impact of violence and trauma on communities and individuals, as well as on the journalists who cover it.

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I must admit to approaching the fellowship with some scepticism after years of seeing various interest groups try to influence reporting on their particular pet subjects. Eventually, however, I was won over by the integrity of the Dart approach and came to realise that the goal was not to promote the ISTSS as much as to provide genuine help to journalists and journalism.

Hearing about the work of the other fellows (who included photographers, editors and television producers) reinforced my appreciation for what good journalism can achieve, often in the face of considerable resistance from the newsroom.

I was inspired by the news editor from Lafayette who pushed her small newspaper to cover the plight of prisoners in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina. It was hard to imagine an Australian newspaper the courage and ability to choose such an unpopular subject as prisoner welfare, not only in such depth but also in a way which humanised prisoners.

And all of us were galloped on the coverage of the young journalist from Colombia who reporting on paramilitary crimes had led to death threats, forcing her to leave her home and country.

It was moving to hear seasoned war reporters talk about their work and its impact, including their struggles with problems such as post-traumatic stress disorder. It was a privilege to be amongst colleagues who were courageous enough to speak of their fears and frailties: It felt like a million miles from the bravado and back stabbing which is so prevalent in many newsrooms and so often impedes professional discussion.

As a former journalist, I also valued a deadline-free opportunity for professional traumas: “In tough cultures you don’t show weakness, and to have any sort of psychological or emotional reaction is often misunderstood as weakness when it’s not. Why’s nobody being human.”

McMahon says Dart is not promoting self-Journalism, it’s about telling tough stories in a better way, which will resonate more with audiences. Ideas for its future directions in Australia will be developed at a meeting in March of journalists and photographers interested in the Dart philosophy.

For more information go to www.dartcentre.org

...thanks to the styrofoam cup.

The Dart Centre for Journalism and Trauma, based at the University of Washington in Seattle, is named for the family whose philanthropy has supported its work over the past decade. Many journalists who benefit are quick to discover they owe a debt to the humble styrofoam cup, whose invention contributed to the Dart family’s wealth, estimated at more than US$7 billion.

The Centre has developed resources to help journalists do a better job of covering violence and trauma, and works to improve journalists’ education and training in the area. It’s established awards and fellowships, and is developing an international network of journalists.

The Australian branch of Dart is based in Melbourne, and has run training sessions for journalists from Australia, Indonesia and East Timor since its 2004 launch. Its director, Cait McMahon, says it’s helping to overcome the journalistic taboo against discussing professional trauma: “In tough cultures you don’t show weakness, and to have any sort of psychological or emotional reaction is often misunderstood as weakness when it’s not. Why’s nobody being human.”
Out of harm’s way

PHILIP CASTLE REVEALS THE JOURNALIST’S “SIX-PACK” FOR MINIMISING THE HURT THAT COMES WITH REPORTING TRAUMA.

“Crime is the melting pot of everything in our society. It’s traumatic and heart-breaking. Children are always difficult. The stories are enduring. You must understand clearly what is on and off-the-record.” – The Courier-Mail’s police crime reporter, Paula Doneman, November 2006.

The most effective journalists, I was told by a journalism academic many years ago, are those driven by idealism. What he didn’t say, and I’ve since realised, is that they then also certainly become masochists.

While many journalists never set out to do it, ultimately they begin to feel the pain of their stories and yet continue, believing correctly, they are doing some good – but they also know that each time they are inflicting further self-harm.

In a recent series of interviews about police/crime reporting and how it now seems to be a side-issue in many newsrooms, I was reminded of the apparent lack of concern shown to those who do those stories; how often it’s forgotten that the reporter will experience associated trauma when doing a tough police/crime story.

The most common cause for suffering amongst reporters is the long-term post-traumatic stress disorder brought on by covering vehicle accidents.

Journalists know part of the package of trauma stories is first to “do no further harm”, but they learn the hard way they must also try to minimise their own self-harm. If these stories are to be done well, a journalist has to be empathetic and “you just can’t fake compassion”.

My research on journalists experiencing trauma through their work shows that inevitably they begin to pay a price. Sometimes it’s too high. I know of journalists where their work reporting on trauma has been a factor in suicide, drug dependency (legal and illegal), failure in relationships and recurrent unwanted recalls.

Some have stopped working as journalists or even working at all. Often they have felt no-one else really understands. Perhaps not, but the Dart Centre is a good start. Talking to colleagues is nearly always also helpful. As a counsellor once advised, we all absorb trauma like a drip into a glass. Each has a different capacity. Inevitably it will fill up and spill over.

The features editor of The Oklahoman in the US Midwest, Bryan Painter, covered many of the traumas in Oklahoma over the past 15 years. The newspaper began a series profiling the victims of their major tragedies, including the Oklahoma bombing of April 19, 1995. He was responsible for most of the stories. Initially he said his personal approach was wrong, but now he believes it was the best way to deal with the stories. Interviewed in 2003, he had some succinct advice to offer to journalists dealing with traumatic events (see right).

Most reporters can and will be exposed to traumatic stories. It’s news. My research in Australia and the US, Canada, the UK and New Zealand confirm the most common cause for suffering amongst reporters is the long-term post-traumatic stress disorder brought on by covering vehicle accidents. They are so brutal, indiscriminate, often senseless and could happen to any of us.

While doing my research, I spent some months in South Africa. Their reporters were some of most traumatised I have met, apart from war journalists, and their most traumatising stories were, not surprisingly, “child/infant rapes and murders”.

It is almost predictable that reporters and all the associated media staff will be affected by major traumatic stories such as disasters, wars and killings. Reporters can almost prepare for these stories and know they will be affected, although it is obvious many felt and still do feel the trauma of events such as the Asian tsunami. But what really hurts is when reporters on a smaller local paper or station are suddenly confronted with a local vehicle accident. They may even know or be connected to the victims.

It also came as no surprise in my most recent interviews that again Australian journalists cited their most distasteful role was the infamous “death knock”. Fortunately now this is generally out of favour. Not all are wrong, but they are if forced and done without genuine consent. The best person to decide whether it’s appropriate is the reporter on the spot. And often an appropriate intermediary can be a better source.

We can and should use whatever resources are available through our employers, union or Dart Centre or similar. But ultimately it means self-care and recognising the journalist’s job is likely to hurt at some point. Those who best understand this are other journalists.

Philip Castle is a journalism lecturer at Queensland University of Technology and a former journalist covering crime and police. For the past decade, he has researched trauma and its impact on journalists and is a former member of the board of the Dart Centre Australia.

The “six-pack” for coping with trauma
1. It is wise to talk regularly to someone close and trusted about your feelings and events being reported. (In Bryan Painter’s case it was his wife.)
2. As much as is possible keep your normal pattern of activities and behaviour going. If you would normally go to a game or meet some friends after work or go to church or scouts or spend time with your family, then keep those patterns.
3. Keep your sense of humour and continue to laugh and joke. Just because you are dealing with sorrow and sadness doesn’t mean you can’t laugh and enjoy the fun of life.
4. Be open to the idea of counselling and, if you consider it worthwhile, then take advantage of the opportunities and be positive about their possibilities for you and others.
5. Take pride in your work and accept the stories you are doing are important to many people and to yourself. The work of a reporter is to take the story “…one step closer to the reader…” Many people said that Bryan Painter’s stories helped them to come to terms with tragedy because of the way they appeared.
6. Before each interview Painter treated each as an individual tragedy for those people. He used his faith for wisdom and his skill to prepare. He always prayed before he interviewed for each profile; that is, he properly prepared in his own way for each interview and obviously treated the opportunity with great respect.

– courtesy Bryan Painter, features editor, The Oklahoman