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# STRESS AND COPING IN JOURNALISTS

Findings of a three-year counselling service



# **Stress & Coping in Journalists**

*Findings of a three-year counselling service*

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# SUMMARY

A profession whose practitioners kill stories, make deadlines and run towards burning buildings can only be one that operates on a steady diet of stress. But gone are the days of valorising newsroom suffering, as journalists the world over have begun to understand the toll their work takes. Burnout, anxiety, depression are just some of the ways they routinely describe their mental state.

Support for media workers is, however, scant in Pakistan. It was, thus, the good fortune of IBA's Centre for Excellence in Journalism in Karachi to receive funding and support from DW Akademie to start a one-of-its-kind free and confidential counselling service for Pakistani media workers in 2018.

To date, the Wellbeing Centre's four psychologists—Dr Asha Bedar, Mahnoor Shaikh, Tabinda Afzal and Zainab Barry—have provided over 600 hourly counselling sessions to 107 journalists across Pakistan, with the majority in Karachi. This study encapsulates the wealth of insights that emerged over three years of the clinic's practice. It draws on data from the Wellbeing Centre's Karachi clients, (keeping in mind confidentiality), the clinical observations of Dr Asha Bedar, interviews with senior journalists and surveys administered at CEJ workshops on well-being.

When the Wellbeing Centre staff visited newsrooms across Karachi to introduce the free service they found that journalists were reluctant to discuss their needs but that they would quietly get in touch for help later on. As expected, younger people (21- to 35-year-olds) showed up for counselling more than older ones. We were surprised to see more men sought help. And even though we visited newsrooms indiscriminately, it was the English-medium journalist who overwhelmingly drew on the support of the Centre. The service has been running successfully for three years, but

it is clear to us that much more work has to be done to normalise and define thinking about mental health among the community. For example, surveys from our workshops indicate that journalists are not even entirely clear how to recognise signs of stress and distress or when their well-being begins to be compromised. From the type of journalist who came to the Centre, we conclude that those who do online work are in the majority—hardly surprising given the pace of digital newsrooms. Anxiety was the most common diagnosis, followed by depression.

The picture that emerges then, would hardly be unfamiliar to those in the industry. They will recognise the sources of stress broken down in this study and would be unlikely to disagree with the impact it has on media workers. We are fairly certain that the section on coping techniques will resonate with journalists who read it. In fact, it might even alert them to their own need for therapy. This study is the first of its kind but we anticipate that some journalists who read it may feel that it tells them nothing new. Therein lies the rub; levels of stress damaging to well-being and performance have become acceptable in media houses and are considered the norm. In fact, the topic of the well-being of journalists is regularly discussed on television and in print and on digital—but very little is happening to tackle it.

In the long run, this will be detrimental to the industry, which is why we hope that media house owners and groups, the authorities, journalist unions, press clubs, academic institutions that teach mass communication, and newsroom leaders will take to heart the recommendations given at the end.

Kamal Siddiqi  
Director, CEJ  
June 2021



# 1. INTRODUCTION

In 2018, a free confidential counselling service was started for journalists and media workers in Karachi, Pakistan at the Institute of Business Administration's Centre for Excellence in Journalism in collaboration with DW Akademie. To date, the CEJ Wellbeing Centre has provided therapy to 107 journalists over 603 hours—and continues to do so. As word spread, journalists from beyond Karachi started to request online appointments with its four clinical psychologists. The Centre was able to thus extend its reach to Balochistan, Khyber Pakhtunkwa and Punjab.

This study, the first of its kind in Pakistan, focuses on the client journalists exclusively from Karachi who came for counselling to the Centre over the course of three years. It provides a picture of the sources and types of stress they experienced, its impact on their personal and professional lives and how they coped. It details their response to counselling. These findings are buttressed by input provided from senior journalists and focus group discussions and data gathered in surveys from the workshops conducted by the Centre.



The signature poster of the CEJ Wellbeing Centre with its tagline: What about your story? The poster advertises the cell phone number and email through which any media worker can make an appointment for the free and confidential counselling service at the CEJ-IBA in Karachi. The idea was to attract them by saying that they told the world's stories but what about their own, as in their psychological challenges.

# 1.1 Background

Journalism can be a rewarding profession especially if its practitioners are motivated by the sense that they are part of something greater than themselves. They find it exhilarating to witness and relay the raw edition of history, making them an instrument of an intangible social good. It is gratifying for them to be able to contribute to people's understanding of their world by uncovering intriguing, useful and unique information on it.

The work of journalism is done, however, in an atmosphere of unrelenting deadline pressure, and most journalists agree that actually a certain tolerance or even appetite for this kind of stress is essential to be able to perform. Stress is intrinsic to a newsroom's operation; the pace of work is constant, competitive and highly physically, emotionally and intellectually demanding. There is little margin for error. The nature of the job is to have to extract information from sources that do not necessarily want to yield it or even actively obfuscate. In Pakistan so much of daily reporting has to be on broken systems, suffering caused by incompetence or corruption and the pain caused by a chronic lack of resources. Mental health experts concur, explaining that not only is some stress, anxiety or even temporary distress a normal human emotional response (especially) to the disturbing or traumatic news that journalists cover, but that they are adaptive responses which serve as coping

mechanisms to motivate, inspire and reward.

Not all stress that journalists experience and report in their line of work is, however, adaptive. Over the last two decades there has been increased recognition of how high the levels are that journalists experience on the job, and the psychosocial impact on their work and well-being.<sup>1</sup> It is not surprising that journalism is considered a high-stress profession given the state of the industry—understaffing, layoffs, salary delays—as well as the nature of work, to cover accidents, violence (physical or sexual), wars, armed conflict, disasters, fires, terrorist attacks and other tragedies, that bring its practitioners in close contact with death, injury, victims, grief and vulnerability.<sup>2</sup> Many Pakistani journalists do a job—typically without adequate training, protection and support—that exposes them to dangerous and distressing situations such as natural or man-made disasters, political, ethnic, sectarian violence, terrorism, political torture and enforced disappearances, state censorship, severe forms of violence against women and children, regular everyday law and order and systemic failures. They may also be exposed to, or even be physically harmed for being in dangerous situations as first responders reporting live. Indeed, a number of studies have identified high rates of trauma exposure (80–100%) among journalists.<sup>3&4</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Dart Center for Journalism & Trauma (2007). *Trauma and journalism: A guide for journalists, editors & managers*. Available: [https://dartcenter.org/sites/default/files/DCE\\_JournoTraumaHandbook.pdf](https://dartcenter.org/sites/default/files/DCE_JournoTraumaHandbook.pdf)

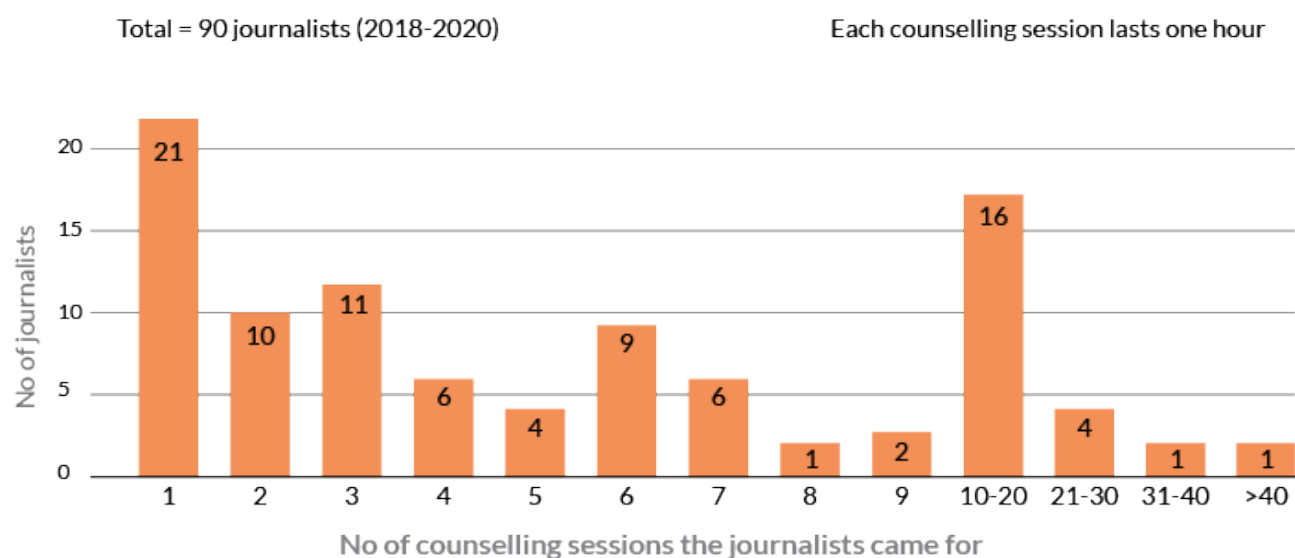
<sup>2</sup>Dubberley, S. & Grant, M. (2017). *Journalism and Vicarious Trauma: A Guide for Journalists, Editors and News Organisations*. Available: <https://firstdraftnews.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/04/vicarioustrauma.pdf>

<sup>3</sup>Czech, T. (2004). *Journalists and trauma: a brief overview*. *Int J Emerg Ment Health*. 2004 Summer;6(3):159-62. PMID: 15481478

<sup>4</sup>Ananthan, G. (2017). *Trauma counseling for journalists: A profession in denial*. *Media Asia* 44: 17–20. Google Scholar



**Figure 1. Distribution of counselling sessions by number of journalists at the CEJ Wellbeing Centre (2018-2020)**



From 2018 to 2020, the CEJ Wellbeing Centre psychologists provided 600 counselling hours to a total of 90 journalists and media workers from Karachi alone. This graph groups the clients by the total number of sessions they took. For example, 21 journalists came for 1 session. Each session lasted an hour. Then the majority tended to come for two to seven sessions. There was a handful who came for over 10 sessions, with one client receiving 46 hours of therapy. This gives us a sense that if one wanted to set a prescribed number of sessions, a good number would be six. Another takeaway is that one can recommend journalists take at least one session to explore or assess if they even need counselling long term.

## What is stress?

Stress can be defined as the degree to which you feel overwhelmed or unable to cope as a result of pressures that are unmanageable. At the most basic level, stress is our body's response to pressures from a situation or life event. What contributes to stress can vary hugely from person to person and differs according to our social and economic circumstances, the environment we live in and our genetic makeup. Some common features of things that can make us feel stressed include experiencing something new or unexpected, something that threatens your feeling of self, or feeling you have little control over a situation.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>5</sup>Mental Health Foundation. Stress. Available: <https://www.mentalhealth.org.uk/a-to-z/s/stress>

Aside from trauma, many journalists are forced to contend with pressure and intimidation from powerful entities over socio-politically or economically sensitive stories. They may face harassment and threats—both physical and in the form of cyberbullying or trolling.<sup>6</sup> According to the Committee for Protection of Journalists, 94 journalists and media workers have been killed in Pakistan since 1992.<sup>7</sup> These risks have earned Pakistan a spot on the list of the most dangerous countries for journalists around the world.<sup>8</sup> Despite the frequent and often-prolonged exposure to both acute and chronic human suffering and danger, an understanding of its potential impact remains largely unrecognised.<sup>9</sup> Low levels of education, mental health awareness and the associated stigma contribute to this neglect and lack of

recognition and support systems for the community.

The impact of these stressors, both industry- and exposure-related, varies greatly. Growing research shows that many journalists experience mild or strong but temporary distress reactions in their everyday work life.<sup>10</sup> These are not abnormal reactions and, in fact, they give us insight into the emotional challenges of journalistic work. Others, however, report and often exhibit more notable and prolonged psychological effects, ranging from moderate stress, to more serious psychological problems, such as Depression, Anxiety, symptoms of traumatic stress or in some cases even Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). Motivation, cognitive functions, work relationships, work performance and mental health may all suffer as a result.

## 1.2 Literature review

In Pakistan, journalist exposure to trauma and their psychological stress reactions have been highlighted by newspapers and magazines. An article published originally by *Newsline* magazine and then the Dart Center in 2010 provided a glimpse into the kind of exposure to trauma and reactions journalists in Peshawar experienced after witnessing and covering violent extremism, which at the time was a routine occurrence.<sup>11</sup> More recently, in 2019, an article in *Herald* magazine discussed the mental health of journalists in detail, based on interviews

with the Dart Center and journalists.<sup>12</sup> The article highlighted the different ways in which journalists experienced stress and trauma, and their inability or unwillingness to speak about it because of the stigma surrounding mental health, a lack of support mechanisms, and the view that journalists were meant to be prepared, tough and unaffected.

The only Pakistani study on trauma and journalists (2020) was conducted in Peshawar, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and found high rates of post-traumatic stress symptoms in the 216 journalists

<sup>6</sup> Mentioned in several documents, such as the Dart Centre guide; *The Guardian* (2019) *Extreme fear and self-censorship: media freedom under threat in Pakistan*. Available: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/nov/05/extreme-fear-and-self-censorship-media-in-pakistan-under-attack>; Ghani, S. (2019). *Herald*. *Suffering in Silence: Journalists and Mental Health*. Available: <http://herald.dawn.com/news/1153429>

<sup>7</sup> Committee to Project Journalists. *94 Journalists and Media Workers Killed in Pakistan* <https://bit.ly/3uPenu3>

<sup>8</sup> Reporters Without Borders. (2017). Available: <https://rsf.org/en/ranking/2017>

<sup>9</sup> Ghani, S. (2019)

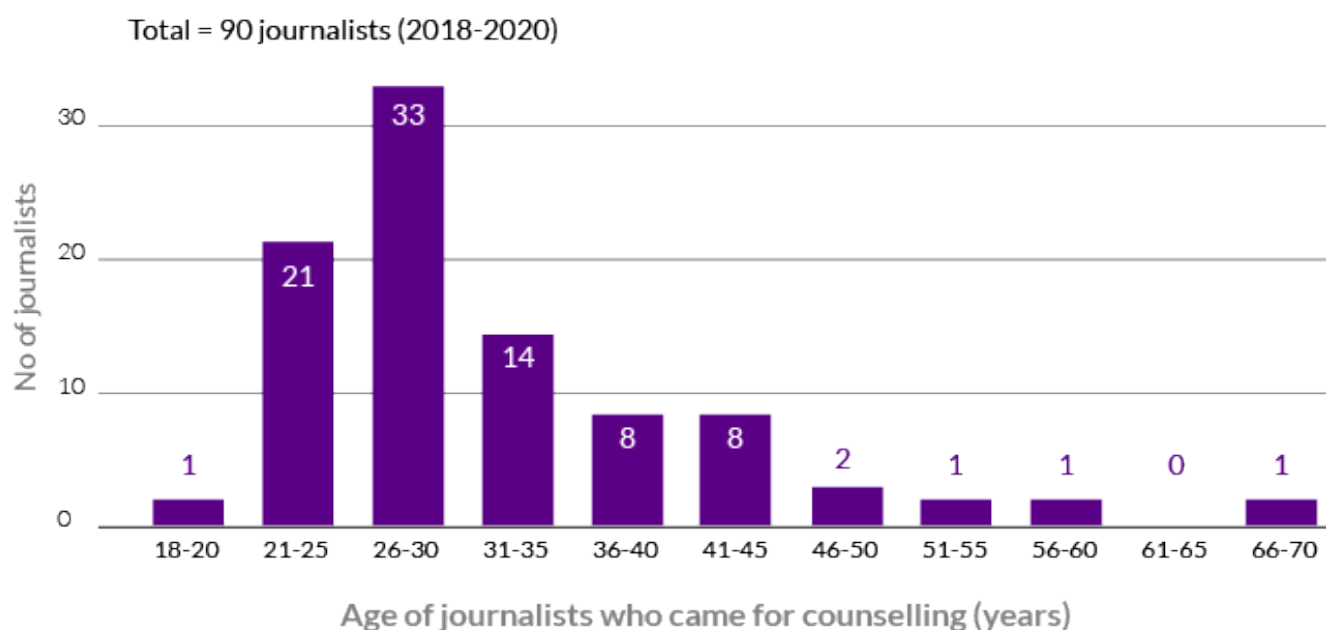
<sup>10</sup> Shah, S.F.A., Jan, F. Ginossar, T. McGrail J.P., Baber D, Ullah R. (2020). *Trauma exposure and post-traumatic stress disorder among regional journalists in Pakistan*. *Journalism*. October 2020

who participated in the study.<sup>13</sup> This should come as no surprise given the level of exposure that media workers here have had to violent terrorism and direct involvement in extremely dangerous situations over at least two decades.

There are a number of factors why some journalists are affected more than others and there may be vast differences in their levels of stress.<sup>14</sup> Some of these include the context, nature, intensity, proximity to and level

of exposure of the stories being covered. Others are the attendant risks and magnitude of disruption to regular life, etc. It matters how frequently they are exposed to and cover disturbing stories and events. Their past experiences, organisational stressors, their coping styles and mechanisms and the kind of support that is available, both personally and professionally, also play a role. For example, journalists covering wars and armed conflicts, especially over long periods of time, are more vulnerable to

**Figure 2. Distribution by CEJ Wellbeing Centre clients by age group**



Journalists who were between 21 and 30 years old formed the bulk of the clients from Karachi who came to the CEJ Wellbeing Centre over the course of three years (2018-2020). We believe this happened largely because younger journalists are more aware of and comfortable seeking help. It could also be indicative of the shift in the industry to newsrooms, especially digital ones, being staffed with younger people. While it is not enough data to extrapolate a trend, we can assume that if newsrooms were to plan to provide counselling support, they could at least make the assumption that it would be a welcome service for this demographic.

<sup>11</sup> Buner, S. (2010). *Under Pressure in Pakistan*. Dart Center for Journalism and Trauma. Available: <https://dartcenter.org/content/pressure-in-pakistan>

<sup>12</sup> Ghani, S. (2020)

<sup>13</sup> Shah S.F.A. et al. (2020)

<sup>14</sup> Newman et al., 2003; Marais and Stuart, 2005; Feinstein et al., Hatanaka et al., 2010; Lee et al., 2018; Seely, 2019; Dwórzniak-Hoak, 2019

psychological stress, including PTSD, compared to those covering other beats.<sup>15</sup> A study on journalists covering the wars in Afghanistan and the Middle East found significantly high levels of trauma,<sup>16</sup> as did a study of journalists facing arrest, torture and threats in Iran.<sup>17</sup> Similarly, journalists working on stories of child rape and murder experience higher levels of stress.<sup>18</sup> The literature provides strong evidence of the gendered effects of being in journalism for women.<sup>19</sup> Women have safety and health concerns that are not shared by male colleagues, especially in hostile work environments, conflict zones and traditional, patriarchal societies. As a result of the gender bias inherent in many fields, especially

conservative cultures, women's work may be undervalued, pushing many to take unnecessary risks to prove that they are as professional as their male counterparts. A survey of female war correspondents carried out by the Dart Center and The International News Safety Institute found that many pregnant journalists have miscarriages during stressful work assignments, but carry on with their work, without telling anyone.<sup>20</sup> Exploitation, intimidation and sexual harassment are not uncommon experiences for women journalists, especially those in male-dominated beats. Fears of sexual violence, especially when working in isolated areas and conflict zones away from



The (now defunct) *Herald* magazine's editor Badar Alam speaking about mental health as the Wellbeing Centre's Mahim Maher came to introduce the service to his newsroom staff on April 20, 2018 in Karachi.

<sup>15</sup> Feinstein A., Osmann J, Patel V. Symptoms of PTSD in Frontline Journalists: A Retrospective Examination of 18 Years of War and Conflict. *Can J Psychiatry*. 2018 Sep;63(9):629-635. doi: 10.1177/0706743718777396. Epub 2018 May 23. PMID: 29792077; PMCID: PMC6109887.

<sup>16</sup> International Media Support (IMS) (2019) *IMS Assessment Report – Fear, trauma and local journalists: Cross-border lessons in psychosocial support for journalists*. Available: [https://www.mediasupport.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/07/IMS\\_ASSESSMENT-REPORT-JUNE-2019\\_SCREEN.pdf](https://www.mediasupport.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/07/IMS_ASSESSMENT-REPORT-JUNE-2019_SCREEN.pdf)

<sup>17</sup> Feinstein, A., Feinstein, S., Behari, M., & Pavisian, B. (2016). The psychological well-being of Iranian journalists: a descriptive study. *JRSM open*, 7(12), 2054270416675560. <https://doi.org/10.1177/2054270416675560>

<sup>18</sup> Angyal, C. (2015). The trauma of writing about trauma: Reporters on the nightmares they get from covering war, racism, and rape. *The New Republic*. Available: <https://newrepublic.com/article/121585/how-writing-about-trauma-can-give-journalists-nightmares-or-worse>

<sup>19</sup> Dart Center (2007)

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*

home are also experienced. Finally, women's experiences of juggling family life, relationships, parenting and household responsibilities with journalistic work can be very different from men's. Harassment, trolling, silencing and threats (often of sexual violence) can become a significant source of added stress. In the Pakistani context, the gendered nature of harassment, threats and bullying that journalists experience has been captured in a number of reports and articles. For example sexual harassment in media houses has been the subject of much media discussion, showing the varied types of sexual harassment women face, the lack of seriousness with which these concerns and complaints are taken, the negative attitudes towards women that are prevalent in the industry, the many hurdles women face in attempting to obtain support or justice, and the personal attacks and further harassment and persecution they face as a result.<sup>21</sup> Specific studies by the Digital Rights Foundation (DRF) have focused on a wide range of risks and stressors faced by women in journalism, particularly in the online space.<sup>22</sup> A series of studies and reports outline these issues in detail, showing that female journalists experience more sexual harassment, trolling, silencing, surveillance and risks such as unsolicited contacts, invasions of privacy, mass trolling, threats of sexual attacks, misinformation campaigns, personal and political

attacks and doxxing (the act of revealing identifying information about someone online). The reports highlight the many psychological effects of gender discrimination and the risks women face, such as stress, a sense of insecurity, fears, paranoia, etc. Few studies cover how journalists cope with either the stress they routinely experience at work or specific distressing or traumatic situations. In the absence of limited support systems, journalists tend to primarily

### Anxiety

45

out of 90 journalists in Karachi who came for counselling from 2018 to 2020 were diagnosed with anxiety at the CEJ Wellbeing Centre

use avoidance strategies, such as self-censorship, avoiding covering disturbing content, changing jobs, substance abuse, etc.<sup>23</sup> These findings are supported by the study on journalists and trauma in Pakistan as well as by studies conducted with women journalists in Pakistan.<sup>24</sup> Avoidant strategies appear to be associated with more negative mental health outcomes.<sup>25</sup> Journalists who use more active problem solving coping strategies seem to be better protected against more serious psychosocial effects.<sup>26</sup>

<sup>21</sup> Ebrahim, Z. (2009). *Pakistan: Female journalist pursues sexual harassment case*. Inter Press Service News Agency. Available: <http://www.ipsnews.net/2009/08/pakistan-female-journalist-pursues-sexual-harassment-case/> and Ebrahim, Z (2017). *An uncovered issue: Why no one talks about sexual harassment in Pakistan's media industry*. The News on Sunday. Available: <https://www.thenews.com.pk/tns/detail/562907-uncovered-issue>

<sup>22</sup> Digital Rights Foundation reports are all available on their website: *Surveillance of Female Journalists in Pakistan: A research study by the Digital Rights Foundation*; *Female journalists in New Media: Experiences, challenges and a gendered approach*

<sup>23</sup> Waisbord, S. (2019) *The vulnerabilities of journalism*. *Journalism* 20: 210–213.

<sup>24</sup> Shah F.S.A. (2020); DRF report: *Fostering Open Spaces in Pakistan: Combatting threats to women's activism in Pakistan*

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

<sup>26</sup> Smith, R.J., Drevo, S., Newman, E. (2018) *Covering traumatic news stories: Factors associated with post-traumatic stress disorder among journalists*. *Stress and Health* 34: 218–226.





*The Wellbeing Centre's staff made multiple visits to newsrooms across Karachi to ensure journalists knew they had the support of a free counselling service. Often these visits had to be held in the middle of a busy bulletin. Here Mahim Maher is photographed at the SAMAA TV newsroom in Karachi on June 5, 2018.*

With a growing understanding of journalist psychosocial stress and in some cases, trauma, media organisations around the world are taking initiatives to address their support needs. Internationally, the Dart Center for Journalism and Trauma is a lead organisation in generating knowledge and support in the area. In Pakistan, the initiative has been taken by the Deutsche Welle Akademie (DW) in collaboration with local organisations, such the Centre of Excellence in Journalism (CEJ) at the Institute of Business Administration (IBA) in Karachi by setting up a Wellbeing Centre for Journalists and Media Workers in 2018. A similar centre is being run in

Quetta and one was previously run in Peshawar. The Karachi Wellbeing Centre aims to provide emotional support, psychoeducation and free and confidential counselling to journalists and media workers primarily in this city—but over time it has expanded to offer these services online to journalists across the country. The service caters to a wide range of emotional and psychological difficulties Pakistani journalists and media workers face as part of their work as well as in their personal lives. Journalist work-related issues range from specific problems at their workplaces to their responses and adjustment to the increasing struggles of the Pakistani media industry.



## 1.3 Aims and objectives

The Wellbeing Centre opened at the Centre for Excellence in Journalism, IBA, Karachi in 2018 and has been successfully functioning for three years. From its inception it has received an overwhelming response. By its second year of operation it decided to conduct a study to better understand and document the stressors, coping techniques and needs of journalists and media workers in Karachi with the aim of advocating for better support systems and protection. The findings of this study are presented in this report.

The aims of the study are to:

- Explore psychosocial issues that journalists and reporters in Karachi face, with a focus on the industry and work environment
- Identify symptoms of emotional and psychological distress and trauma in these journalists and reporters
- Highlight the existing impact of the above-mentioned issues on their work and general well-being



Aside from offering counselling, the Wellbeing Centre's mandate includes spreading awareness of psychological safety. Here clinical psychologist Dr Asha Bedar is photographed with a batch of the CEJ's Master's students after a session with them on the topic, November 18, 2019 in Karachi.

**Table 1. Survey question: What do you understand by “psychological well-being”?**

The CEJ Wellbeing Centre held four workshops on psychological well-being over three years. A total of 50 participants filled in survey forms to gauge their understanding of it.

Their responses are illustrative of the levels of awareness for media workers. For this question 17 people chose to leave the answer blank.

<b>What do you understand by “psychological well-being”?</b>	
A vital part of mental health	To be satisfied with your inner soul
Be mentally relaxed	To be satisfied with your mental health
Be sane and remain composed	To be satisfied, have sound mental and physical health and very strong emotional health
Be stress-free	To care for mental and health conditions
Being in a state of mind where you feel acknowledged, appreciated and can compartmentalise	To cope with stress
Good mental health, happy state of mind	To feel and do what you want
Just like physical health	To feel safe, content, functional and productive for the most part
Just like you can physically get sick	To generally have well-being mentally, emotionally, physically
Manage emotions	To have a clear mind, not have nightmares and wake every 10mins
Mental peace while at work and able to release pressure	To have a positive attitude towards everything
Nothing special	To have clarity on mood swings and anxiety
To accept pressure, think positively, make time to fulfil your wishes, to have the capacity to help others	To have mental peace of mind
To be able to focus and think	To have self-satisfaction
To be mentally and emotionally stable so you can perform	To know how to overcome problems
To be mentally healthy just like physically	To not feel stressed or depressed most of the time
To be mentally sharp, have a healthy mind	To not show you're under strain no matter what's going on inside
	To spend life positively

## 1.4 Methodology

As this would be the first study of its kind in Pakistan, with the aim of exploring and identifying key issues, it was decided to employ mixed methods. Qualitative methods included the following:

### Focus Group Discussions (FGDs)

*Three (03) FGDs were conducted with 23 journalists from diverse work backgrounds in order to assess:*

- Psychosocial issues they face as part of their work
- The impact this may have on their work
- Their perception of causes and triggers for these issues; and
- Signs of stress and distress that may become apparent in their workplaces

### Semi-structured interviews (SSIs)

*These interviews were conducted with nine (09) senior journalists and editors from a mix of backgrounds, aimed at exploring:*

- Psychological, behavioural and social issues they observe in their workplaces
- The implications of these issues for staff productivity, well-being and general morale
- Their understanding of the need for counselling or other forms of professional support for journalists
- Their perception of industry and workplace-related factors that contribute to psychosocial issues in their teams

Quantitative data was collected using a survey form that was filled out by journalists taking part in workshops conducted by the CEJ. The survey asked questions on journalist

stressors, their impact and coping mechanisms.

This quantitative data was analysed using FGDs and interviews were then transcribed, coded and categorised into key themes relevant to the study.

## 1.5 Participants

The participants were journalists from diverse work backgrounds from print, TV and digital media, both Urdu and English.

A total of 32 journalists (17 men and 15 women) participated in the qualitative part of the study. Nine of them were interviewed and 23 participated in the focus group discussions.

The survey forms were filled out by 50 Karachi journalists who attended workshops held by the Wellbeing Centre over three years. Additional data came from 90 journalist clients in Karachi who came for counselling to the Wellbeing Centre over three years.

# 107

journalists from across Pakistan sought counselling at the CEJ Wellbeing Centre since 2018 to date for over

# 603

hours of therapy with

# 4

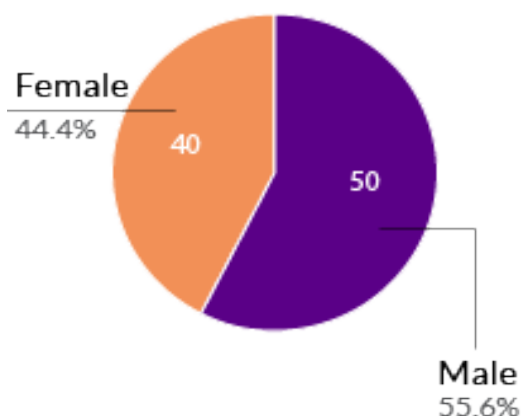
clinical psychologists

## 2. FINDINGS

One key sentiment that echoed through all the focus group discussions and interviews with journalists for this study was that journalism is an “*ishq*” (passion). This emotion even shone through accounts of their struggles. Many of them spoke of how they joined the profession for the love of the news and passion for the ‘truth’. They spoke of the fast-paced work, the “thrill” of rushing to get a story out, the “adrenaline” pumping as they made their way to the spot, often taking risks to reach it, the frenzy of the newsroom. The more experienced journalists, in particular, felt that they were motivated by the causes they covered, the stories of real lives and people, by being “part of something important”. Journalism was their life.

**Figure 3. Gender of journalists who came to the CEJ Wellbeing Centre**

Total = 90 journalists (2018-2020)



50 men and 40 women journalists came for counselling to the CEJ Wellbeing Centre from 2018 to 2020.

### 2.1 Sources of stress

All participants agreed that some stress was “part of the job”, and many of them related to passion and exhilaration as motivators. Many still felt, however, that the stress in the field today is excessive and in some cases constant and relentless. An FGD participant described it as follows:

A range of sources of stress was identified, some to do with the industry in general, some to do with the changes in it and the challenges it faces, others to do with newsroom culture or specific workplace issues. Many participants talked about the additional stress created because of COVID-19. These are discussed below.

*“What journalism has become now can be referred to as “tension”. Now what is that tension? It’s tension 24/7—because this work of reporting is about facing tension 24/7.”*

## Industry stressors

Since the 2000s, when the airwaves opened for private television channels, many journalists who straddled this industry transition have since been grappling with immense stress caused by the change. They witnessed the media sector's expansion from traditional broadsheet journalism to broadcast and with it the necessity to produce immediate, ratings-worthy coverage. The production and nature of news had thus changed, according to many of this study's participants.

Reporters and their newsrooms are now under more pressure to churn out good stories quickly, to cover events as they occur and to become part of the "breaking news race". For some of the "ideological" journalists, this race in TV was a radical departure from the relatively luxurious pace of print, which they came to describe as "real journalism". The seismic shift became difficult to digest and felt like a compromise.

*"Things that we used to call ethical and formal... I'm not saying that things are not formal these days, but it has changed. Acceptance of that change is all I'm talking about because to accept all these changes is a difficult task. We have seen the graph of journalism declining, we have seen that people are reporting by associating with political parties, they even [extract an] advantage out of it. They start flourishing with it professionally, personally, both, and financially as well. So these things frustrate you."*

*"In television, what happens is half the time you don't know yourself what the hell you're supposed to be telling others. You arrive at the location without any prep and the camera is on. Maybe you're live and you are just kind of describing what was there, right in there, and then you don't have a lot of background. It's been like this for years, but it's kind of mechanical. What happens in print is that people become an authority on the subject that they're working on because they have researched [it], they've talked [about it] firsthand, they've observed, they've smelled, they've tasted things. But in television they don't have this luxury. So because this happened in the last 10 to 15 years—that all the money went into television—everyone wanted to go into television, because the [newspaper] leadership [was] declining anyway."*

Interactive session | November 24, 2020

### Insecurity and Self-esteem in Newsrooms

Newsrooms are hypercritical places where big egos compete on who knows more. How can we develop confidence and self-esteem as journalists? What can we do if we feel insecure?

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Psychologist

**Nida Khan**  
Psychologist

**Who is it for?**  
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Time **12-1:30pm**

The workshop will be in **Urdu & English**

Come register by **18 NOV. 2020**

CEI TBA





The Wellbeing Centre's team visited the GEO TV newsroom to introduce the free counselling service to 12 senior editors, including Uzma Alkarim, who is the head of Sexual harassment committee, on May 29, 2019 in Karachi. GEO TV's HR manager Meraj Khalid asked what the response was from the journalism community. GEO TV is a 24-hour Urdu news channel owned by the Jang Group.

## Physical symptoms of stress

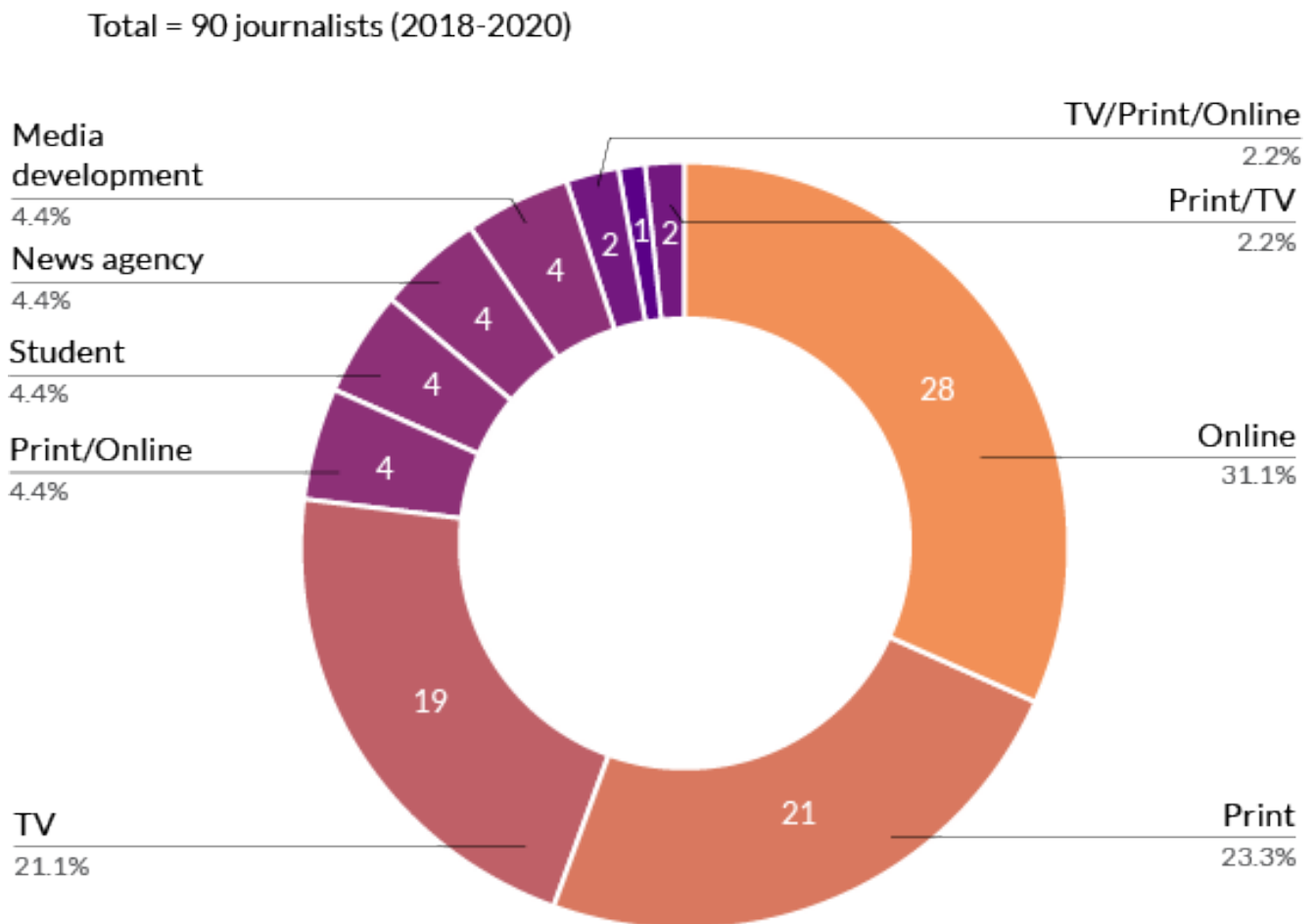
The human body is designed to experience stress and react to it. Stress can be positive, keeping us alert, motivated, and ready to avoid danger. Stress becomes negative when a person faces continuous challenges without relief or relaxation between stressors. As a result, the person becomes overworked, and stress-related tension builds. The body's autonomic nervous system has a built-in stress response that causes physiological changes to allow the body to combat stressful situations. This stress response, also known as the "fight or flight response", is activated in case of an emergency. However, this response can become chronically activated during prolonged periods of stress. Prolonged activation of the stress response causes wear and tear on the body—both physical and emotional.

Stress that continues without relief can lead to a condition called distress—a negative stress reaction. Distress can disturb the body's internal balance or equilibrium, leading to physical symptoms such as headaches, dizziness, elevated blood pressure, chest pain, sexual dysfunction, problems sleeping, indigestion, upset stomach or acid reflux symptoms, increase in or loss of appetite, weight gain or loss, muscle tension, etc.<sup>27</sup>

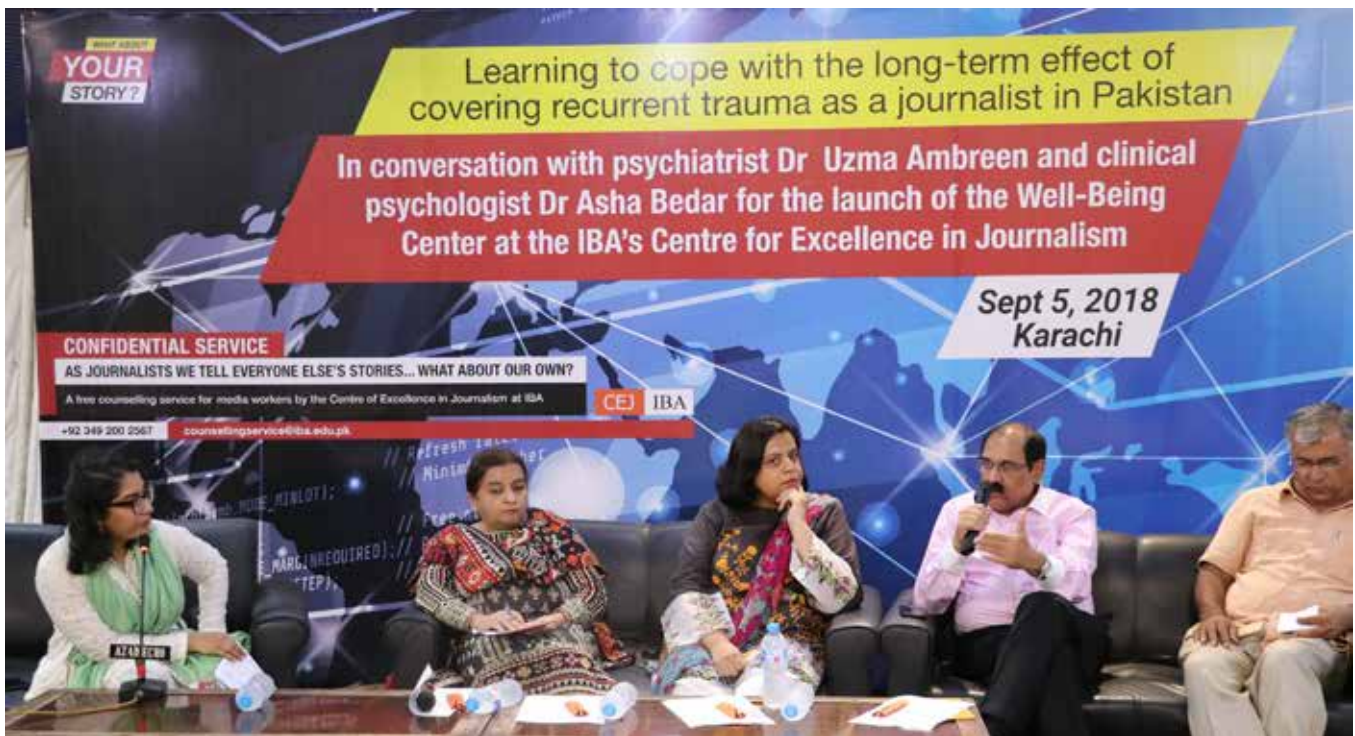
<sup>27</sup> Cleveland Clinic (2020). Stress.

Available: <https://my.clevelandclinic.org/health/articles/11874-stress>



**Figure 4. Type of media workplace of journalists who came for counselling**

It is difficult to categorically split the medium within which journalists work because of increasing overlap. People who work in print (newspaper or magazine) now find themselves also doing related online work. Television channels have digital presence, creating a TV/Online category. That said, one clear picture emerged from the self-described categories of the 90 Karachi journalists who came for counselling: the majority worked online.



The counselling service started in February 2018 but was officially launched on September 5 that year at the Karachi Press Club where Mahim Maher moderated a discussion on learning to cope with trauma with clinical psychiatrist Dr Uzma Ambareen, psychologist Dr Asha Bedar, Geo TV's director for input Zahid Hussain and the club's president Ahmed Khan Malik.

These changes have piled on stress for newsrooms where the varying levels of capability and skills become even more apparent between generations of journalists. The expansion and convergence of print, TV and now digital has disillusioned many journalists and pushed older ones to the sidelines. Their "attachment to print" and its "obsolete" ways holds them back. Many of them struggle to accept these changes comfortably, and are resistant to learning because they are unable to adapt to now unfamiliar

***"And I would blame TV for this. TV ruined a lot of things for all of us. The quality content is gone because of the culture TV has brought, but that's another debate. Well these challenges were there in every era and they are even today I think because of social media."***

formats of news-making. The result is that many of them have lost, and continue to lose their jobs.

News-gathering systems have been altered forever with the arrival of WhatsApp. Digitisation has brought audiences (readers and viewers) right into newsrooms with real time feedback from platforms such as Google Analytics. Social media has turbo-boostered newsroom abilities to gather and produce more content faster—but this has also meant that the pressure to do so has been ratcheted up. Many journalists feel these demands are excessive at times, and do not take into account human needs, such as time, resources, staff or individual capacity. There are greater demands and expectations on reporters, camerapersons, non-linear editors, assignment editors, desk editors, social media subeditors to somehow acquire new storytelling and technical skills—often without training—and multitask, such as to do their own “mojo” photography, shoots, editing, since smartphones have replaced bulky cameras. The faster a news organisation produces news or other content, the more ratings and revenue it makes, a commercial reality that many participants acknowledged. They said, after all, the media industry is “a business at the end of the day”. The rush to produce a certain number of stories within what many reporters see as unrealistic deadlines means that the quality of work is often compromised. Standards and ethics have therefore been falling consistently, which has become a

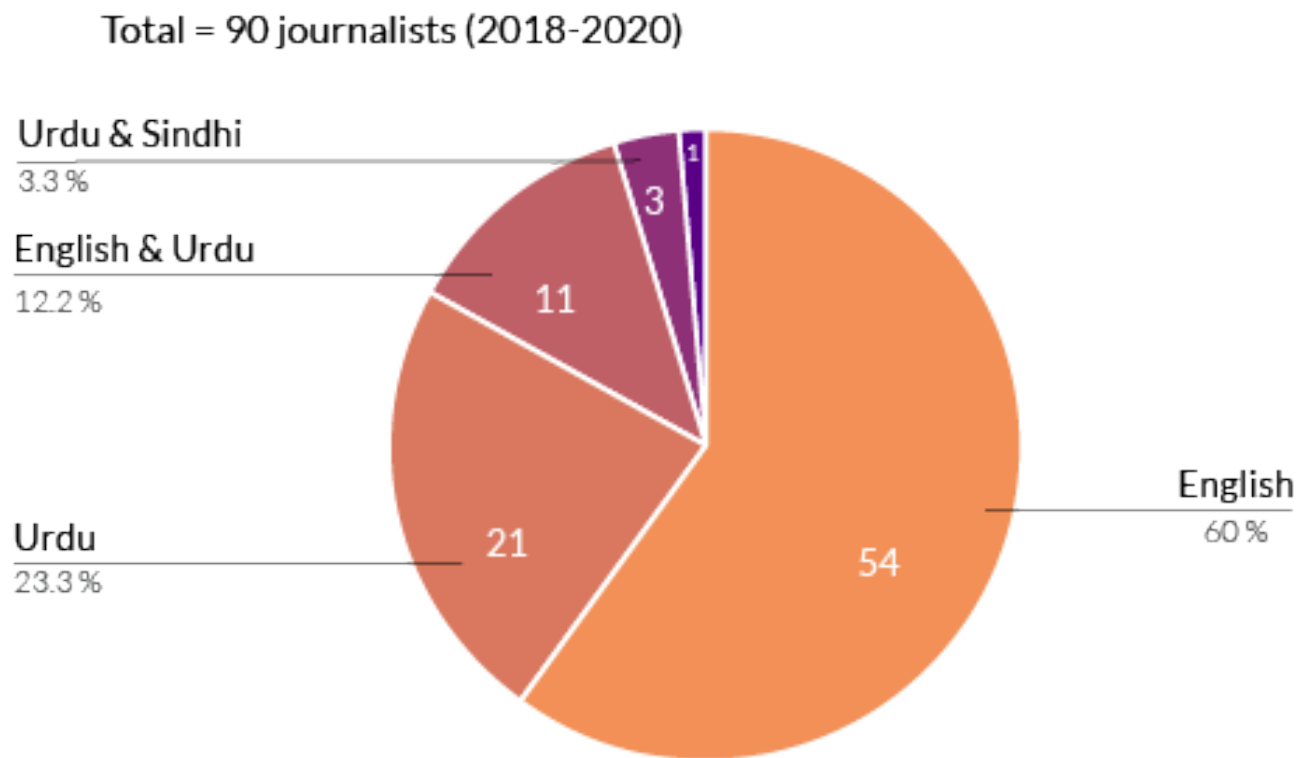
## Stress perception

# 4

out of 50 journalists who took a survey after a well-being workshop at the CEJ said they never experienced stress or emotional distress related to their work

source of great anxiety for many professional journalists. Some participants attributed these changes to the “artificial media boom” that took place early this century, leading to a model of journalism that is commercial and “unsustainable”. Now that the advertising pie has reached saturation, the industry is in crisis. Job losses and salary cuts are common, and many journalists are not paid for months. All the journalists who participated in the study cited job and financial insecurity as a major source of stress for anyone in the industry even if they were not directly affected by it. (Some participants work for international organisations and therefore have better pay and stability). Many participants went as far as to say that if this one problem did not exist, all others (discussed below) would be bearable. This places journalists in a very vulnerable position, however, rendering them unable to assert themselves and demand better work conditions.

*“...So of course there will be stress when a person is getting whatever X amount and suddenly the job goes and he’s unable to find a new job for months... how are you... basically without money how will you survive? I mean if we don’t get salaries or income for even a month, it would be very difficult for us, but it’s very common for them to be unpaid for even six months...”*

**Figure 5. Language spoken by journalists who came for counselling**

It is illuminating that overwhelmingly English-speaking journalists in Karachi formed the biggest group who came for counselling to the CEJ Wellbeing Centre. The Centre's staff went to introduce the service to newsrooms across the city, many of which were non-English speaking media houses. This data, therefore, suggests that newsroom visits need to be made to encourage non-English speaking journalists to seek support if they need.

Taking risks and covering disturbing content is part of the work of many journalists. While some desensitisation does occur naturally as a result, some study participants felt that this part of their job can be overwhelming and “draining”, especially when there is no institutionalised support for coping with stress or distress of any kind. Exposure to stories of terrorism, rape, child rape, death, grief, violence, gruesome forms of violence and torture, and extreme vulnerabilities as well takes its toll. The more frequently such stories are covered and the shorter the intervals between them, the higher the stress

levels are likely to be. There is little recognition at leadership levels of these risks and stress, and no enforcement of safety standards or protocols to which media houses are held accountable in any way.

***“[A] kind of peculiar environment we have. Censorship. If you play bold, if you are someone's favourite, or if you are somebody's sidekick, then you will get a chance, but not necessarily if you're independent. And your fearless journalism will not get you there.”***



For many participants, this stress was linked to the risks and threats that are part of their own or their colleagues' work (and sometimes personal) lives. Political parties, religious groups and intelligence or law-enforcement agencies were identified by many as a source of fear and anxiety. Media companies and individual journalists face pressure or threats, leading to degrees of censorship, affecting the journalist's integrity, "conscience", work ethic, morale and most importantly safety. For many, these fears lead to compromises on the kind of sensitive material they can cover, which can lead to frustration.

The space for journalists with progressive politics is shrinking. Many journalists expressing their views online or through their work face considerable threats from extremist elements, limiting their expression and creating fears for their own safety. Female journalists report rampant discrimination and harassment.<sup>28</sup> Women face degrees of abuse online, especially if they express views that are not mainstream or are critical of government or religious or political groups. They are targeted with unrelenting criticism, trolling and surveillance more than their male counterparts. Just to be able to do

*"[I]f the state thinks you are... umm... too critical of them, then they somehow send a message to your organisation that he is not acceptable as part of your organisations and if he remains then again, things like advertisements and distribution would be stopped."*



Psychologist Dr Asha Bedar helping participants with an exercise at the Well-being at Work workshop at the CEJ held August 28, 2019 in Karachi.

<sup>28</sup> Reporters Without Borders. (Aug 19, 2020). Pakistani government-orchestrated cyber-harassment of women journalists Available: <https://rsf.org/en/news/pakistani-government-orchestrated-cyber-harassment-women-journalists>

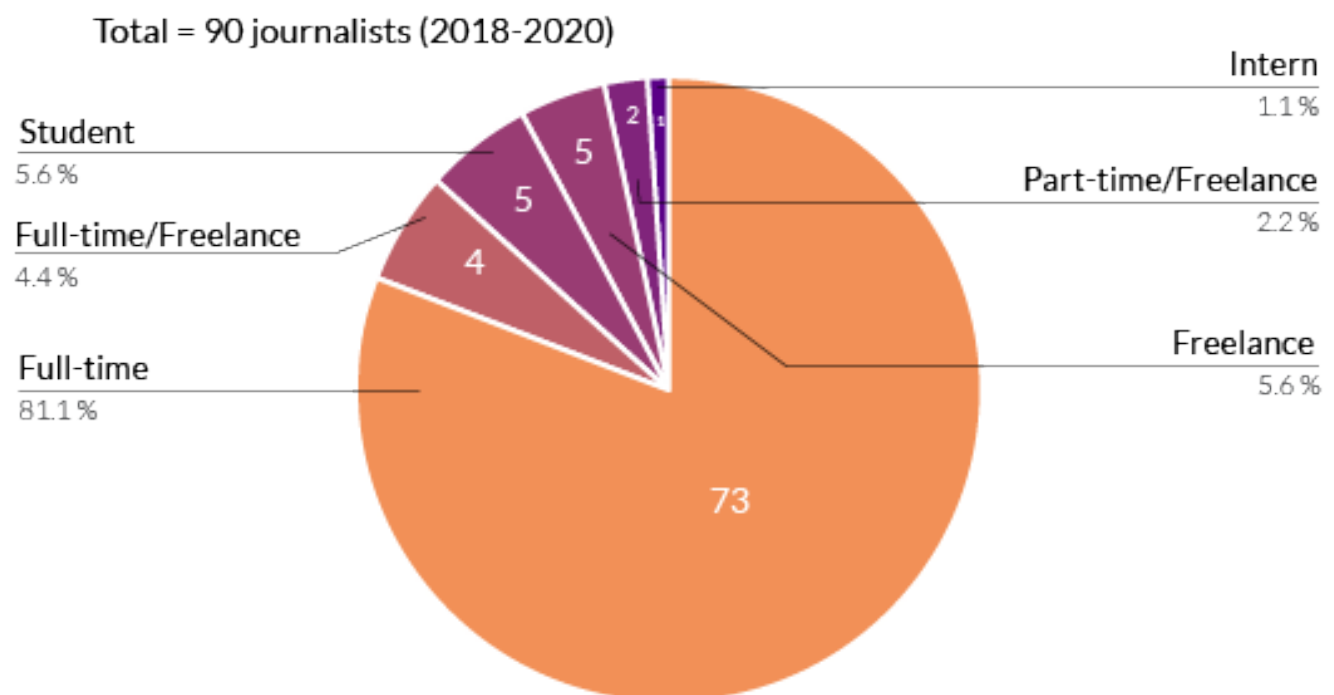
their jobs safely, they are forced to either choose between tolerating offensive and hostile messages or keeping their heads down. Survival is in self-censorship and adapting to a system which they see as vicious and “misogynistic”.

The functioning of the industry depends to a large extent on relationships and networking, according to many participants, with “lobbies” holding power. There is a strongly expressed view that this culture of power games and affiliations—who is aligned with whom and who is whose person—can at times influence the support and favours journalists receive. This was identified as another cause of stress for journalists with no such backing.

Hard-earned experience, principles, journalistic courage and merit alone do not count for much, according to many of the participants.

*“But if you decide early on that it’s not why I am in journalism, I am not a postman, I have to put my own conscience to use, then not only will your journey be difficult, but sooner or later you will run into trouble because the forces who control this, if they don’t like what you’re saying, they will warn you, come after you. If you don’t mend your ways, then things will happen to you... cases, abductions, etc.”*

**Figure 6. Job type by commitment for journalists who came for counselling**



Overwhelmingly, journalists who came to the CEJ Wellbeing Centre (2018-2020) were full-time workers. This makes clear, and from the staff’s experience of running the Centre, that journalists who work full-time need to be assured that their organisations will be sympathetic should they wish to seek help. Ideally, media houses would have in-house counsellors which would considerably cut back on commute times to sessions. Journalists had to not only seek permission to take over an hour off from their busy schedules for their counselling appointments but the time it took to commute from their workplace added to stress.



*“So when you’re seeing them flourishing as well, then adaptability and acceptability remain on one side, and then you have to choose what kind of life you want: this or that? If you opt for this life, then you’ll have to compromise on your ideology which will be a source of stress, and if you don’t choose this life and you choose your ideology, then you have to compromise on your fame, on your success, on your financial conditions, on your future. So that is another kind of stress and it has another kind of psychological impact. ”*

## Workplace stressors

The quality of newsroom talent and management are directly linked to the overall well-being of teams. This is contingent on the personalities and work or management styles of the employers, owners, channel heads, editors, subeditors, etc. Journalists generally report that the quality of leadership and mentorship in newsrooms has been steadily declining. Those in charge have little to no management training themselves and have little to offer in terms of building their staff’s capacity. As a result, there is widespread mismanagement, exploitation and mediocrity.

*“Another thing is when you start on a blank sheet and end up writing 2,000 words or like 500 words in half an hour. You feel excited inside. We had a bureau chief, he was very powerful. He used to tell us to hold our breath and write the headline. To develop our speed, that’s how we were polished and trained... And seeing editors of today, I don’t think they can help out their juniors like our seniors helped us.”*

# 30%

of the 50 journalists who filled in surveys after workshops on well-being at the CEJ said that experienced hopelessness because of their job and

# 23%

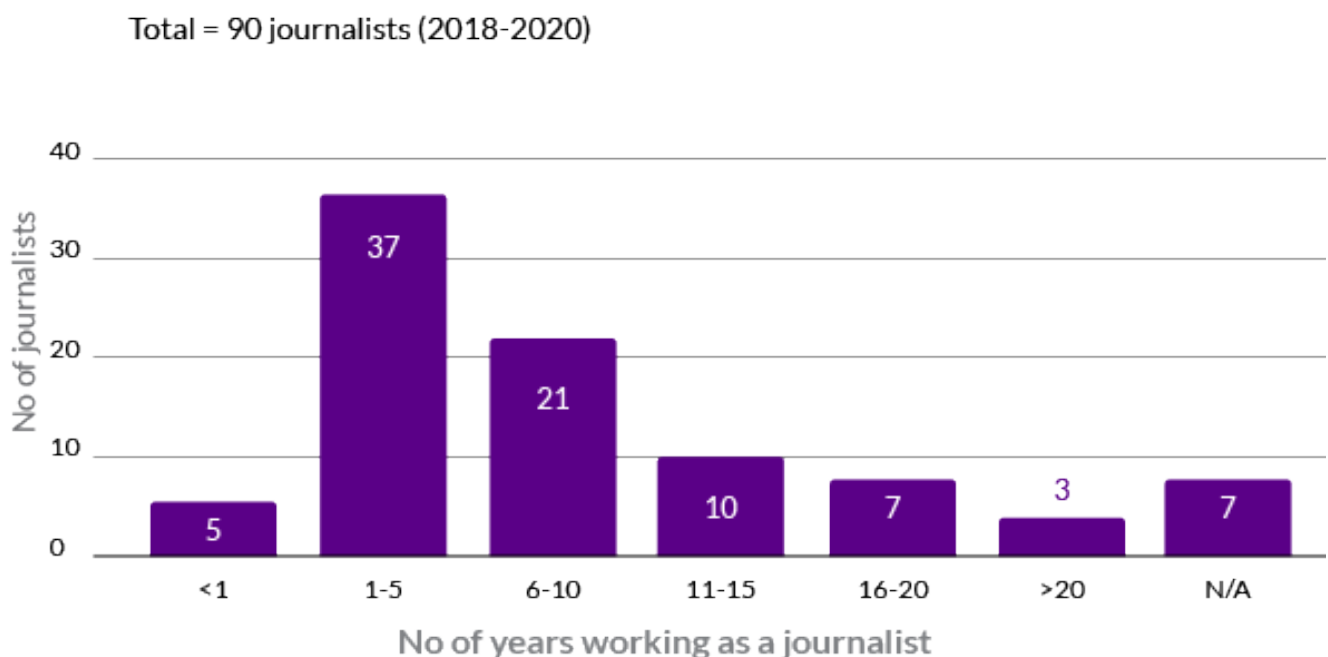
of them said that they felt anger and rage because of work stress

The job and financial crisis in the industry allows many employers to exploit their staff, and to demand more work for less pay with little to no support, facilitation or incentives. At some workplaces expectations are unrealistically high and consideration of capacity and circumstances is low. Short-staffing, cuts and changes in beats translate into extra work for staff and the expectation that they will do jobs that are not theirs.

*“How is one person supposed to do three people’s jobs? And it’s kinda true. If in a shift, when you started off there were like seven to eight people. Now there are literally two people doing that job. That’s kinda like insanely inhuman right now. So your editors basically expect you to do a live cursor at the moment and you’re supposed to convert the reports properly into good copy that can go on to the website. You are also supposed to be working on your own feature story at least once a week.”*

*“Like, what am I getting in return for doing something that is not part of my job? I’m able to do it OK. I’m doing it but am I getting the favours or the facilitation that I deserve in return? Did you provide me the conveyance? No, I used my own bike. Did you give me a raise? No! Did you assure me that my job is safe? No! Did I get the acknowledgement? No! So this is the thing that is lacking even if we are doing everything in the way it’s being asked. Yet there is this constant fear that I’ll be kicked out of the organisation any time.”*

**Figure 7. Length of career for journalists who came to the CEJ Wellbeing Centre for counselling**



Thirty-seven out of the 90 journalists in Karachi who came for varying degrees of counselling at the Wellbeing Centre had been on the job from one to five years. This was the biggest group. This may indicate that support systems might be most beneficial for those starting out in their careers and news organisations may want to consider investing in such mechanisms to ensure the well-being of their staff.

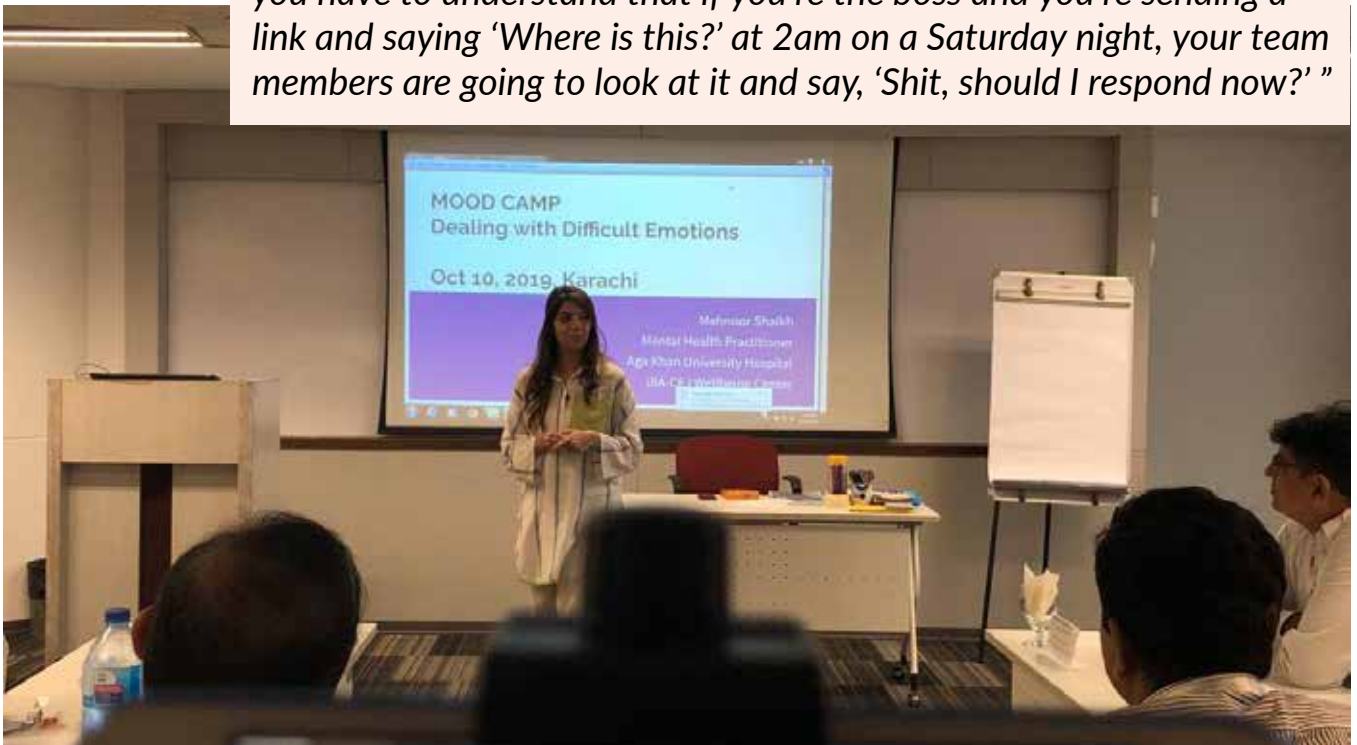
Employers demand that reporters and desk staffers take on bigger workloads, and instantly learn and apply new skills, and still produce good material at record speed—all without being provided any extra support or facilities.

The use of technology has added to stress. Journalists are expected to always be on top of the news and available any time for work discussions (often on multiple communication groups). The personal-professional divide has merged, and those who attempt

***“These are seen like excuses here. They ask you ‘Don’t you have WhatsApp?’ Like even if you have not checked your WhatsApp in the last two minutes that’s an issue too.”***

to keep them separate may be reprimanded by some employers. Even if there is no direct expectation of a response or immediate action from managers, the power dynamics involved in message exchanges places pressure on employees to respond.

***“Yes, switch your phone off. Like, you don’t need to respond to this. We have one team group with our boss who is usually... like he’s very... um... he just doesn’t, like, get it. He’s just like, ‘It’s not work, it’s just discussing things.’ But if you send like... the power dynamic’s there also, right? Like you have to understand that if you’re the boss and you’re sending a link and saying ‘Where is this?’ at 2am on a Saturday night, your team members are going to look at it and say, ‘Shit, should I respond now?’ ”***



Clinical psychologist Mahnoor Shaikh at the mood camp held at the CEJ on October 10, 2019.

The findings indicate that a major source of workplace stress for journalists is employer attitudes and behaviour in the shape of threats, emotional blackmail, frequent rude behaviour and insults, harassment and bullying, especially towards those seen as vulnerable. "Insecure" managers frequently put workers down in offensive ways, especially if there are disagreements or work conflicts, and they are uncomfortable with dissent. "Favouritism" is often displayed when some workers get special favours and allowances while rules stand firm for others and they are penalised for little mistakes. Their stories may be cut or killed with no reason given. They are often not given credit, not compensated in any way for the extra time,

effort or resources they may have put in. Support for employees is negligible in many workplaces, whether in terms of breaks, backing from the management if errors are made, safety or emotional support. Participants reported that

journalists are generally on their own when it comes to self-care. Some may, in fact, be ridiculed or threatened for bringing up their basic rights. Threats are easily thrown around because of the perception that given the industry conditions employment is hard to find. Reporters who bring up risks are scorned for being too

"sensitive" and dismissively told to consider other careers if they are unable to take the stress and risks inherent in journalism.

The data shows that women face gendered barriers at many workplaces. All the participants of the study felt that sexism and gender bias are rampant in many media houses and that this is a significant stressor for women in the field, including those in management.

Discrimination

in pay scales and the kind of work assigned is common. Women's efforts are often not taken seriously, are put down or trivialised by employers and they are expected to adhere to stereotypical gender roles (be nicer, smile more).

***"I remember he would yell, like as if we were school students, and we just took it. Now in hindsight I really wonder why I didn't just get up and leave because no one should talk to you like that in a professional environment."***

***"When I was working I used to say [things] in front of everyone in the meeting and they were like, 'You said everything in front of everyone.' So I was like, 'In front of everyone because the meeting was with everyone so I thought there's transparency and it's better that I put my opinion in front of everyone, so that if anyone disagrees with me, [they] can say whatever they want there and then only.' Then he said, 'No...no...if you want to do something like this in the future you tell me in private.'"***

*“...So when I was at the desk I tried... that I must report as well... and I did reporting later as well, but initially I was told that you belong to the desk, so you have to work only at the desk. I asked why, so he said—the male colleague with whom I used to sit—he told me, no, no, no way, it’s not a female’s job. You must work only at the desk because basically we are giving you new cases and you just need to edit them and put ads. This is your work, this is the nature of the work you will do, and reporting is our job.”*

*“There’s a lot of sexism out in the field and in-house. You try as much as you can, you know, but you have to constantly deal with like little indicators that I should be wearing this, I should be dressing like that.”*

The focus in some places tends to be more on how women dress and behave than on their professionalism and productivity. Gender stereotypes frequently play out in interactions with them and the kind of work demanded or expected of them.

Sexual harassment in all its forms takes place. In some cases it is subtle, in others it happens blatantly and collectively, for all to see with little to no consequences. Women rarely speak out because of fear of the outcome.

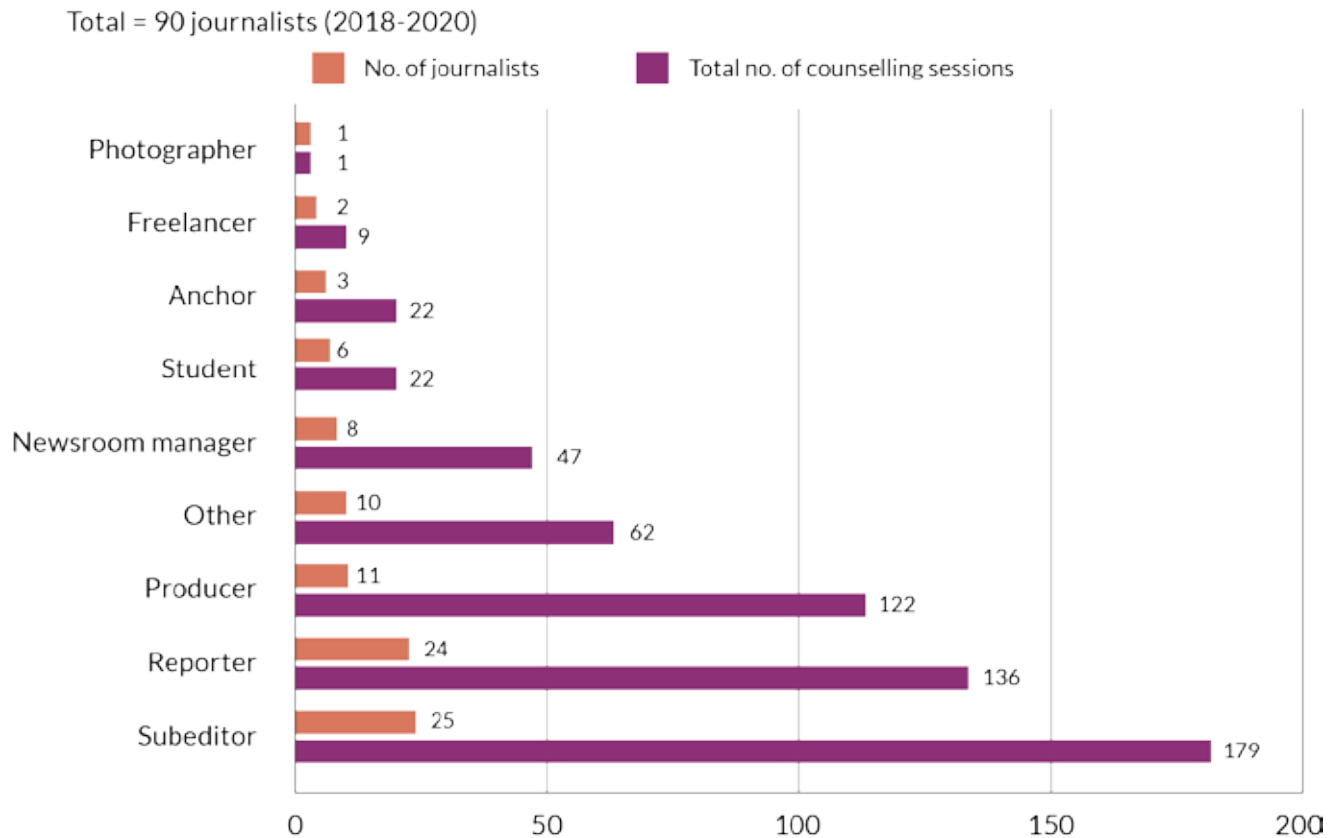
*“...So he replied to me that, ‘As much as I have observed you, I’ve seen that you come here for the voiceover and you think that you are reporting and you dress well enough and you bring your food from home, so you are well-off I believe, and with the salary package I think even parents don’t give such pocket money to the kids.’ So basically the mindset of an editor is like that, that this is pocket money.”*

## **Stress and cognitive impairment**

Elevated levels of anxiety at work and prolonged periods of stress can cause overuse of parts of the brain that switch the stress response on and off. Repeated exposure to stressful conditions has a cognitive cost. Working memory, attention, response inhibition and cognitive flexibility have all been found to be impaired by stress. At work, impairments in these domains translate to a reduced ability to concentrate, control our impulses, remember and plan.<sup>29</sup>

<sup>29</sup> Martinez-Gatell, D. & Smalley, K. (2019). Cambridge Cognition. Can Stress Affect Cognitive Performance at Work? Available: <https://bit.ly/3JtLWt>



**Figure 8. Type of journalists who came for counselling**

In three years the CEJ Wellbeing Centre provided a total of 600 counselling hours to 90 journalists from Karachi alone (the total numbers are higher for all of Pakistan). In this graph we provide a snapshot of roughly the type of journalist or media worker who came to the Centre. Anyone who described themselves as a copywriter, subeditor, translator, trainee subeditor or social media subeditor was placed in the subeditor category.

Reporters, whether they described themselves as senior or special correspondents, were put in that category. TV and video producers were placed under 'Producer'. Newsroom managers were central assignment desk managers, news editors, deputy news editors, editors. Media students and interns were clubbed together. 'Other' consisted of people who qualified as media workers, media NGO workers and former journalists who have become trainers or media training programme managers. The two major groups who came for counselling were subeditors and reporters.

*"He asserted his authority over me. He would make me feel that I am obligated to talk to him, obliged to sit with him in his room and I'm obliged to talk to him in front of all the employees. That was another kind of job uncertainty. So at that time I used to think that if he gets upset with something or if he gets the idea that I am feeling uncomfortable with him, there's a chance that he might just lay me off on that basis only, because that is the history before me. There were girls, there were women who used to work over there and were involved in such scandals, who were defamed and laid off."*



*“...and it was just incredibly stressful because my photos were being shared from one reporter to another.”*



The journalists at the Vsh TV newsroom being introduced to the free counselling service on July 4, 2019 in Karachi. One person asked if memory loss was a mental health issue, to which project lead Mahim Maher said an expert would be able to answer that question better. Journalists are encouraged to come to the Wellbeing Centre even if for one session if they wish to acquire clarity on any aspects of their well-being. Vsh TV is a 24-hour Balochi news channel.

*“...maybe when I go there again whatever they say I’ll have to keep my relations good with them, so this becomes a huge problem because you start questioning yourself—maybe you were just inviting the person yourself, you must not have greeted the person while smiling or something. It’s just a constant thing on your mind.”*

**Table 2. Survey question: Do you think there is any kind of stress or emotional distress that is related to your work?**

Fifty journalists filling in a workshop survey form gave these descriptions of the stress they experienced at work, which we have loosely categorised by type. Some of them mentioned more than one stressor. Urdu responses have been translated.

Deadlines	Pressure	Toxic newsroom	Job security	Workload	Toxic bosses
Stress of meeting deadlines	Because of pressure	Dirty politics	Job and salary uncertainty	Working late hours	Eternally dissatisfied boss
Deadlines, time-liness pressure	Severe work pressure	Backbiting	Insecurity	Shift changes, not getting leave cause anxiety, depression	Boss sending an hour's content for a 3-min news item
Unreasonable turnaround expectation	No room for mistakes	Sometime my co-workers act like seniors or discriminate	Fear of losing job	Overworked	Boss's unpleasant behaviour
	Stress	Unprofessional environment	Career path	Overburdened	Having two bosses who fight
	To miss breaking news	There are toxic colleagues trying to interfere in your domain	Anxiety about progress		Miscommunication of my tasks
	Work pressure		Sometimes it feels I am not achieving enough to survive in industry in the long run		When I miss an assignment, threatened with consequences
			Salary issues		My problems are not heard
			Unpaid overtime		
			Prosperity		
Other stressors	I have to keep myself updated round the clock. I cannot miss any news	Stress of investigative reporting	Fear of public bashing	Not enough resources, too much work	Lack of motivation
Criticism of appearance	Unfair work	When you are not certain about the story's facts	Long commute	Sleeplessness	Work not how you want it
The 'what will people say' over how I dress	If your story doesn't get the play it deserves	Unfinished work	Scepticism	Zero motivation	Failure

## Journalist attitudes as stressors

A verse from Munir Niazi's Punjabi poem, quoted by one of the participants sums up the sentiment expressed by many that the attitude of journalists is part of the problem. Most participants felt that a general learning attitude, positivity, an ability to deal

*Kuj shehr de log vee  
zaalim san;  
kuj saanu maran da  
shauq vi si*

*The town folk were a little cruel; but I  
also had a death wish*

with some stress and assertiveness go a long way in helping journalists survive in "the wild, wild West" that the profession is sometimes. Passion and the need for the "rush" may be what bring people to journalism, but many of them emerge as ill-prepared and equipped to deal with the attendant daily stress. It is not a field "for the faint-hearted" and anyone making the decision to become a journalist needs to be mentally and physically prepared. Traits such as passion for, and belief in, the work, a tolerance for stress, creativity, flexibility and assertiveness are seen as prerequisites, without which the stress of the industry and the workplace would be impossible for anyone to function in. Resistance to change is another

stressor. Many journalists, and particularly older ones, are reluctant to embrace inevitable changes such as evolving technology and digitisation, which are rapidly altering the way newsrooms function. This reluctance leads to either job loss or dissatisfaction

as these journalists are unable to keep up. Their progress and sense of achievement fall casualty. Despite knowing how tight the job market is, many journalists are still resistant to 'reinventing themselves'. Many of them are then either unemployed and constantly looking for employment, or are 'stuck' and unable to move on because they are holding on to jobs that make them unhappy.

Some senior journalists feel that newer entrants become even more vulnerable because they are unable to assert, speak up and stand up for themselves. These participants felt that journalists would command more respect and be even able to fare better if they raised their voices for their rights as opposed to being passively accepting.

*"...[I]f somebody just throws copy in your face and you feel bad about it, you cannot enter the circle and it will be difficult for you to stay there. So you have to be an extrovert, you have to be pushy and not just within the office, but even when you're dealing with your sources. When you are chasing a story, you need aggression."*

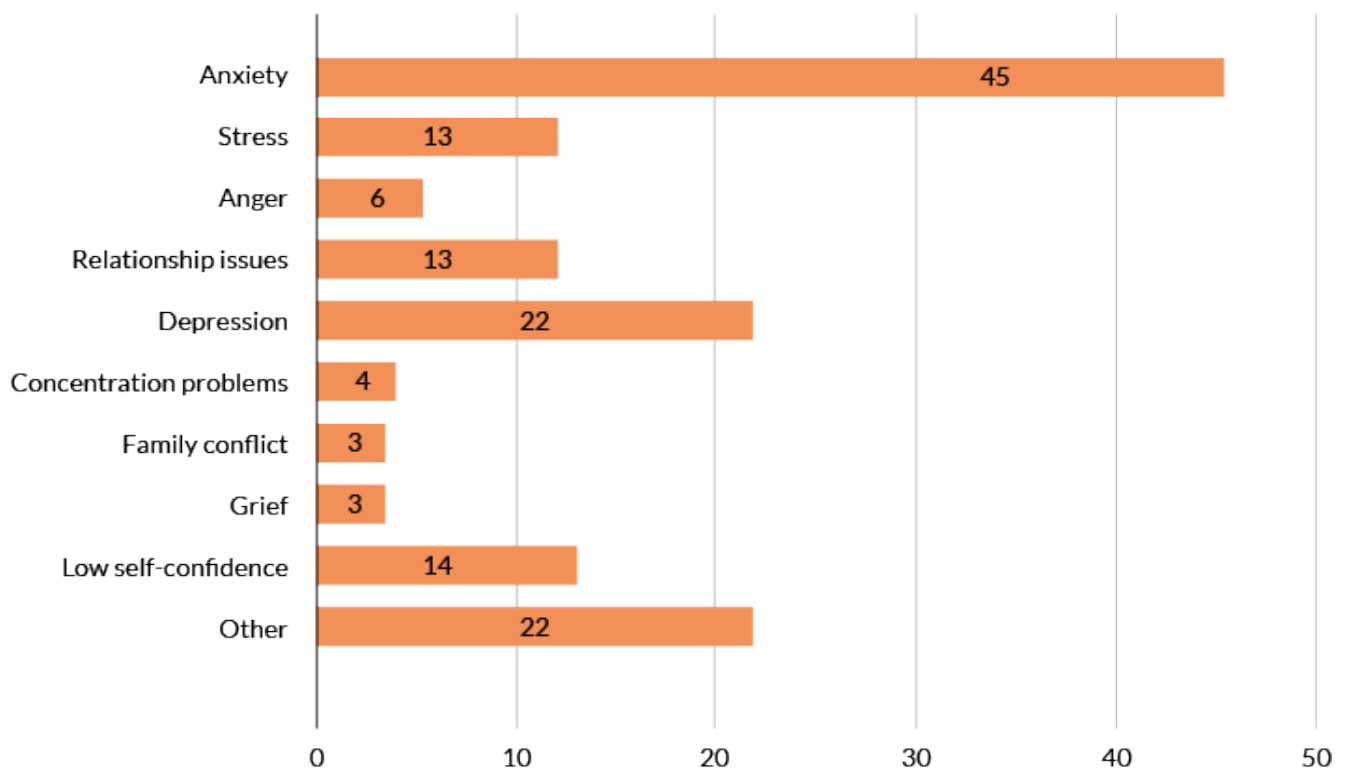
*“See, you are not dead. You will be a little bit affected. So, it’s about how you come out of it. And you should be self-sufficient about it and know how to come out of it on your own.”*

Younger journalists, fresh out of university, may experience stress because of disillusionment. Some of them have unrealistic expectations from the job; they think they will be automatically sent to cover thrilling

stories but when they find themselves mired in newsroom drudgery they grow frustrated quickly. Encounters with censorship add to that sense as well, even though they may be told it is a reality in Pakistan.

**Figure 9. Presenting issues of journalists who came for counselling**

Major diagnoses for Karachi journalists at the CEJ Wellbeing Centre  
Total = 90 journalists (2018-2020)



The 90 journalists from Karachi came for counselling for an array of presenting issues. If we separated each issue, this is the picture that emerges: Anxiety and depression were the most common complaints. Please note that some journalists may have had just one complaint, for example anxiety, and others may have had more than one. This graph does not convey overlapping concerns. ‘Other’ referred to Bipolar disorder, frustration, OCD, memory loss, mental fatigue, obsessive thoughts, suicidal thoughts, mood swings and emotional control, insomnia, trauma, difficulty in decision-making, panic, lack of motivation, hopelessness etc.



*"I wouldn't say this... for journalists across the board, but journalists do tend... especially the generation that was before me ... to be very hesitant to take to new technologies. So if they are editing, then they are only editing from the beginning ... They don't want to become tech savvy, they don't want to learn new things so that makes you a bit redundant too...and this is a journalist's fault, it's not anyone else's. "*



The CEJ Wellbeing Centre staff would introduce the free counselling service to journalists attending all workshops. In this photo, project lead Mahim Maher talks to journalists attending a workshop on education and data held at the CEJ January 11 to 13, 2018.

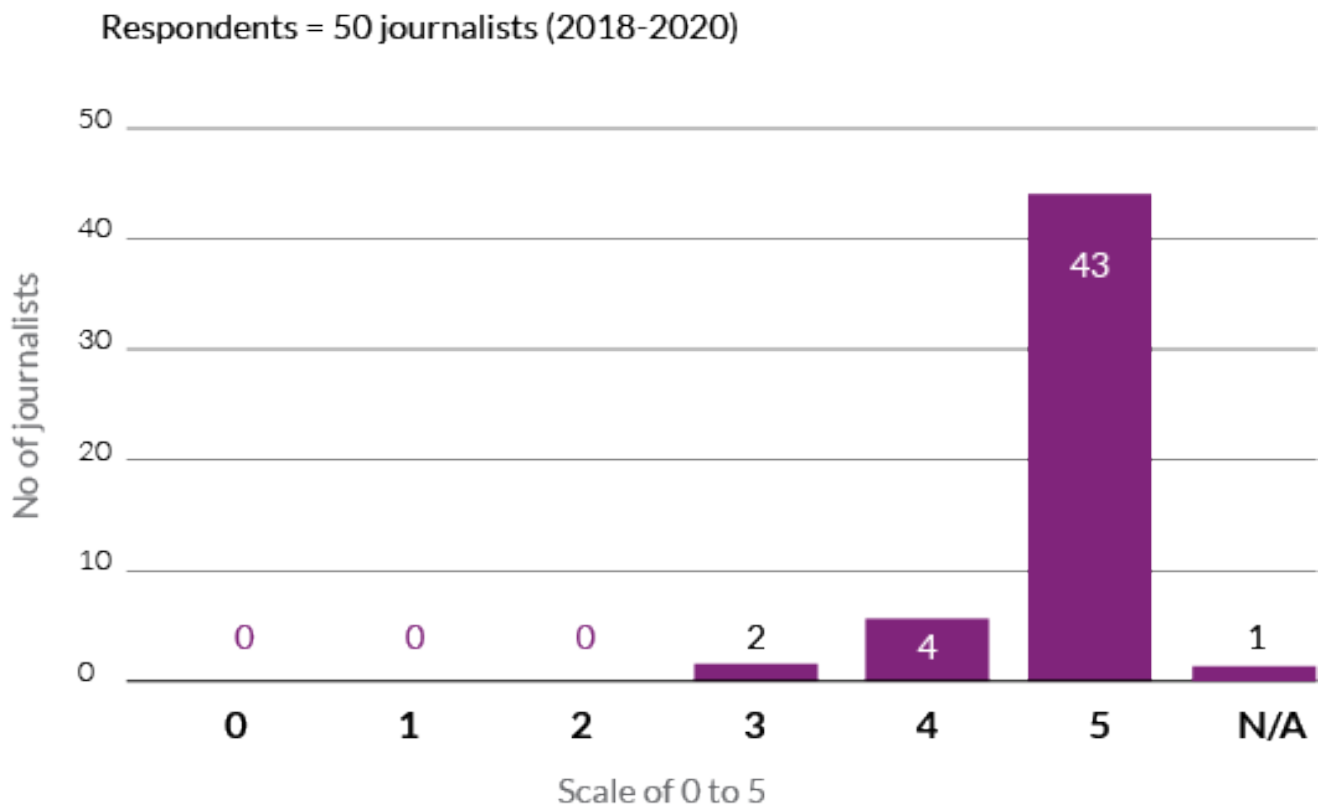
Many participants agreed that their attachment to their work and "addiction" to the news contributed to their stress. Even when there is no breaking news, and no work requirements to constantly be in touch or on top of things, many stay tuned in out of habit. The overload of information, the constant participation on social media can be as overwhelming as it is addictive.

*"...And then you have these young reporters/researchers who are wanting to come in saying, 'We want to spread the truth,' so that's also stressful for them to kind of come and see that, oh wait, like you aren't print....but yet you guys are restrained by these limitations."*

*"...What you can do is just wrap up your work, protest, go to the owner's office and take charge. I mean if I were in these people's place, this is what I would have done."*



**Figure 10. Survey question: How important is psychological well-being for someone working in the media?**



The CEJ Wellbeing Centre held three workshops over three years, 2018-2020, in which a total of 50 Karachi journalists filled in a survey form. With the exception of one person who did not answer this question, overwhelmingly the workshop participants felt that psychological well-being was important for someone working in the media.

## COVID-19-related stressors

The COVID-19 pandemic has added another set of stressors to many journalists' already-strained work lives. Those who were able to work from home during lockdown were glad to be relatively safer, but they still faced with the daily struggle of online work, managing rosters and adjusting to working differently in a field that requires mobility and physical interaction. Work-home boundaries blurred even more, and many of them felt their workload had doubled.

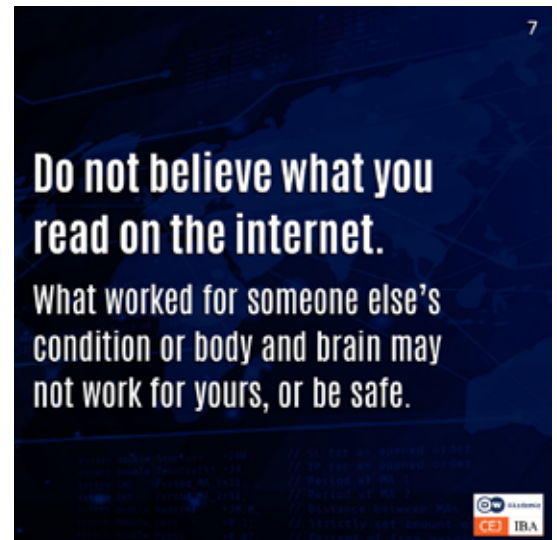
*"But they didn't realise... or maybe the fear was there... they couldn't voice it because of the fear of being let go or being seen as too scared to do their jobs. They had to go out to get their stories at the cost of putting their own families at risk. Right, so they went out, and they got these stories."*

Journalists who have not been able to work from home at all or for long experience the stress of exposure, are at times frustrated and angry towards their employers for not taking their health concerns seriously. Many worry not only about their own health but also about indirectly exposing their families. However, job insecurity prevented many of them from speaking about their anxieties.

*"It's no longer eight hours or nine hours. It's basically, hey you're at home, so it's OK to sign in. You need a laptop and an internet connection."*

*...[S]ometimes they felt that if they were assigned a story, they would have to perform as if it was... there was no pandemic outside."*

Journalists in management roles have had the added challenge of handling teams during the pandemic (whether shifting entirely online with work from home, or on alternating roster systems with reduced hours). They have had to manage their own stress and that of their teams as anxiety built over safety and exposure.



An Instagram swipe-through feature for the CEJ Wellbeing Centre's social media based on advice from psychiatrist Dr Uzma Ambareen.

*"But the people... for them to actually go about and report... they were hesitant... but the stress that they did have was when... they wouldn't say it to me explicitly. I would always give them room to say do you want to go or not. But I feel like everyone has this underlying understanding that if we said 'no' then we'd be fired."*

## 3. IMPACT

The participants of the study identified a range of stress symptoms. Many of them were echoed by journalists who came for counselling as well. They have been divided into the following categories:

- 3.1 Physical
- 3.2 Cognitive functions
- 3.3 Frustration and anger
- 3.4 Distress and trauma
- 3.5 Depression and anxiety
- 3.6 Low motivation and work performance
- 3.7 Effect on personal lives

### Survey

# 49%

of 50 journalists at CEJ workshops said they did not think media houses and newsrooms make enough effort to take care of their employees' work-related stress and distress.

## 3.1 Physical

Many somatic issues such neck/back/ muscle pain, headaches, sleep and appetite issues, high blood pressure and heart trouble (including heart attacks) are seen as being related to work-related stress for journalists.

Many of those who came for counselling at the Wellbeing Centre spoke of initially going to a doctor, not realising that many of the problems were related to their work difficulties. Panic attacks were typically misinterpreted as heart or asthmatic attacks (and more recently as COVID-19) and hours were spent rushing to emergency wards, visiting doctors, getting tests done. Others reported taking medication for various kinds of pain, some struggling to carry on working because of muscular pain, stiffness, migraines. Some were encouraged by their doctors to seek counselling, others were able to identify on their own that their physical health problems flared up when they were under stress.

**WHAT ABOUT YOUR STORY?**

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**AS JOURNALISTS WE TELL EVERYONE ELSE'S STORIES... WHAT ABOUT OUR OWN?**

A free counselling service for media workers by the Centre of Excellence in Journalism at IBA and DW Akademie

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DW Akademie  
CEJ IBA

## 3.2 Cognitive functions

Journalists were very aware of psychological symptoms of stress, affecting their thoughts and functioning. In the workplace, most notable were difficulties in cognitive functioning, which in turn have an impact on motivation, mood and productivity, sometimes significantly so. At the most basic level, memory and concentration are affected, which can lead to increased mistakes and lapses,

affecting overall work performance. Some of the clients who approached the Wellbeing Centre did so because of a pattern of mistakes at work, falling performance and difficulties with their management as a result. In fact, some were referred by management in the hope that it would improve their performance and efficiency, particularly the ability to focus and retain information, both critical tasks in journalism.

## 3.3 Frustration and anger

Prolonged and/or severe stress, frustration and anger at work sometimes play out as interpersonal conflict and aggression. Many research participants shared stories of colleagues who had experienced substantial stress and burn out which built up and erupted at work. Some journalists are unable to cope and have resorted to leaving their jobs. At the Wellbeing Centre, clients commonly presented with issues of anger and aggressive behaviour. Some came because they were encouraged or pressured by family or work management to seek help because of their aggression, while others came because of a realisation they were carrying anger at past or current situations, which was interfering with their lives. Others presented at the Centre for different reasons, but during the course of counselling realised anger was also a major issue. For many, the anger was often directed at others, but in some cases also towards themselves. Self-harm, at times of a serious nature, was inflicted.

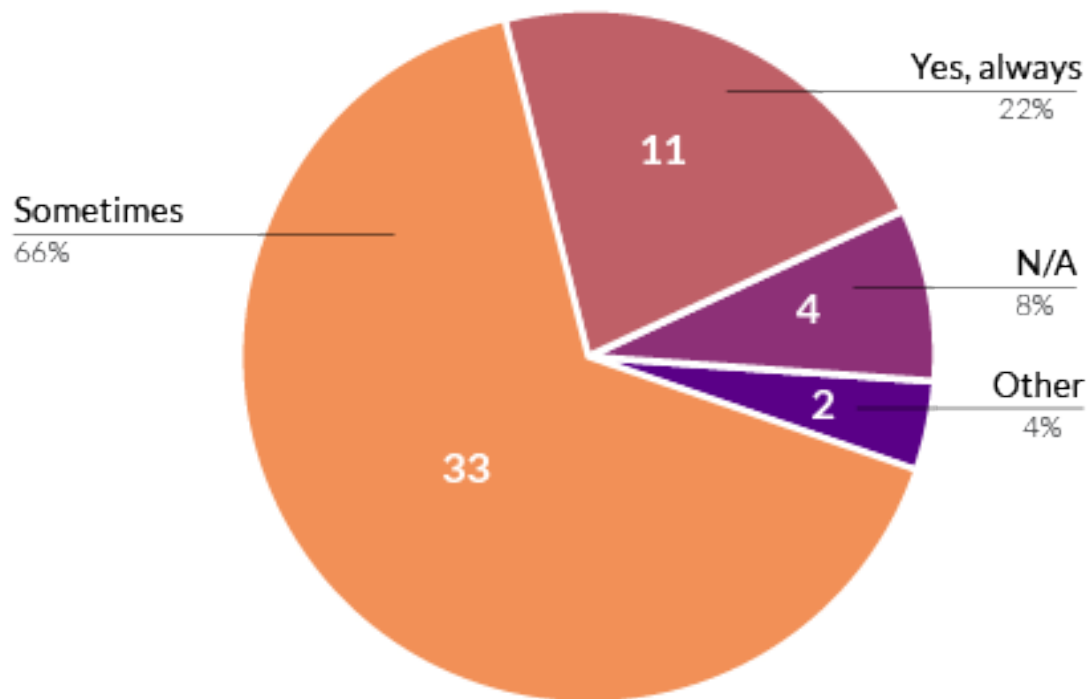
For many of the clients in counselling, the anger often had roots in personal issues, childhood abuse and relationships. Work issues, however,

often contributed to these, particularly when they involved a sense of injustice, discrimination and exploitation. Anger was often an indirect manifestation of frustration, anxiety, helplessness and depressive symptoms related to the financial cuts and their fall out in the industry. Some clients were unable to express their anger, causing it to build up. Others expressed it in indirect and often unhealthy ways, causing further damage to themselves and to their relationships. It was at times serious and they faced serious consequences, such as job losses, loss of relationships, substance abuse, injuries, etc.

Women struggling with anger expressed a frustration that there was little room for them to express even valid concerns as this was seen as “too angry for a woman” as they were often expected to display more feminine traits. At the same time, they were expected to prove themselves as able journalists and not ‘play the woman card’ for concessions or allowances, leading to their decision to take unnecessary risks. Anger when expressed by women led to conflict with colleagues, and unexpressed anger led to growing frustration and aggression often directed towards close, safe relationships and themselves.

**Figure 11. Survey question: Do you feel your colleagues are supportive of your psychological well-being?**

Respondents = 50 journalists (2018-2020)



Sixty-six percent out of 50 journalists who filled in a survey form at CEJ Wellbeing Centre workshops said that they feel their colleagues sometimes support their psychological well-being. This would buttress the findings from the other data and observations which indicated strongly that journalists rely on each other where they can for support in newsrooms.

### 3.4 Distress and trauma

Journalist exposure to distressing and disturbing stories affects their mental and emotional well-being to varying degrees. Even when continued exposure

causes a certain level of natural desensitisation, some situations “stay” with them, can be overwhelming and difficult for them to talk about.

*“Right so...dealing with the real-time news, and especially COVID’s guidelines coming in from the WHO, the news that’s coming in, the scientific studies that are coming in... Obviously I am a news editor, so I have to be... stay on top of these things. I want to sort of bring them the latest tallies. Reading all of this, it literally takes a toll on you. Because... we don’t realize, it’s kinda like watching a war movie but the uncensored version. You are digesting it before you give it to the reader.”*



For many, reactions were not immediate. Most journalists and media workers function as needed during the coverage of even the most disturbing and risky situations, both because of desensitisation and their professionalism. When the work is done, however, many experience a delayed affective reaction, such as shock, fear, disgust, anger, tears, helplessness, guilt, etc. These are not emotional expressions journalists are comfortable dealing with or talking about.

*“... I think it hit me three days after the attack... A lot of my colleagues said that day it hit them a little after it happened. And it was just, it was... I couldn't... it was horrible. I couldn't eat. I could barely sleep.”*

*“...and then...and then...in 2014...what is it 2014 when the APS attack? That was when...I mean that was really bad. That was also...I was on...I might be getting the dates getting mixed up. But anyway, that was... that was really horrible and I was not prepared for that. So we had to cover it... as it was happening and...but...so it didn't really hit us on the day...and then we were like, okay this is real, like kids... like... first it was like 10, like three kids then 10, 15...the death toll kept rising, and that was like the first time I saw my edit... like our editor...he got emotional you know...”*

For some these emotions may be triggered by something relatively less serious that happens soon after exposure, allowing pent-up emotions to flow freely in a safe environment. For others, these reactions are displaced, and triggered by other unrelated occurrences. Some journalists report these emotional reactions as being short-term, disturbing them briefly, but not affecting their overall mental well-being. For other journalists and media workers some stories and continued exposure to distressing content cause significant distress, sometimes even secondary trauma symptoms, such as nightmares, flashbacks and anxiety. The likelihood of such symptoms is greater when exposure is frequent,

when the events they are covering are particularly distressing (e.g., child rape cases, the APS attack, etc.) and when personal risks are higher.

At the Wellbeing Centre, emotional distress and trauma was much more openly expressed by female journalists compared to the men, reflecting the gendered expression of emotion. When men did express their distress, anxieties and fears, they spoke of the limitations on their expression in the workplace. Showing their distress they felt would be considered weak and effeminate, and they risked being ridiculed by colleagues. Maintaining the image of the tough, macho journalist who had the needed masculine skills was considered an important requirement for journalism in Pakistan.

## 3.5 Depression and anxiety

Findings indicate that both depressive and anxiety symptoms are common in journalists and media workers—for example, frequent feelings of sadness, excessive

worrying and overthinking, low self-esteem and a sense of hopelessness and helplessness. Many are disillusioned with the industry, sad for the loss of their hopes and ambitions,

develop low self-esteem as a result of constant setbacks and disappointment with the general state of journalism. At the Wellbeing Centre, this was the most common set of issues with which clients presented. Work-related anxieties were most often related to losing their jobs, finding new jobs, getting paid, being able to do the kind of work that was important to them, engaging with people at work, dealing with difficult people or bosses, etc. A range of anxiety-related thoughts and behaviours were addressed in counselling, including panic, social anxiety, insomnia, restlessness and general anxiety related to the workplace and people.

Depressive symptoms related to work tended to be most associated with a feeling of helplessness at changing work circumstances, at ensuring timely or adequate remuneration for their work and challenging unequal and often exploitative power dynamics at work.

***“I became very depressed after that. I started getting dark circles, stayed tense all the time. My family started to worry about me, wondering what had happened to me. They thought I was doing drugs or something. I keep on changing my ringtones. Because it then starts acting as a stimulus.”***

Some clients expressed a sense of being pulled down by covering the constant barrage of bad news which was the norm in Pakistan (accidents, disasters,

deaths, violence of all kinds, vicious politics, routine system failures affecting the most vulnerable). Even if not traumatic, the mental impact of routinely covering, sifting through information, meeting

affectees, looking at footage, etc., was seen by many as too much to tolerate. A range of emotional and behavioural effects were discussed during sessions, particularly excessive crying, over-sensitivity, low self-esteem and confidence, lack of interest and motivation in work, constant negative thinking and irritability, withdrawal from colleagues and work friends, passive behaviour, and a general feeling of dissatisfaction and emptiness. In a field like journalism which depends so much on fast thinking, confidence, initiative-taking, networking, accuracy and attention to detail, drive and passion, such symptomatology creates further work issues, creating a vicious circle of depressions and anxieties. As helplessness mounted, some clients reported turning to self-medication or substance use, others to self-harm, with a few reaching extreme distress, including suicidal thoughts and attempts.

## 3.6 Low motivation and work performance

Decreased motivation was identified as an effect of stress by all the study's participants. Even those who are generally happy with their workplaces and employers recognise that the passion with which journalists tend to work has taken a hit across the board, affecting both morale and performance. This is also a "contagious" mental state; journalists are affected by the low morale, frustration and hopelessness they see around them. The industry is caught up in a vicious cycle in which the

challenges are affecting the regular, respected standards that journalism aspires to, which in turn is affecting journalist motivation and performance, ultimately leading to a further decline in standards and to "mediocrity" in the field. As morale dissolves, the passion, the love for the truth and the urge to be part of something important are replaced by a practical approach; the job becomes "just a job" and journalists miss out on the "magic" that could be part of their important work.



The CEJ Wellbeing Centre held a workshop on 'Depression, Anxiety and Medicines' on December 11, 2019 in Karachi. In this photo, clinical psychiatrist Dr Uzma Ambareen talks about the science behind antidepressants and dispels some myths to a roomful of journalists.

*"Another colleague said, 'I just come in, whatever they ask me, I do it, then I leave and after that I switch off and I don't take anything from over here. So I really don't care about it when I leave, that's the way I stay happy. If I worry too much about the output and the quality then I will be the one who will stay miserable because nobody else cares. So why should I care? So people have learned ways to cope with the situation OK, and they're like just give me the story, how many do you want I will translate them for you and when my time ends then I'll go and enjoy my life, I'll travel and hang out and make it worth it. That's why I do this shitty job, right.'"*

***“The way they used to work earlier, with that enthusiasm, now they’re just doing it for the sake of doing it. If I say it in just one statement, I would say that they’re just doing their job not work.”***

### 3.7 Effect on personal lives

Work stress often also plays out beyond the newsroom for journalists. It affects the quantity and quality of time journalists spend outside work. Time with family is often cut short and even time spent together is sometimes tainted with work anxieties. Some participants talk about how even when they are physically present with their families, they are “mentally not there”. Symptoms of stress are sometimes visible at home and worry family members. Not only does this restrict their ability to relax and find relief from their stress, it affects their relationships, sometimes creating significant problems.

Other activities, such as time with non-work friends, socialising or participation in entertainment or sports are limited for many as they “live and breathe” their work because of limited time, exhaustion and/or mental stress.

A large number of journalists who sought counselling at the Wellbeing Centre spoke about difficulties in their personal lives because of work stress. Financial constraints (related for example to pay cuts and delays, low incomes, job losses), long and odd hours at work, constant engagement (through social media) with work, conflicts with colleagues, exposure to distressing news were all reported as triggers for problems with family members and friends.

The inability to meet their families created frustration and a loss of a sense of self-worth which for many translated

***“For three years I have been working straight. I mean it took me a while to get over that sleep schedule as well ‘cause you get home at 2 to 3 and you have to unwind and then you wake up the next day at 2pm, get ready for work again and you have no social life. Your friends were just your colleagues...”***

***When a situation like this arises you become glued to your phone and in such situations your family and home are very much neglected, and they start wondering what’s happened that she won’t leave her phone for even a second.”***

into irritability and aggression at home when demands were made or expectations expressed. This was an issue for men, in particular, who in Pakistan’s traditional culture carry the burden of being the main earners of the family, sometimes even for the extended family. Many of them routinely missed important family and social events because of work, creating not only personal frustration and a sense of loss, but also tension with family and friends. Abusive, violent relationships were reported, triggered by frustration and stress in the workplace.

**Table 3: Survey question: What factors at work do you think contribute to this stress and distress?**

Fifty (50) participants of three workshops on psychological well-being were asked to answer this

question. Responses in Urdu were translated. Repetition was eliminated.

What factors do you think contribute to this stress and distress?	
Atmosphere of newsroom	Line manager's pressure
Backbiting	Needless bureaucratic interference
Bad behaviour	Negative comments
Blaming others for mistakes	Nitpicking
Boss charging you for the mistake that is a team blunder	No deadlines for work
Boss's behaviour	Noise
Colleagues' behaviour	Not an equal environment
Conditions in the country	Not respected
Continuous negative news	Not thinking before assigning work
Delayed salaries	Overall media's state of affairs
Delays at desk killing a story	Overloaded
Deliberately misleading reporting being demanded	Overloaded working hours
Demanding work immediately	Pay disparity
Dirty politics	Pressure
Discouragement	Pressure from boss
Double standards on freedom of choosing or expression	Pressure of work
Double standards on freedom to express	Running after ratings and revenue
Fear of lay-offs	Low salary
High expectations	Salary delays
Ideas not entertained	Shift changes
Inability to adapt to changes	Social media backlash
Job security	Staff cuts
Lack of appreciation	Stress management
Lack of communication	The demands of management
Lack of concern on the management's part	To scream and scold workers
Lack of detailed job description	To work all week
Lack of newsroom training	Too demanding
Lack of professionalism	Toxic co-workers
Lack of promotions	Two bosses who cannot get along well
Lack of understanding	Unreasonable deadlines
Lay-offs	When we work sincerely our boss does not appreciate
	Work not appreciated
	Work stress
	Zero motivation



## 4. COPING TECHNIQUES

As the media industry or organisations have no formal support systems, journalists and media workers are left to primarily rely on their own resources to cope. Some journalists are fortunate their workplaces provide some form of relief. In rare cases, this relief is initiated by those in charge, with managers being sensitive to worker rights and mental health. They are open to staff talking to them about any issues they may be facing. Even if staff does not approach them, some managers proactively identify, ask about and support their staff in managing their stress, whether related to work or their personal lives. Even more rarely, managers may put in place or encourage the use of formal mechanisms for support, such as counselling. Other, more informal methods for stress relief, include team

*“...the way that many people deal with it, including myself, that I can talk about everything and anything except the trauma. I would not want to...I mean I don't have the capacity to talk about it...”*

building, staff outings, etc. More commonly, however, journalists develop their own ways of dealing with stress. In the workplace this occurs through friendships and social support systems, initiating fun activities, such as picnics with colleagues, improving their own interpersonal skills (e.g., being assertive or strategic, if needed), etc. Individually, journalists find other ways, mental and physical, healthy and unhealthy, of coping on their own.

*“So now what happens is if you go to a relative's place or are attending any funeral that we have to attend, we have a straight face. People notice that and say that they are being indifferent or they don't have any expressions on their faces and they just say these journalists are like dead from inside, they don't have hearts.”*



Journalists listen to Dr Uzma Ambareen, clinical psychiatrist, explain the effects of medication on depression at a work shop on December 11, 2019 in Karachi.

## What is psychological trauma?

According to the latest edition of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual (DSM), trauma is an event in which a person was exposed to: death, threatened death, actual or threatened serious injury, or actual or threatened sexual violence.

This could be direct exposure, witnessing in person, indirect exposure, for example by learning that a close relative or close friend was exposed to trauma, and repeated or extreme indirect exposure to aversive details of the event(s), usually in the course of professional duties.<sup>30</sup>

There are several types of trauma, including:

- Acute trauma: This results from a single stressful or dangerous event.
- Chronic trauma: This results from repeated and prolonged exposure to highly stressful events. Examples include cases of child abuse, bullying, or domestic violence.
- Complex trauma: This results from exposure to multiple traumatic events.
- Secondary trauma, or vicarious trauma, is another form of trauma. With this form of trauma, a person develops trauma symptoms from close contact with someone who has experienced a traumatic event.<sup>31</sup>

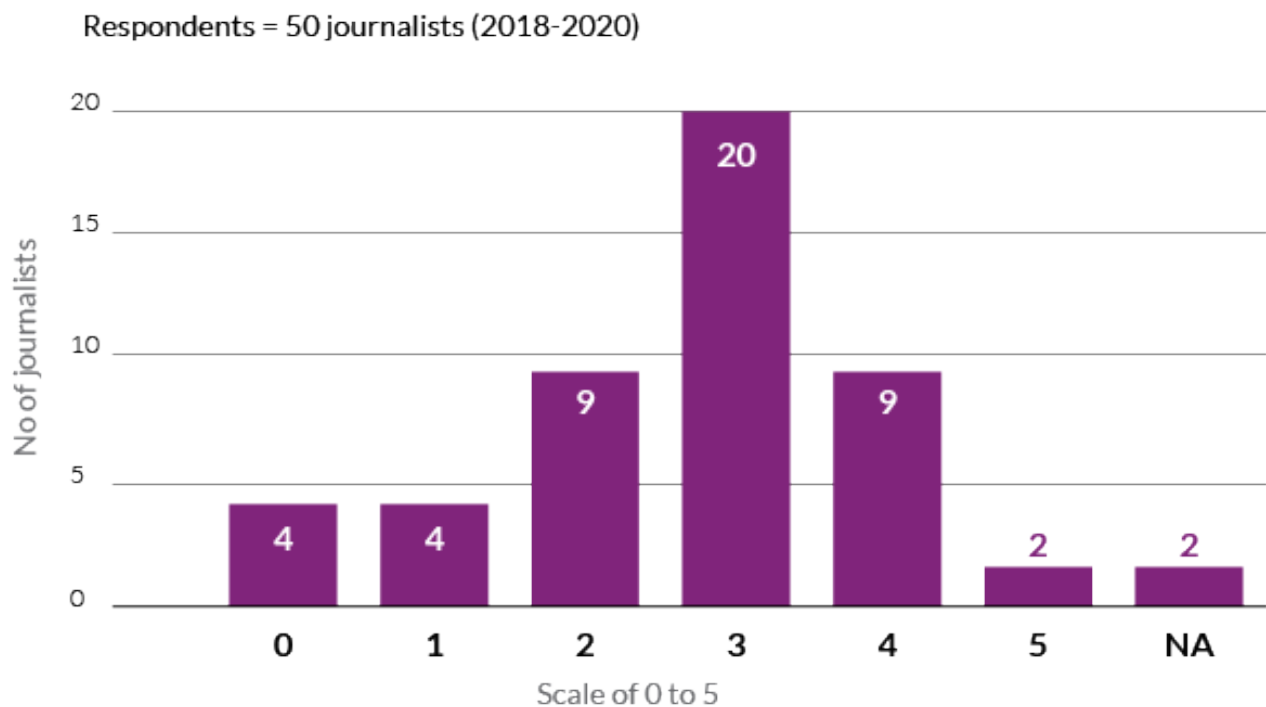
Psychologically, journalists are prepared for a certain amount of stress and many cope by trying to stay positive by focusing on the good they are doing, their successes, the positive changes around them and “on the bigger picture”, and also working on developing more tolerance for stress. In the absence of support mechanisms, sufficient awareness or skills, when emotions threaten to overwhelm them, many journalists tend to cope by actively suppressing them and building a “wall” to protect themselves in order to continue to work effectively.

*“On a personal level, I have devised a system for myself but that doesn’t work for everyone. ... I block things out that are stressful. I take a deep breath, I watch something on Netflix, I go out, I take a walk and I try to actively box it in my head. I try to hardly...like I give myself half an hour space so that I don’t think about it.”*

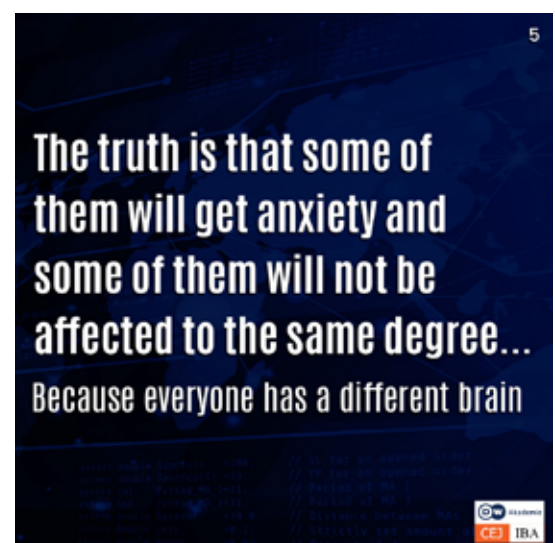
<sup>30</sup>American Psychiatric Association (2013). Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder. Available: [file:///C:/Users/ashab/Downloads/APA\\_DSM-5-PTSD%20\(1\).pdf](file:///C:/Users/ashab/Downloads/APA_DSM-5-PTSD%20(1).pdf)

<sup>31</sup>Dubberley, S. & Grant, M. (2017).

**Figure 12. Survey question: How comfortable are you raising a concern at work if it is affecting your psychological well-being?**



*"I remember seeing the images of that. Just charred bodies. It was really difficult to work that day... we couldn't take those pictures obviously but we saw them. I remember there was a bomb blast in Quetta that we covered and the images for that of the... uhh.. suicide bomber... it was just... I've never seen such an image... it was just..uhh.. you know a pile of meat and the head. It was just horrible and you know when you were 23, 24 you know you were just... I feel like it probably just had some effect but you know we didn't we didn't really talk about it. It was just work as usual."*



An Instagram swipe-through feature drawn from advice by the CEJ's clinical psychologists.

*“Journalists are very indifferent people. We are very much dead from the inside and it doesn’t affect us that way, so that’s the only coping mechanism we have.”*

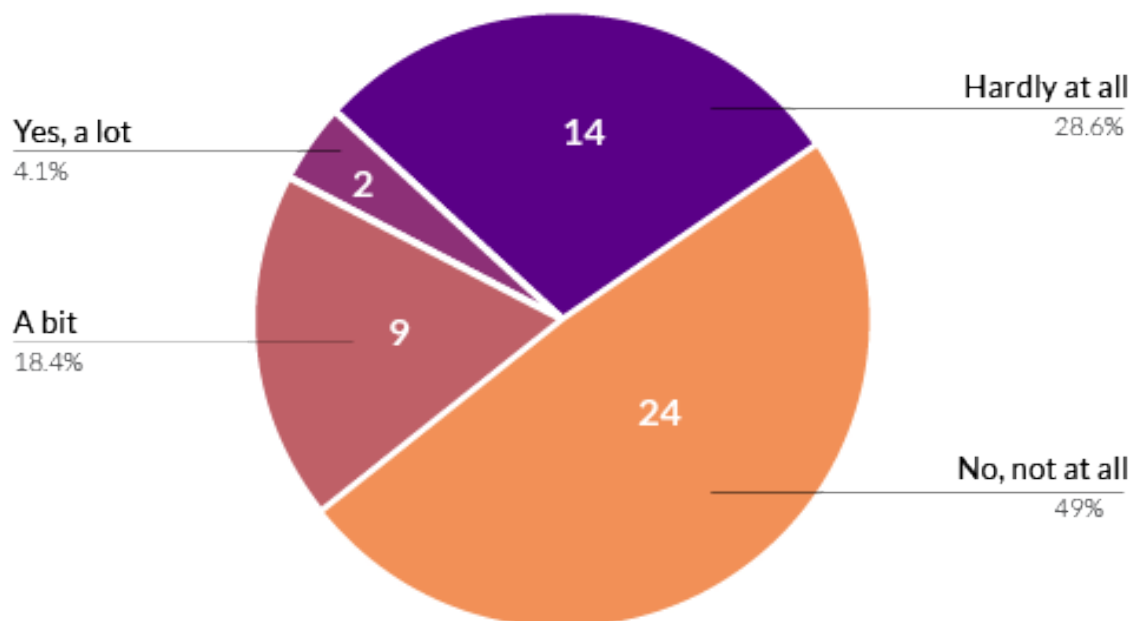
When suppression is not effective, some journalists turn to more self-destructive ways of coping, such as aggression, excessive smoking and the overuse of alcohol and drugs or self-medication.

Others are unable to take the stress and despite all the passion, resort to leaving their jobs or the field.

*“As I have known people who come to this field with a lot of expectations, they had ideas and were full of energy but within the first two, three months alone, the work environment there was so bad... there was so much bullying or it was so toxic that it all fizzled out because they were like this is not how I imagined it, I am in the wrong place, why did I waste my time I should be doing something else kind of you know.”*

**Figure 13.** Survey question: *Do you think media houses and newsrooms make enough effort to take care of their employees’ work-related stress and distress?*

Respondents = 50 journalists (2018-2020)



## 5. RESPONSES TO COUNSELLING

Over the last three years, many Karachi journalists have accessed and reported benefitting from counselling at the CEJ Wellbeing Centre. Support has been sought for issues such as, but not limited to:

- Day-to-day stress
- Depression
- A range of anxiety-related problems
- Anger management
- Communication difficulties
- Conflict in the workplace
- Grief
- Trauma (at work or in their personal lives)
- Relationship difficulties
- Issues of self-esteem and confidence
- Sexual difficulties
- Addictive and compulsive behaviour
- Self-harm, suicidal ideation

Often these issues were related to their personal lives and past experiences (including in their childhood). Difficulties in relationships concerned those in the family, intimate relationships, with friends or peers. Trauma would be related to domestic violence, witnessing domestic violence, sexual assault, child abuse, bullying, etc. Coping with depression typically involved socially withdrawing, giving up work, giving up on people and activities that were once a source of pleasure, self-medicating.

For some journalist clients their personal problems did not play out significantly at work, and in fact their workplaces offered some solace from past traumas and the stressors at home. For others, these difficulties manifested at work to the extent that they created problems such as conflicts, anger issues, anxiety, inefficiency,

lack of motivation, etc. For others still, the issues for which they sought counselling were primarily work-related (as discussed earlier) and these on their own or combined with personal issues, were a source of significant stress in the workplace.

Most journalists who received counselling at the Centre did so after attempting various techniques to gain control over their stress or emotional distress, some of which were temporarily adaptive, and others that were not, or in fact often caused more harm.

The expression of anger is a good example of a behavioural issue that often played out in ways that were destructive for themselves or for others, such as hurting themselves, verbally or physically hurting others, frequently using or abusing substances, overworking, making drastic and rash decisions.

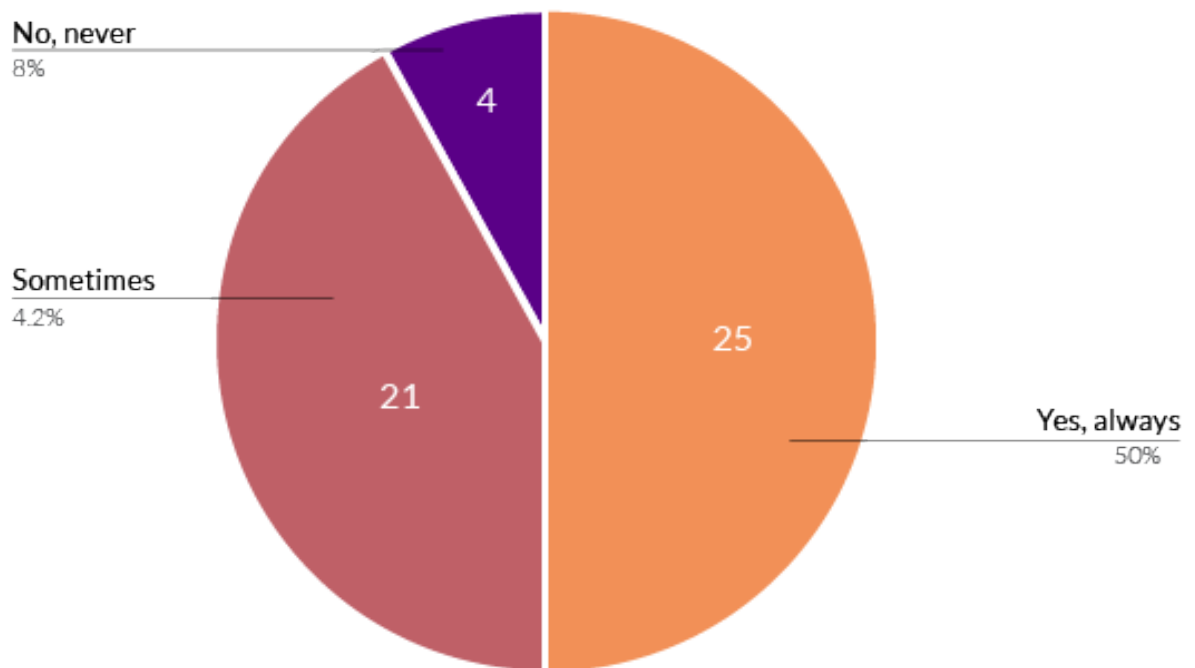
Improving client coping constituted one of the most important parts of the counselling process at the CEJ Wellbeing Centre. Using a range of approaches (e.g., psycho-education, Cognitive-Behavioural Therapy, humanistic psycho-dynamic, basic stress management and self-management), sessions aimed to support clients in:

- Better understanding themselves and the causes or triggers of the issues they were facing
- Developing better coping skills (such as emotional regulation, problem solving, conflict, resolution, etc.)
- Modifying negative, unrealistic and self-sabotaging attitudes and belief



**Figure 14. Survey question: Do you think there is any kind of stress or emotional distress that is related to your work?**

Respondents = 50 journalists (2018-2020)



Journalist responses to counselling varied, depending on a number of factors such as: their willingness to participate; the regularity with which they attended sessions; the number of sessions they attended, the amount of effort they put into the counselling work/homework assignments, the rapport developed with their counsellor, and the nature/intensity of the issue and the extent of support required. For example, some individuals presented with issues that were beyond the scope of the Centre, requiring more regular and intensive support or crisis management. In such cases, efforts were made to refer clients to services that were better suited to their needs. Other clients approached the Centre with caution and were unwilling or too anxious to put in the time required to develop trust and work on change. Similarly, to ease anxiety, many clients

tended to adopt avoidant coping mechanisms, such as missing work, making strong efforts to avoid contact with people who trigger anxiety, completely avoiding anxiety-provoking situations, even if they were important for work, self-censoring, giving up on beneficial opportunities, frequently leaving or changing jobs.

For example, a middle-aged male client who sought help for Depression, dating to when he was an adolescent, and also faced a number of difficulties in his current relationship, expressed frustration that he was still not feeling better by the second session, and chose to stop coming. Another client, a woman living in a highly violent marital relationship chose to give up counselling because her current needs required a different nature of support and crisis management which the Centre did not offer (but still made referrals for).

**A QUICK INTRODUCTION FOR JOURNALISTS**

**WORKSHOP | DECEMBER 11, 2019**

**DEPRESSION, ANXIETY & MEDICINES**

**Are anti-depressants (eg Prozac, Seroxit) addictive?  
What happens if you sometimes pop a pill  
(Xanax, Lexotanil, Alp) to cope?**

 **Dr Asha Bedar**  
Psychologist

**Come spend an afternoon with us as we  
learn about them with a leading  
psychiatrist and psychologist**

 **Dr Uzma Ambareen**  
Psychiatrist

Part of this workshop involves a focus group discussion on the topics

**Who it is for?**

**Reporters, desk editors, freelancers, media HR managers**

**The workshop will be in English and Urdu  
The event is free and open to the media**

**TIME**  
12pm to 5pm

**Please register by: December 1, 2019 | Venue: CEJ-IBA, Karachi**

**CEJ IBA**

A poster announcing a CEJ Wellbeing Centre workshop in 2019.

Another example is of a young man who sought help for severe anxiety, but often attended sessions while under the influence of substances and was unable to benefit from the discussion. There are examples of others who were unable to take out regular time from their work schedules for sessions, and sometimes missed weeks in a row, which is not conducive to effective counselling. It is not uncommon for clients to present with basic support needs (e.g., stress management, help with focus and memory, etc.), but for deeper issues to emerge during counselling, they may require more intensive support, which was not always possible at the Centre due

to both a high client load and also the goal of accommodating as many journalists as possible.

At the same time, many clients were able and willing to continue regular (and sometimes irregular) counselling sessions, and showed significant positive changes. A range of techniques was employed to help clients safely recall, process and work through distressing, sometimes traumatic experiences. Specific tools were used and taught to understand and cope with mild to severe stress, mood or emotion management, anxiety and anger, to improve memory, focus and communication, and to build self-awareness, self-esteem and self-worth.

For example, a young woman approached the Centre for severe anxiety and phobias related to traumatic childhood experiences, which were creating significant problems in her already high-stress workplace. Initial sessions focused on supporting her in understanding and working through her childhood experiences, on reducing anger and self-blame and her sense of powerlessness. In the second stage, the sessions focused on specific, tailored strategies, including role playing and 'homework', to help reduce and eventually overcome her anxiety and panic when faced with stressful

### Survey

# 30%

of 50 journalists at CEJ workshops said they have experienced psychological complaints at or because of their work

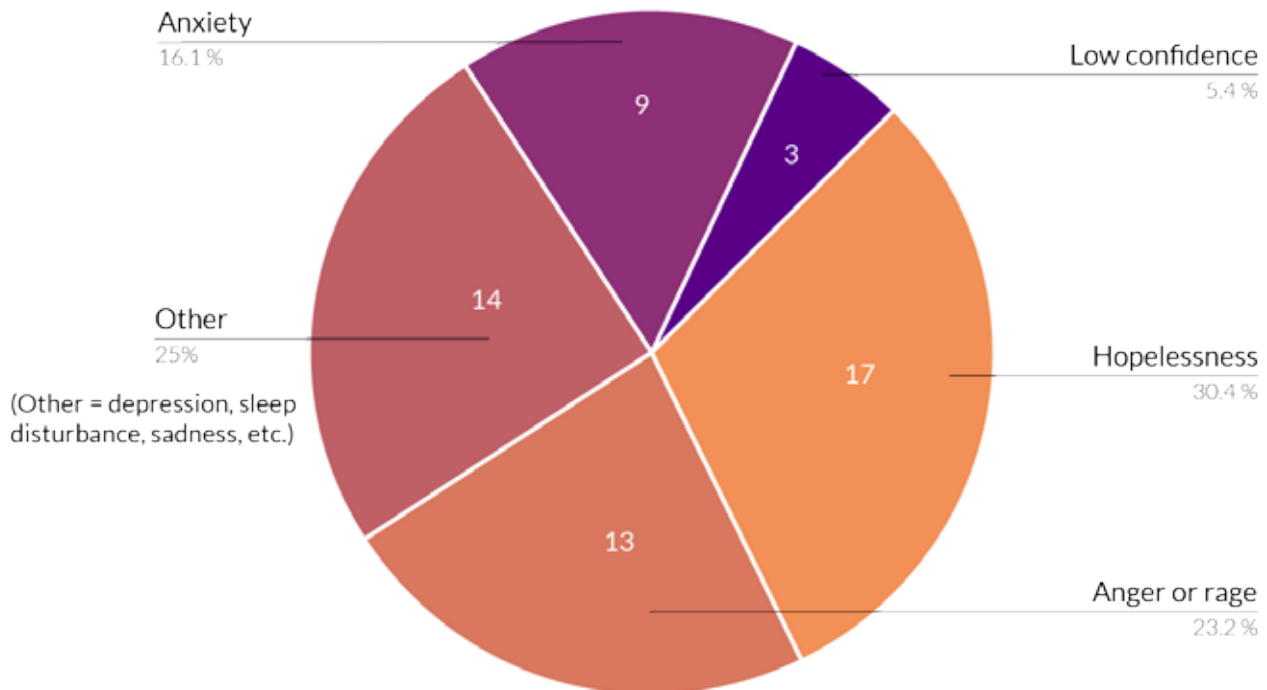
situations at work. The client reported immediate emotional relief and a gradual but definite increase in self-confidence, which was also noted and appreciated by her work supervisors.



*CEJ Wellbeing Centre lead clinical psychologist Dr Asha Bedar speaks to the journalists of the Aaj TV newsroom to introduce the free counselling service and explain when one should know to seek help, April 11, 2018 in Karachi. Aaj TV is a 24 hour Urdu news channel owned by the Business Recorder Group.*

**Figure 15. Survey question: Do you or have you experienced psychological complaints at or because of your work (e.g., anxiety, rage, hopelessness etc.)?**

Respondents = 50 journalists (2018-2020)

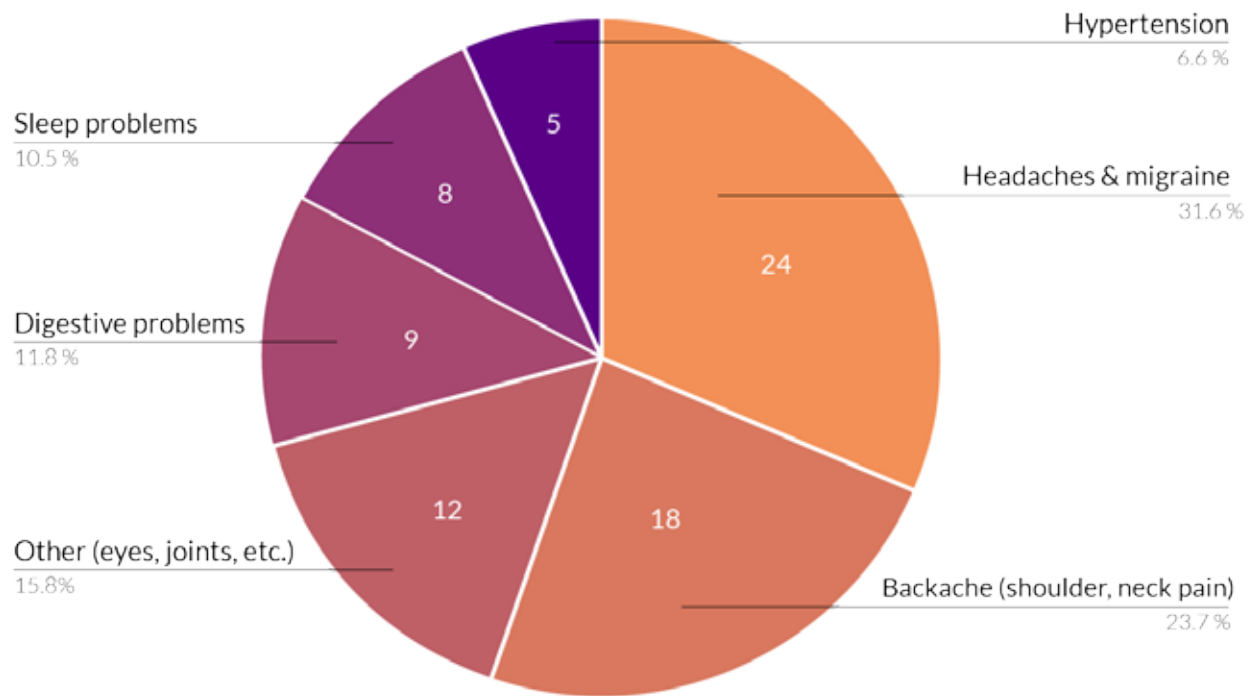


Similarly, a male client, with significant experience in journalism presented at the Centre with moderate depression due to which he felt his motivation and consequently work performance were visibly declining and he had received a serious warning from his superiors. Early sessions focused on increasing his understanding of the causes of his depressive symptoms and identifying thought and behavioural patterns that were reinforcing feelings of inadequacy, low self-worth (despite his accomplishments) and overall dissatisfaction. In the next few sessions, work was done on helping him connect with his ideology and sense of purpose and improving his communication at

work through specific practice tasks and journaling. Within the first few weeks of his participation in sessions, the client observed a significant change in mood and performance, and was able to retain his job as well as improve his relationship with his managers. A middle-aged female client reported similar improvements as she challenged some of her own thoughts and deeply ingrained values that were self-damaging. In the course of counselling, she was able to better understand herself, experience self-compassion and focus on her strengths to better assert herself, put forth her needs and opinions and to improve her work situation.

**Figure 16. Survey question: Do you or have you experienced any physical complaints related to stress caused by work (Such as migraines, backache, acidity, etc.) ?**

Respondents = 50 journalists (2018-2020)



A male client with difficulties controlling his anger and aggression both at home and in his workplace also reported a significant positive change. During the sessions he explored the underlying causes of his anger as well as the range of relationship and emotional difficulties that had ensued as a result. In the course of counselling, he worked hard on not only learning better communication (through practice and feedback from the counsellor) and emotional management but also on the very challenging work of forgiveness and repairing damaged relationships. Occasional sessions with his family members indicated that there were visible changes that had occurred, and the client reported that these were also helping him in his workplace. A young female client, who presented with severe anxiety because of harassment of various kinds in her workplace, was supported in counselling to first identify and clearly label her experiences and

reactions, and to eventually develop workable strategies to address her concerns at work. As with many, both emotion and problem focused strategies were used and taught to help her to both manage her distress and to explore ways of solving the problem. A common goal in all sessions was to increase self-awareness and to empower the clients to cope (ultimately independently to varying degrees) with situations and internal emotional states that were barriers to their mental health and well-being in their personal and professional lives. At times, an increase in self-awareness and understanding contributed to major life decisions (marital separations or relationship break-ups, resignations, relocation to other cities, etc.), but these were always led by the clients themselves, based on discussions and a growing understanding of their underlying or evolving needs.





Counselling helped many clients identify issues, clarify the causes and triggers and learn decision-making techniques that not only helped with current issues but also became useful tools for future problems and conflicts. Existing strengths and adaptive coping strategies were discussed both in the context of reminding clients of, and encouraging them to reconnect with approaches that had worked well for them in the past. They were encouraged to develop new, more constructive, healthy and effective ways of coping. Some of the strategies discussed and practiced (through various techniques) were as follows:

- Self-awareness: Identifying emotions, issues (professional and/or personal) and needs. Clarifying and prioritising
- Psychoeducation: Understanding their own situations and conditions, their causes, contributing factors and triggers
- Understanding mediating and moderating factors: Support mechanisms, aggravating factors, etc.
- Emotional expression: Talking, crying, writing, etc.
- Using both emotion- and problem-focused coping
- Working through or healing past or current trauma (work-related, personal, from childhood, etc.) through structured re-telling, expression and intensive support

- Identifying and challenging self-damaging (e.g., unrealistic, irrational, negative) thoughts, beliefs, behaviours and reactions
- Identifying, connecting with and building on personal strengths and resources
- Connections with people, building or rebuilding trust, healthy social interaction
- Relaxation techniques, including for anxiety or panic management, stress, anger and improved sleep (e.g., meditation deep breathing or other calming breathing-based, grounding, engaging with nature, etc.)
- Problem-solving
- Conflict resolution and assertiveness
- Time for self: For relaxation, hobbies, fun, etc.
- Ensuring breaks from distressing thoughts and activities
- Improve communication, conflict resolution and assertiveness
- Active coping: Problem solving, open communication, assertiveness and conflict resolution
- Creating own balance between time for family, work, social activities, interests, health (rest, nutrition, exercise), self-development, etc.
- Creating variety: Indulging in varied interests and activities, ability to switch attention
- Connecting with the bigger picture: e.g., purpose, values, spirituality or religion



## Secondary trauma

Repeatedly seeing images of violence and trauma, especially extreme forms of it, can take its toll. The psychological impact of viewing content of graphic and violent nature indirectly rather than firsthand is referred to as secondary or vicarious trauma.<sup>32</sup> Vicarious trauma (VT) and Secondary Traumatic Stress (STS) are frequently used interchangeably to refer to the indirect trauma that can occur when we are exposed to difficult or disturbing images and stories second-hand. This can occur by viewing graphic news reports, exposure to gruesome frightening media, hearing a detailed traumatic story from another person, viewing crime scene evidence, exposure to disturbing images, and many other ways in which we can be indirectly affected by the content or visuals of some other living creature's suffering.

This kind of indirect trauma can also cause a profound shift in worldview that occurs in professionals when they work with individuals who have experienced direct trauma, for example, fundamental beliefs about the world may be altered and possibly damaged by being repeatedly exposed to traumatic material.

Common signs of vicarious trauma include experiencing lingering feelings of anger, rage and sadness. In some more extreme cases, intense exposure to such content can lead to anxiety, stress, burnout, and in some cases, a specific disorder known as Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder.

**Table 4: Survey question: Please mention three special concerns media houses/newsrooms need to take care of in order to ensure the psychological safety of their employees?**

Fifty (50) participants of three workshops on psychological well-being were asked to answer this question.

Responses in Urdu were translated. Repetition was eliminated.

Please mention three special concerns media houses/newsrooms need to take care of in order to ensure the psychological safety of their employees?	
Stop running after breaking news	Create an environment of trust
Address staff's emotional issues with dignity	Discourage mind games
Annual picnic	Divide the workload better
Bosses need to take meetings	Do away with multiple chains of command
Bosses should be aware of their staff's issues	Don't burden staff unnecessarily
Celebrate each employee because they are assets	Employees should have access to a psychologist

<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

Please mention three special concerns media houses/newsrooms need to take care of in order to ensure the psychological safety of their employees?	
Encourage inter-departmental communication	Listen to employees
Encourage knowledge sharing	Listen to staff grievances
Ensure open communication	Monthly meetings on staff problems
Equal opportunities for professional growth	No sexualising
Establish a friendly environment	No shouting
Establish merit	No swearing
Establish mutual trust	Offer benefits such as transport, medical, leave
Financial issues should be removed	Offer daycare, extended maternal/care leave
Free tea or coffee	Offer encouragement
Give increments	Offer training in new digital
Give space for ideas	Offer trophies and prizes for performance
Give staff breaks	Organise sports
Give staff respect	Pay salaries on time
Have a break-out relaxation room at the office	Performance appraisals
Have a small gym or exercise equipment	Provide a healthy environment
Have an in-house counsellor	Provide better resources
Have flexible deadlines	Provide job security
Hold professional development	Provide mentorship
Hold sessions on well-being from time to time	Shifts should not be more than 8 hours long

## 6. CONCLUSION & RECOMMENDATIONS

Journalists the world over are susceptible to stress, depressive symptoms, anxiety and secondary trauma as a direct result of the nature of their work. The study reported here and data from the client notes of the CEJ Wellbeing Centre fully support this finding for journalists in Karachi.

The 2017 World Press Freedom Index<sup>33</sup>, prepared by Reporters Without Borders, placed Pakistan among the most dangerous countries for journalists. While not all Karachi journalists are constantly exposed to traumatic or dangerous situations such as those in parts of Pakistan (Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Balochistan), they are affected because they function in a high-stress environment with little to no support, guidance or even basic safety standards and rights.

An understanding is growing, especially among younger journalists, however, of the physical and psychological risks associated with journalism and the impact it has on mental health. But this understanding is still in many ways beyond the vocabulary of those at the top who could make a difference. Stress and trauma are actively dismissed as valid concerns by some, and simply do not surface on the radar for many others. As a result, there are almost no avenues of support for journalists who are otherwise passionate about their jobs and the industry and willing to work within a certain amount of stress that they recognise as being part of their profession.

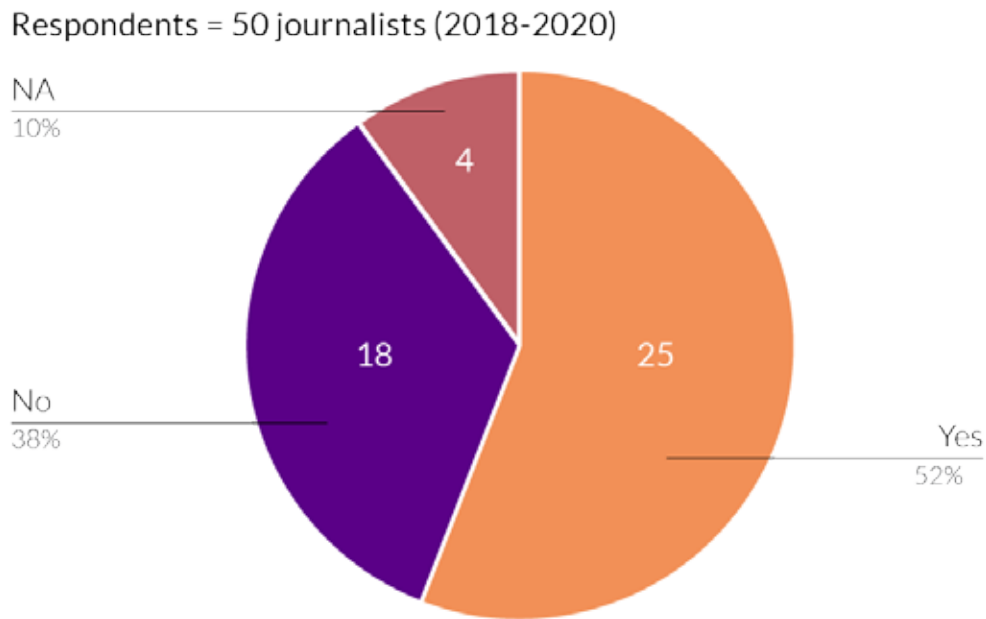
Areas where support is needed, as identified by the participants of this study and the clients of the CEJ Wellbeing Centre, include increased psycho-education on

stress, trauma and coping, training for management, mechanisms for ethical and psychosocial safety standards at work, and formal systems for ongoing counselling for those journalists who may need it from time to time.

A large part of the psychological stress, distress and anxiety that journalists experience can be attributed to the somewhat “macho” notion that there is glory in overworking, without breaks, at the cost of all else, with little compensation, sometimes in disturbing, risky situations, without complaint, and that this is an indicator of true journalism. Journalists in Karachi then are often torn between proving their dedication, keeping their jobs and demanding their basic rights. They experience varying levels of anxiety as a result of the constant overstimulation this produces. Add to this the reality that news in Pakistan itself is often negative and typically overstimulating. From political developments and breaking news to violence of all kinds to natural and man-made disasters, corruption, deprivation, human rights violations, accidents, there are rarely any dull periods in the news cycle. This inherent nature of Pakistani news is a source both of excitement and passion, as well as of addiction and the race to provide breaking news, and the related anxiety. Journalists are often unable to “switch off” and allow themselves to rest and focus on themselves as individuals with a life and personality beyond the newsroom. The anxiety produced by this constant stimulation and connectivity interferes regularly in the journalists’ work performance and productivity and general sense of safety and well-being.

<sup>33</sup> Reporters Without Borders. (2017). Available: <https://rsf.org/en/ranking/2017>

**Figure 17. Survey question: Have you faced or are facing harassment at work or due to your work as a journalist that is or has affected your well-being?**



The state of the industry and the personalities who populate workplaces add to the stress that journalists face. Unprofessional conduct, discrimination, exploitation and bullying are common. Assertiveness and ideological journalistic work is difficult to pursue when jobs are insecure and new jobs even harder to come by. This forces many journalists to settle for jobs that undermine their self-worth, or worse, where there is subtle or blatant persecution, hostility and harassment. Depression and anxiety-related issues and disorders are often directly related to this level of dissatisfaction and unhappiness at work.

As this study, data from the CEJ Wellbeing Centre and research by organisations such as DRF show, widespread sexual harassment and gender-based discrimination are a major source of stress for women journalists and media workers. Despite

growing awareness and conversations around gender and harassment, it continues to flourish in myriad forms, with limited to no avenues of redress for its victims. More enlightened organisations sometimes have mechanisms in place, but these are ad hoc measures, dependent largely on individuals. No institutional mechanism for women's protection exists, leaving many to rely on their own resources, strengths and networks to cope. Journalists who espouse progressive outlooks face the additional stress of censorship and at times a more serious fear of "consequences" of a certain kind. The real and perceived danger in expressing their opinions and reporting may create even greater anxiety. Problems with sleep, hyperalertness and even a paranoia around their own safety can develop in addition to frustration in response to not being able to freely do the kind of work for



### **Sadness and depression<sup>34</sup>**

The death of a loved one, loss of a job or the ending of a relationship are difficult experiences for a person to endure. It is normal for feelings of sadness or grief to develop in response to such situations. Those experiencing loss often might describe themselves as being “depressed.” But being sad is not the same as having Depression.

Depression (major depressive disorder) is a common and serious medical illness that negatively affects how you feel, the way you think and how you act. Fortunately, it is also treatable. Depression causes feelings of sadness and/or a loss of interest in activities you once enjoyed. It can lead to a variety of emotional and physical problems and can decrease your ability to function at work and at home. Depression symptoms can vary from mild to severe and can include: feeling sad, loss of interest, changes in appetite, sleep issues, fatigue, guilt, difficulty focusing, thoughts of self-harm and/or suicide, etc.

which they entered the profession. Finally, although journalists are generally a resilient group<sup>35</sup>, the human impact of such exposure cannot be ignored even though they are mentally prepared for the risks associated with their work and even grow somewhat immune to them in time. At times, journalists are directly caught in the middle of violence, dangerous and traumatic events as they are unfolding. At other times, they are indirectly exposed by covering such events, making, re-watching and editing raw, graphic footage and then reproducing it for public consumption in short periods of time in a disassociated news language and format—a psychological experience in itself. Social media is now a regular part of all work in journalism and has contributed to levels of stress. For starters it has flooded newsrooms with user-generated content which has become another stream of “raw news” that was limited to coming from government or reporting sources. Sifting through the sheer volumes of material from multiple platforms (Twitter, Facebook, WhatsApp and YouTube) is challenging in itself. Journalists have to regularly trawl through extremely disturbing witness accounts, images and videos of gross human rights violations, extreme violence and human suffering that almost never carry warnings. This is why most journalists, including those in this study and the clients of the CEJ Wellbeing Centre, may not meet the criteria of PTSD but they now face

<sup>34</sup> American Psychiatric Association (2020). What is Depression? Available: <https://www.psychiatry.org/patients-families/depression/what-is-depression>

<sup>35</sup> Smith, R. et al. (2017)

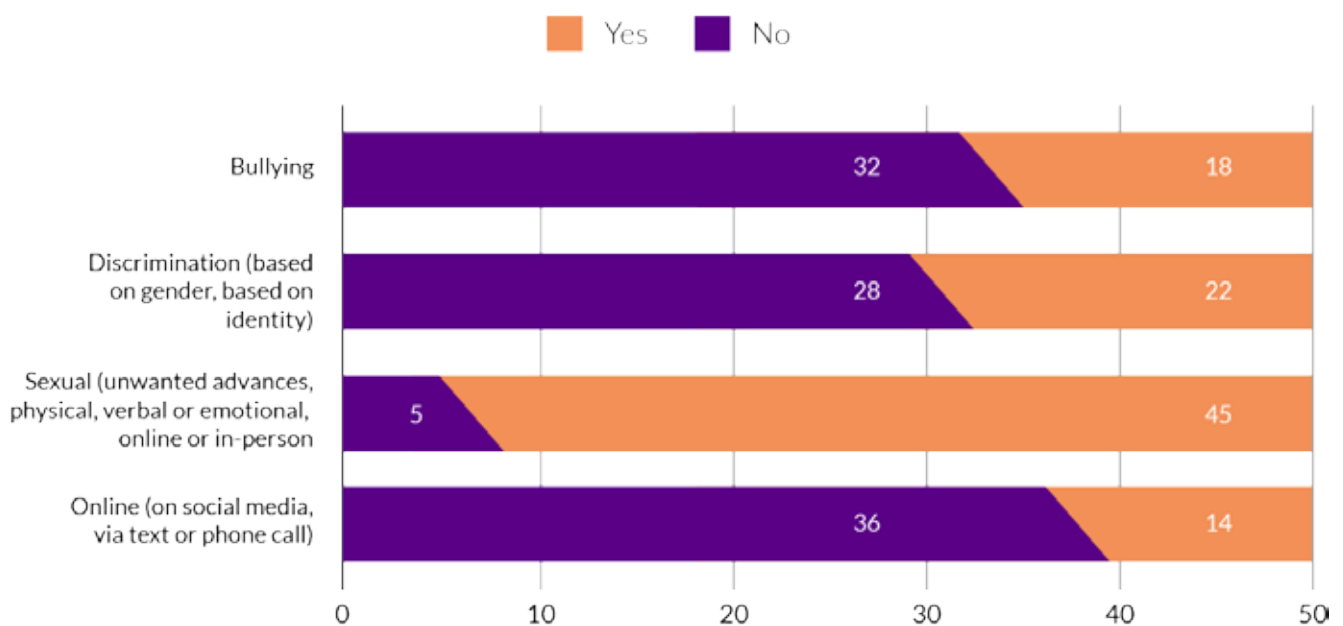
a real and serious threat in the shape of day-to-day stress and sometimes high levels of distress. This applies to the newsroom-based journalist, as well as those working in the field.

Many media workers may have developed robust coping attitudes and styles to help them function, but they are not always effective and certainly not for all journalists and media workers at all times, as indicated strongly by the study and the data from the Centre. This underscores the need for an independent psychosocial support mechanism that is accessible to all journalists and media workers and that functions both as a regular and need-based service.

Several participants felt that one reason for the lack of support is the general attitude towards stress and mental health. Journalist mental well-being is not taken seriously and those who visibly experience or talk about overwhelming stress and trauma are labelled as oversensitive and unsuitable for the job. All participants acknowledge that a certain amount of tolerance and “thick skin” is required for the job and that over time this does and needs to develop, as do skills to cope with ongoing stress and injustices. Many also lament, however, the lack of acceptance that some of the stress can be excessive, and that support may be required.

**Figure 18. Survey question: What kind(s) of harassment have you faced at work or due to your work as a journalist that is or has affected your well-being?**

Respondents = 50 journalists (2018-2020)





CEJ director Kamal Siddiqi introducing the counselling service at Dawn.com's newsroom in Karachi on May 23, 2018. The Wellbeing Centre's team visited every major newsroom over the course of three years to spread awareness.

## 6.1 Journalist recommendations

The following are suggestions made by the study's participants for their needs for support mechanisms to help them deal with stress:

- Training or seminars on stress and trauma
- Training for employers on mentoring, stress management, work-life balance, sensitivity and basic support skills
- Stress awareness for journalists and media workers a work and as part of academic programmes
- Mechanisms for support and debriefing at work
- Resources for mental health support, such as free counselling programmes, therapists on call, mandatory counselling when needed, regular mental health check-ins, etc.
- Clear SoPs on process and procedures keeping in mind worker rights, risks and stress
- Protocols for appropriate professional behaviour
- Recreational leave
- Team-building activities
- Improved transparency at work
- Government regulations

## What is anxiety?<sup>36</sup>

Anxiety is a normal reaction to stress and can be beneficial in some situations. It can alert us to dangers and help us prepare and pay attention.

Anxiety disorders differ from normal feelings of nervousness or anxiousness, and involve excessive fear or anxiety, especially in regards to the future. Fear, muscle tension, excessive worry, overthinking, hypervigilance, avoidance behaviour and a range of physical effects (e.g., increased heart rate, rapid breathing, restlessness trouble concentrating, difficulty falling asleep, appetite issues) are common symptoms. Job performance, school work and personal relationships can be affected.

## 6.2 Overall recommendations

- Journalist stress and trauma and their management need to be taught in academic journalist programmes
- More regular training workshops and seminars need to be organised for all journalists on stress, stress management and importance of self-care, including recognising the need for more professional support. An important part of these training should comprise challenging the stigma associated with mental health and counselling in Pakistan
- The management of media houses need to be sensitised through ongoing training and other resources to journalist stress and the need for support mechanisms at work
- Management would benefit from training on basic professional ethics in the workplace, communication skills, human rights and psychological/physical safety for staff
- Training programmes need to include sensitisation to issues of diversity, discrimination, gender equality, abuse, trauma safety, etc., to address these issues in the media industry in Pakistan
- Support programmes such as group support/individual counselling need to be made accessible and mandatory across media organisations
- A variety of approaches need to be implemented simultaneously. In-house counselling services would help both provide easy access to all staff as well as normalise stress management and support-seeking. External counselling support would help main privacy for those who need it and allow for more intensive and longer-term support
- For increased effectiveness, professionals offering psychological support to journalists need to be sensitised in specific issues journalists face
- Counsellors sensitised to and experienced in diversity and human rights/gender work are recommended to work with journalists in Pakistan, given the diverse, marginalised groups that form the journalism industry

<sup>36</sup> American Psychiatric Association (2017). What are Anxiety Disorders? Available: <https://www.psychiatry.org/patients-families/anxiety-disorders/what-are-anxiety-disorders>



- Standardised policies on leave (including stress leave), team building, debriefing, stress relief, etc., need to be collectively developed and implemented. This would require intensive work with management as these are weak areas in Pakistan in general
- A system for monitoring, evaluating and collecting data from support/ counselling programmes for journalists needs to be developed
- Journalists should be encouraged to write about mental health and trauma
- Standards/guidelines/SoPs for psychological and physical safety, equality and non-discrimination (including on bullying, discrimination and sexual harassment) in the workplace need to be developed and disseminated

**INTERACTIVE WORKSHOP | AUGUST 27, 2020**

# THE ELEPHANT IN THE NEWSROOM

**We need to talk about how journalists treat each other, toxic newsrooms and bullying**

**We want to hear your stories...  
Please join us to start the conversation**

**Open to all**

**Newsroom workers**  
(print, TV, digital)

**TIME**  
6:30-7:30pm  
on Zoom

**The discussion will be in Urdu and English**

**Participants will be requested to fill a feedback survey**

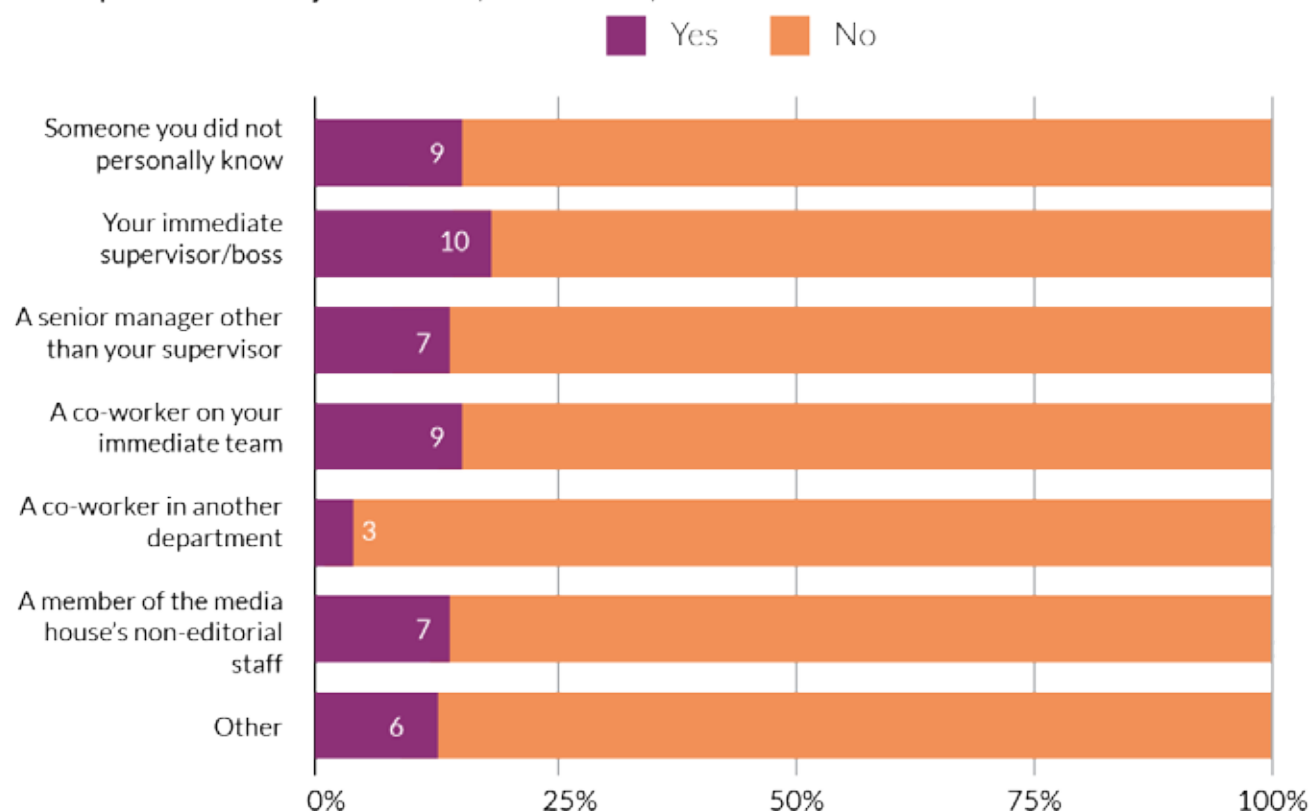
**Please register by Aug 19, 2020**

**CEJ IBA**



**Figure 19. Survey question: Who harassed you?**

Respondents = 50 journalists (2018-2020)

**Some coping ideas to consider<sup>37</sup>**

- Become more self-aware – notice, attend to and label your emotions.
- Connect with others you trust.
- Connect with the bigger picture-your values, purpose, and spirituality/religion.
- Take time out for focused relaxation (e.g., meditation deep breathing or other calming breathing-based techniques, engaging with nature, etc.
- Try some 'grounding' techniques.
- Try attention switching.
- Talk to a colleague. Let your manager know that you feel you need additional support.
- Develop skills in communication, assertiveness, problem solving, conflict resolution.
- Ensure you take breaks from work and stress. Learn to switch off.
- Pursue hobbies or other activities that are nourishing, enjoyable and fun.
- Seek therapy and counselling.

<sup>37</sup>Dubberley, S. & Grant, M. (2017).

## The CEJ Wellbeing Centre

The CEJ Wellbeing Centre operates out of the Institute of Business Administration's Centre for Excellence in Journalism. The free and confidential counselling service was started in 2018 with lead clinical psychologist Dr Asha Bedar. She supervised psychologists Mahnoor Shaikh, Tabinda Afzal and Zainab Barry. Clinical psychiatrist Dr Uzma Ambareen was enlisted to provide prescriptions upon referral from the Centre. These sessions were provided

free of cost.

The Centre was administratively managed by Qurat ul Ain and Mahim Maher. Journalists made appointments over the phone and had a choice of two locations, one downtown at the main IBA campus and the other at the IBA campus at the University of Karachi. In addition to running the clinic, the staff held workshops and online sessions on psychological well-being for media workers.



*This is a photo of the CEJ Wellbeing Centre's first counselling room. It is located in the administration building on the IBA campus in the University of Karachi. The location was chosen as it ensured confidentiality for journalists. As demand grew a second clinic room was opened at the IBA at the city centre because it was closer to work for many media workers.*

## Author information

Dr Asha Bedar is a Clinical Psychologist with a PhD from the University of Melbourne, Australia. She has over 18 years of experience working with individuals and groups, including women, children, youth and men. Before her doctorate, she practised in Islamabad, working specifically on gender and violence against women and children. After her PhD she worked extensively with individuals, groups,

families and professionals, both in Pakistan and Australia over the last 12 years. Dr Bedar does counselling and therapy, capacity building, group work, research, resource material development and project design and implementation related to mental and emotional health, life skills development, resilience, post-disaster psychosocial support among other areas.

## Ethics declaration

We declare no conflict of interest.

## Limitations

This study was limited by the fact that the counselling service offered was confidential and in-depth discussion of client data could not be provided. The sample size of 90 journalists is

limited given that an estimated 3,000 journalists work in Karachi, however, many of the findings are consonant with those of the focus group discussion and semi-structured interviews.

## Keywords

Mental health, journalists, Karachi, Pakistan, depression, anxiety, media

workers, newsrooms, stress, distress, coping mechanisms, counselling