

2023

Analysis: Mental health of journalists

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CONTENTS

I Introduction	2
II Socio-demographic characteristics of the sample	3
III Professional stress, mobbing and burnout.....	9
IV The impact of the topics that journalists report about on their mental health	21
V Pressures on journalists in Serbia	25
VI Mental health of journalists	31
VII Conclusions and recommendations	35

Note: The views herein expressed are solely those of the authors and contributors and do not necessarily reflect the official position of the OSCE Mission to Serbia.

I INTRODUCTION

Journalism as a profession faces enormous pressures all around the world. The reasons are numerous and, one may say, even too many – starting from precarious work conditions up to their high exposure to physical and verbal violence due to the delicacy of topics they report about. Unfortunately, the outcomes can often be even tragic. Some journalists suffer due to physical and verbal violence and some due to anxieties and illnesses as a consequence of their pursuit of this profession.

According to the 2022 report of Reporters without Borders, out **of 180 states in the world subject to classification, only eight can boast a good situation in respect to press freedom and journalists' safety**. This is only 4.4% of the total number of states. A satisfactory situation exists in 40 states, i.e. 22.2%. On the other hand, 62 (34.4%) states are ascertained to have a problematic situation, while a difficult situation exists in as many as 42 (23.3%) states. A very difficult situation was recorded in 28 states, i.e. 15.6% of the total. Such serious and worrying data clearly indicate very difficult conditions in which media professionals operate, which significantly impacts their lives and health, and the well-being of their families.

Given the importance of the journalistic profession in democratic societies, without whose role the existence of democracies is practically unimaginable, the question is whether the burden on their shoulders is manageable and how long these guardians of democracy will manage to sustain numerous types of pressures they are exposed to. Will and when will they succumb and how can they be helped so that our precious democracies continue to grow and our citizens are adequately informed about the reality they live in?

Male and female journalists who report about politics, crime, corruption, health and ecological crises and other important issues face an exceptionally high level of exposure to stress and trauma. Despite this, many of them do not have access to medical treatments that would help maintain and improve their mental health. Many are not even aware that various forms of anxiety, depression, burnout and stress have become part of their everyday lives, as they believe those are customary risks of this profession.

For this very reason, in late 2022, the OSCE Mission to Serbia set up a team consisting of four journalists and one psychologist, tasked with developing a pilot survey to provide factual insights into the degree of presence and sources of stress that journalists encounter in their everyday work, and to establish whether it, and to what extent, influences the feeling of job burnout. The survey results should serve to define recommendations and very concrete short- and long-term activities and projects that will help female and male journalists tackle the challenges to their mental and, thus, physical health.

II SOCIO-DEMOGRAPHIC CHARACTERISTICS OF THE SAMPLE

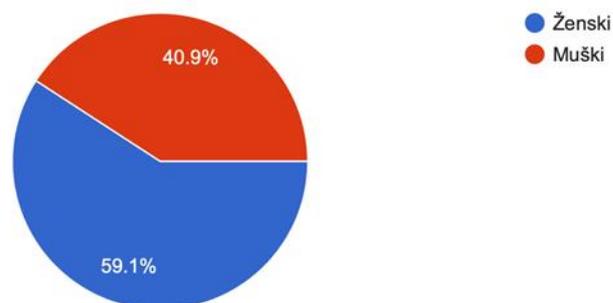
Participation in this research was voluntary and anonymous, and was carried out via an online survey. Support was provided by the Permanent Working Group for the Safety of Journalists, and primarily by journalist and media associations participating in its operation – the Independent Journalists’ Association of Serbia (NUNS), Journalists’ Association of Serbia (UNS), Independent Journalists’ Association of Vojvodina (NDNV), Association of Independent Electronic Media (ANEM), Media Association (AM) and Online Media Association (AOM). A precious contribution to this research was provided by journalists who are members of other associations such as Prouns, the Sports Journalists’ Association and others.

The results of this research, based on 164 female and male journalists respondents¹, have shown that this initiative was timely and needed. The situation is highly worrying as 32.3% of the surveyed female and male journalists have a diagnosed mental disorder or experience mental disturbances, which more than twice exceeds the percentage of mental disorders among the general population – around 15%.

An in-depth explanation of the research results is preceded here by a short introduction of the socio-demographic characteristics of the sample.

Označite kog ste pola:

164 responses



Question: Mark your gender

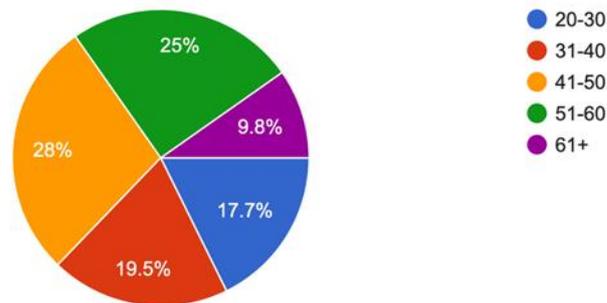
- Female
- Male

¹ The survey was sent to around 5,000 email addresses through the databases of the above-mentioned journalist and media associations. The response rate thus corresponds to approx. 3.28%. Although this sample cannot be considered representative of the Serbian population or the journalistic profession, it provides indications of trends and common themes that will require further research.

Gender representation in the sample reflects earlier findings that deal with the gender structure of media professionals in Serbia,² which consistently shows that women holding journalistic and editorial posts make up the majority – around 60%.

Molimo Vas da obeležite kojoj starosnoj grupi pripadate:

164 responses

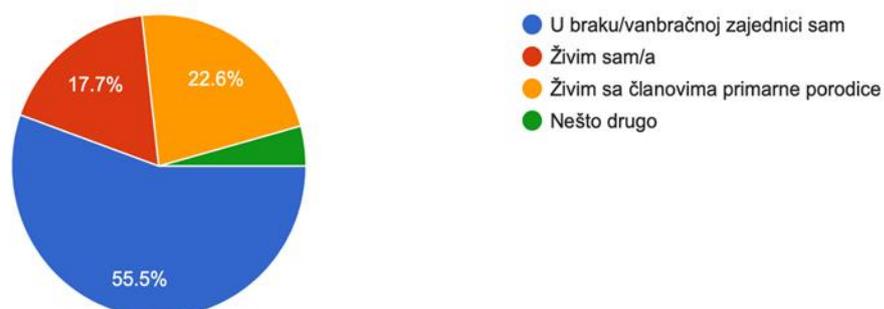


Question: Please mark your age group

The research sample also shows that more than a half of respondents belong to the age groups between 41 and 60. It is particularly interesting to note that female and male journalists in their sixth decade of life make up a fourth of the sample. A somewhat lesser percentage of young persons in the sample is not strange, but almost a tenth of the sample in the seventh decade of life must come as a small surprise and it would be useful to corroborate this interesting result with additional analyses.

Porodična situacija:

164 responses



Question: Family situation

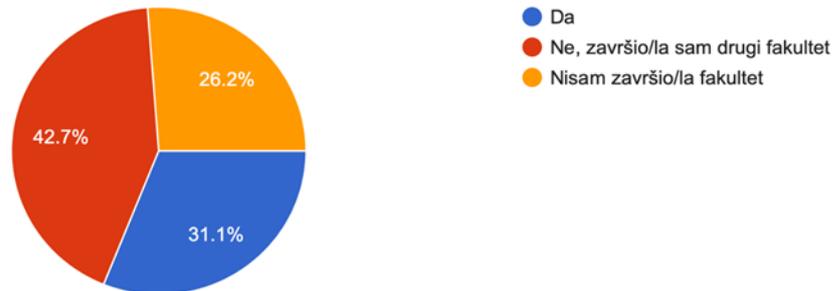
- Married/extra-marital community
- I live alone
- I live with members of my primary family
- Something else

² "Rodna struktura direktorskih i uredničkih funkcija u medijima" (*Gender Structure of Directorial and Editorial Media Functions*), prof. dr Snježana Milivojević, (OSCE, 2021) – <https://www.osce.org/files/f/documents/0/c/491866.pdf>.

Almost 80% of the surveyed female and male journalists live with their primary or secondary families. Family support is important for employees on any job, even more so when a person has an exceptionally stressful job, such as media professionals. At the same time, an important percentage of the surveyed persons indicates that they transfer stress induced by their job onto their families.

Da li ste završili studije novinarstva?

164 responses

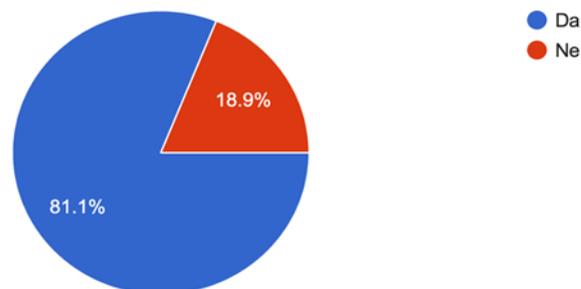


Question: Did you graduate from a faculty of journalism?

- Yes
- No, I graduated from another faculty
- I didn't graduate

Da li ste se dodatno usavršavali u oblasti novinarstva kroz specijalizovane treninge ili obuke?

164 responses



Question: Have you received additional training in the field of journalism through specialised training courses?

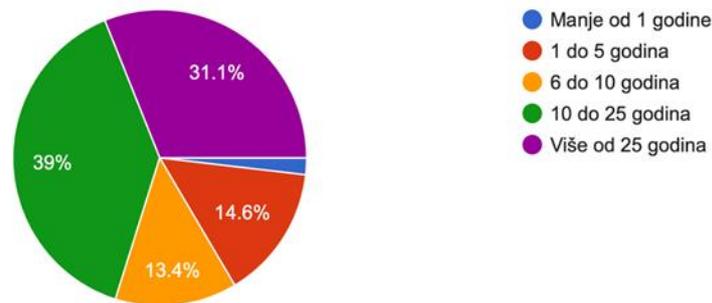
- Yes
- No

The formal and informal educational structure of the sample, with the question concerning the studies of journalism, is not surprising. A third of the sample with a journalism university background is a significant percentage in a profession values work results more than formal education. The priority of work results over formal education is even more emphasised by more than a fourth of persons without a higher education in the sample. However, an enormous percentage of those who continued to educate themselves through specialised training courses indicates the need and ambition to

develop professionally and achieve better results, but also suggests a significant absence of practical skills and knowledge about media work in formal education. The awareness of young female and male journalists, once they encounter the media practice, that what they learned is highly inadequate and often useless for a competitive and dynamic profession, represents a great challenge and a negative experience that significantly impacts their early careers.

Koliko dugo radite u medijima?

164 responses



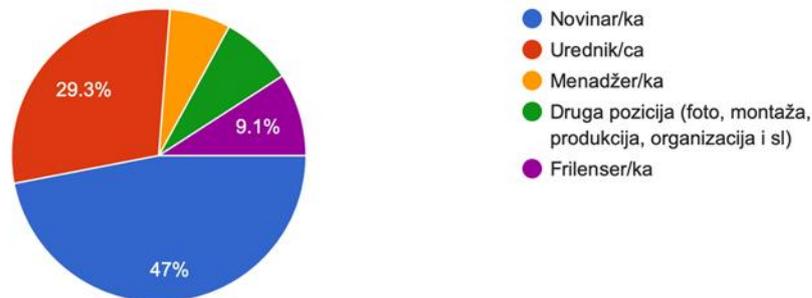
Question: How long have you worked in the media?

- *Less than 1 year*
- *1–5 years,*
- *6–10 years,*
- *10–25 years,*
- *More 25 years*

New employment of female and male media professionals is insufficient in this sample – almost 70% of respondents have worked for ten or more years already, while almost a third more than 25 years. The 15% of female and male novices and a somewhat smaller percentage of those with an experience between six and ten years, show a clear mathematical void and suggest that the profession’s future is not quite certain. It would be necessary to check the percentage of the newly arrived in the profession through a more in-depth analysis, and ascertain whether the profession’s reputation as non-lucrative and uncomfortable influences a lesser inflow of “fresh blood”, in addition to business circumstances.

Na kojoj poziciji radite?

164 responses



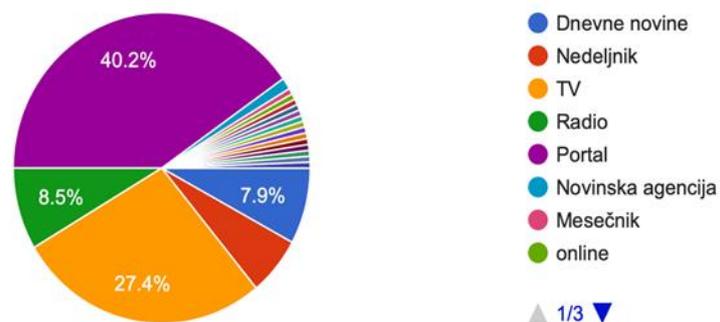
Question: What post do you hold?

- *Journalist*
- *Editor*
- *Manager*
- *Other (photo, editing, production, organisation etc.*
- *Freelancer*

In this sample – with around a half of female and male journalists, almost a third of female and male editors, and around 10% of female and male freelancers – there are probably more editorial posts compared to reality, but one should not exclude the share of double editorial/journalist posts, which are, unfortunately, on the rise.

U kojoj vrsti medija radite?

164 responses



Question: In what kind of media do you work?

- *A daily*
- *A weekly*
- *TV*
- *Radio*
- *Portal*
- *News agency*
- *A monthly*
- *Online*

The domination of web portals in the sample is a natural consequence of the consistent global trend of the public's exodus from traditional media. TV, as the second most work place of the respondents, resists this exodus rigorously. Multiple answers to this question were possible, indicating that the majority of respondents work for various media types at the same time (i.e. shooting/writing on the same topic for various outlets; taking photos and writing at the same time, etc.). Freelance engagement also often implies working with several types of the media. The fluidity and lack of finity of media products on the Internet, and the requirement for simultaneous production of diverse media products are exceptionally demanding for individual journalists and usually take place at the expense of the reporting quality and with a lot of pressure, stress and the lack of space to respond to unforeseen circumstances, to correct mistakes or respond to changed or additional requests of superiors. All this clearly generates stress.

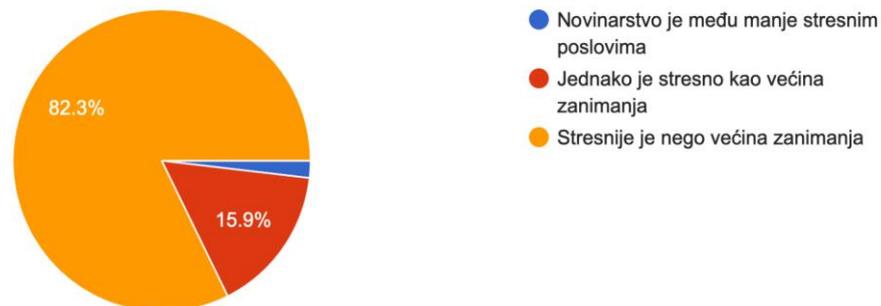
III PROFESSIONAL STRESS, MOBBING AND BURNOUT FROM A JOURNALIST'S VIEWPOINT

Journalists and stress

The World Health Organisation (WHO) defines stress as any type of change that causes physical, emotional and/or psychological strain. Stress is the body's response to anything that requires attention or action. Everyone experiences stress and no one is unaffected. The way we respond to stress, however, makes a big difference to our physical and mental well-being. This very response to stress is what we colloquially, in everyday conversation, call stress. Stress affects both the physical and mental functions of our bodies. A little bit of stress is, in fact, good for people as it encourages them to perform better in their private and professional lives. However, too much or frequent stress has an entirely opposite effect as, due to the body being in a constant state of alert, it exhausts a person's adaptive capacities and causes a number of physical symptoms, which gradually lead to chronic psychosomatic illnesses (cardiovascular, gastrointestinal, endocrinological, autoimmune and other).

Kada je reč o stresu u Vašoj profesiji, kako ocenjujete nivo stresa u odnosu na druga zanimanja?

164 responses



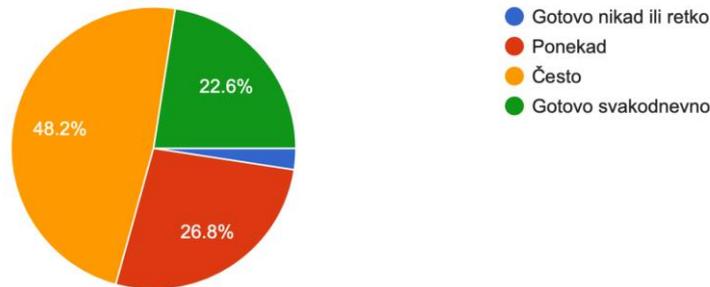
Question: How do you assess the level of stress in your profession compared to other professions?

- *Journalism is among less stressful professions*
- *It is equally stressful as most professions*
- *It is more stressful than most professions*

As seen in the above chart, a vast majority (82.3%) of female and male journalists who participated in the survey believe that journalism is more stressful than most professions. A total of 15.9% of respondents believe it is equally stressful, and merely 0.8% see journalism as a less stressful profession than others. Given the sample size covered by the research, only one person associates journalism with a low level of stress, which can be discarded as not representative in any way. The percentage of those who consider their job exceptionally stressful is highly worrying and indicative of a larger trend.

Koliko često doživljavate stres na poslu?

164 responses



Question: How often do you experience stress at work?

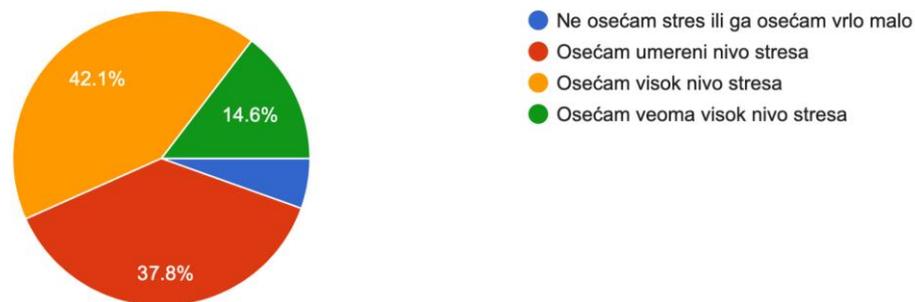
- *Almost never or rarely*
- *Sometimes*
- *Often*
- *Almost every day*

On the other hand, the percentage of journalists assessing their job as exceptionally stressful is significantly higher than the percentage of those stating that they experience stress at work almost every day (22.6%) or frequently (48.2%), which is 70.8% in total. So 11.5% of the total number of those who consider their job exceptionally stressful do not believe that they themselves experience the stress.

However, the chart below provides a somewhat different picture:

Kako biste ocenili nivo stresa pod kojim ste trenutno?

164 responses



Question: How would you assess the level of stress that you currently feel?

- *I don't feel stress or feel very little stress*
- *I feel a moderate level of stress*
- *I feel a high level of stress*
- *I feel a very high level of stress*

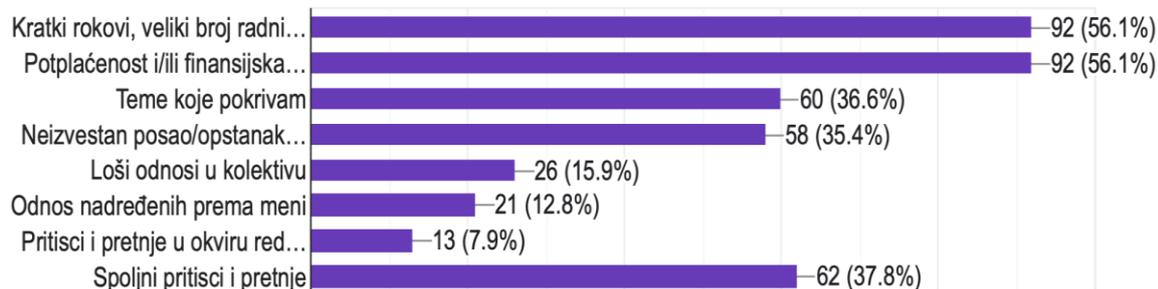
Asked to assess the level of stress they currently feel (without mentioning the job), 79.9% of female and male journalists perceive the level of stress as moderate to high, while

14.6% suffer even a very high level of stress, which is overall much closer to the number of those who consider journalism a stressful profession.

It can be naturally concluded that not all stressors that male and female respondents feel are necessarily related to their job. However, when given the possibility to choose several answers about the main triggers of stress, they state the following:

Šta smatrate da je za Vas ključan uzročnik stresa na poslu? (imate mogućnost izbora više odgovora)

164 responses



Question: What do you believe is the key cause of stress at work? (You can choose several answers)?

- Short deadlines, a large number of work tasks
- Being underpaid and/or financial uncertainty
- The topics I cover
- An uncertain job/survival
- Bad interpersonal relations in the team
- The attitude of superiors towards me
- Pressures and threats within the newsroom
- External pressures and threats

Short deadlines and a great number of work tasks on the one hand, and being underpaid and financial uncertainty on the other hand, account for an identical share (56.1%) of responses. They are followed by external pressures and threats (37.8%), which by far outnumber pressures and threats within the newsroom (7.9%).

Based on the data thus far, a possible conclusion may be that certain stress factors have become “normal” for the profession, and therefore male and female journalists fail to recognize them as stress factors in their profession. The authors consider that female and male journalists see short deadlines and a large number of work tasks as directly related to their job, while financial uncertainty and external pressures and threats are perceived as indirectly related.

Journalists and mobbing

Mobbing means any moral abuse, discrediting, harassment, humiliation and similar kind of behaviour towards employees, exercised through repeated actions, with the aim and/or consequence to degrade a person by deteriorating working conditions for the

abused worker. Mobbing is violence directed to the psyche of an individual and is specific by being related exclusively to the working environment and implies continuous inimical behaviour (apart from sexual abuse) aimed at degrading someone at the workplace. Its purpose is often to force the employee to leave the job on his/her own.

In terms of the position of the abuser and abused person in the employer's hierarchy, there are two types of mobbing:

- **Horizontal mobbing:** when mobbing activities take place among workers at the same hierarchical position in an organisation.
- **Vertical mobbing:** when the superior abuses a subordinate worker and when a group of workers engage in mobbing activities towards a superior.

In Serbia, mobbing is a criminal offence stipulated by the Law on the Prevention of Harassment at the Workplace.³ However, offences belonging to the scope of mobbing are still rarely reported and are hard to prove in court practice.

The above data suggest that only 15.9% of respondents mention bad relations in the team as a stressor, while 12.8% mention the attitude of superiors. However, directly asked about their mobbing experience, respondents answer somewhat differently:



Question: Did you have mobbing experience?

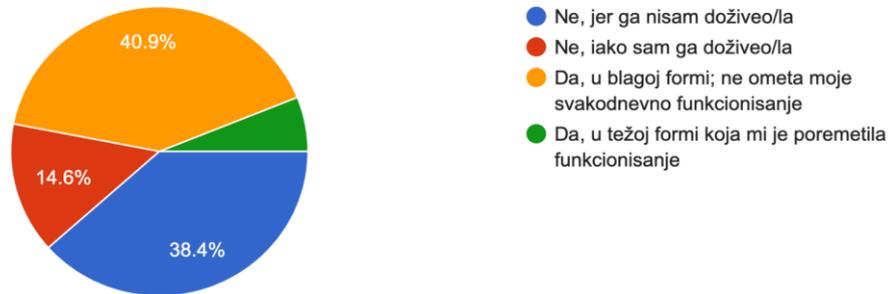
- No
- I think I have, in milder form
- Yes, in more serious form

Almost a half of respondents (49.4%) experienced mobbing in milder and 12.8% in more serious form, which leads to the conclusion that 62.2% of surveyed female and male journalists experienced some form of mobbing during their careers.

³ Please see: [Zakon o sprečavanju zlostavljanja na radu \(paragraf.rs\)](http://zakonodavstvo.rs/Zakon%20o%20spre%C4%87avanju%20zlostavljanja%20na%20radu%20(paragraf.rs))

Da li mislite da je mobing ostavio posledice na Vaše psihičko blagostanje?

164 responses



Question: Do you think mobbing has left consequences for your mental well-being?

- *No, because I didn't experience it*
- *No, although I experienced it*
- *Yes, in mild form; it doesn't disturb my everyday functioning*
- *Yes, in more serious form which prevented me from functioning*

When it comes to the consequences of mobbing for the respondents, 6.1% of them state that mobbing severely impacted them which hinders their everyday functioning, while 40.9% say they feel consequences but not to the extent that would hamper their everyday functioning. However, in total sum, 47%, i.e. almost a half of respondents, feel psychological consequences of mobbing.

Mobbing often appears in answers given by male and female respondents in free form. Some of the examples include:

"Denigration, dismissal threats, twisting one's words."

"Belittling by the editor in front of younger colleagues."

"It concerns my work in the previous newsroom when I had to go to the doctor's after working hours. My editor began to scream saying how I could go to the doctor's when I asked no one."

"The executive editor sexually harassed me. I addressed the editor of the piece that I was working on, but I received the answer 'well, that's him', and I later learned that she had informed him of what I said."

"Degradation after I gave birth; humiliation by male colleagues because I was proposing topics outside the framework of entertainment, beauty and household, although I'm a woman."

"The former editor pulled my hair out twice and was sending extremely long, insulting messages, after working hours."

Reporting about traumatic events also often appears in answers to the question about concrete, particularly stressful situations:

"A victim of violence had a psychotic episode (decompensation) while working on a story. She didn't want to give up on going to the public, but I wasn't sure that her consent was informed."

“Covering the war in Ukraine, studying the online world of conspiracy theorists, antivax groups, nationalistic and rightist groups, covering the suffering of migrants and refugees on the Balkan route, with death cases as well.”

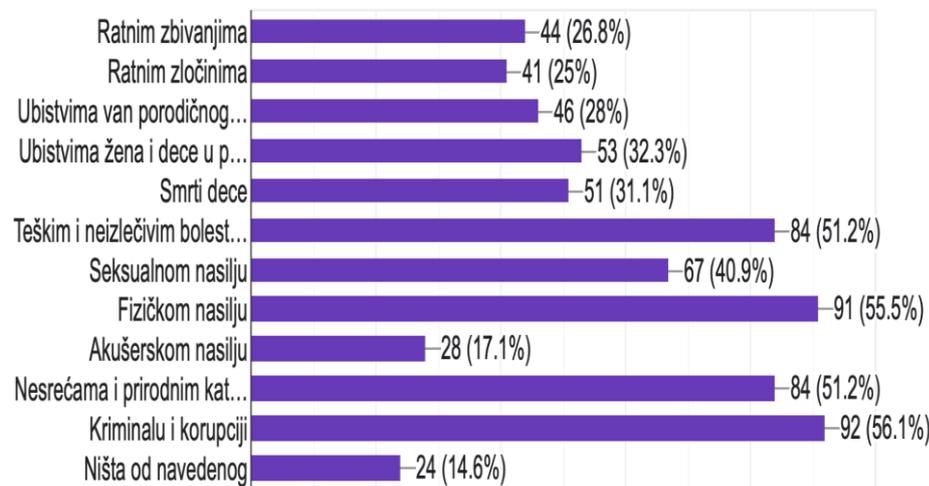
“Reporting about bombing, wartime sexual abuse, war crimes, migrant crisis, refugees...”

“Talks with interlocutors about complex health topics which I choose on my own as I believe it is important to report about them, but it is sometimes hard to maintain balance between the right questions, protection of interlocutors and my internal equilibrium.”

The types of traumatic events covered by journalists are presented in the chart below:

Molimo Vas da zaokružite sve ono što se odnosi na Vas. Tokom karijere izveštavao/la sam o:

164 responses



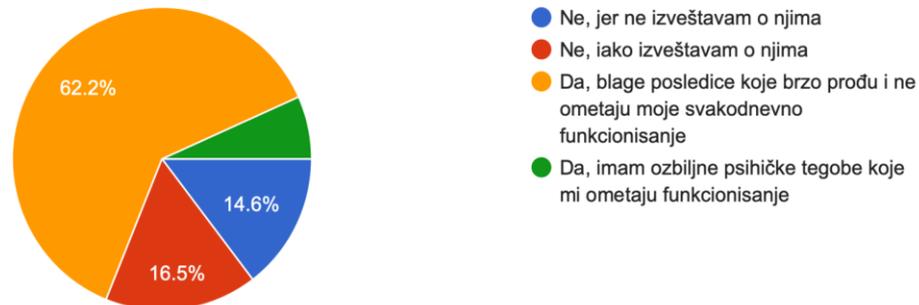
Question: Please circle everything that concerns you. During my career I reported about:

- War events
- War crimes
- Murders outside family...
- Murders of women and children
- Deaths of children
- Severe and incurable diseases
- Sexual violence
- Obstetric violence
- Accidents and natural disasters
- Crime and corruption
- None of the above

In this regard, it should be borne in mind that male and female journalists were given the possibility to provide several answers. There is also overlap of traumatic events being reported on by a single person: reporting about war crimes also includes reporting about wartime rapes, i.e. sexual violence. Or, reporting about severe and incurable diseases overlaps with reporting about the death of children.

Da li imate utisak da izveštavanje o ovim temama ostavlja neke posledice po Vaše mentalno zdravlje?

164 responses



Question: Do you have the impression that reporting about these topics leaves some consequences for your mental health?

- *No, because I don't report about them*
- *No, although I report about them*
- *Yes, mild consequences which disappear quickly and do not disturb my everyday functioning*
- *Yes, I have serious psychological problems which disturb my functioning*

In this case as well, the consequences for the mental well-being of journalists are mainly mild and do not hinder them in their everyday life and work, but one should not disregard the percentage of those who suffer more serious consequences (6.7%). However, there are 62.2% of those with mild consequences, which makes up 69.9% of journalists who suffer the consequences of reporting about traumatic events.

One should add, i.e. subtract the percentage of surveyed journalists who do not report about traumatic situations at all (14.6%). When this number is subtracted, the number of journalists who have consequences due to the nature of topics they report about is even higher (within the group of only those female and male journalists who cover traumatic events in their work).

Burnout syndrome among journalists

In late 2019, the WHO introduced the burnout syndrome in its International Classification of Diseases. Since 2021, health workers in Serbia have also been diagnosing this syndrome as a medical disorder, treating it and working on its prevention.

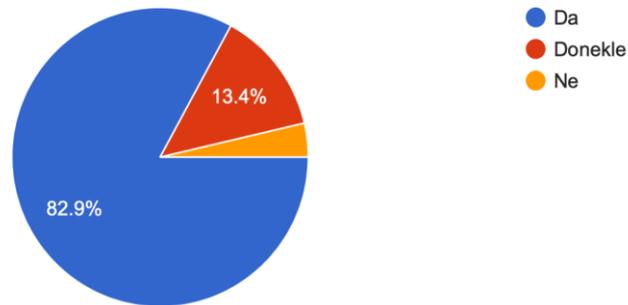
The WHO defines burnout as a state resulting from chronic workplace stress. Some of its main symptoms are sleep deprivation, energy depletion and exhaustion, digestion problems, high blood pressure, difficulty concentrating, increased mental distance from one's job, and reduced professional efficacy.

Symptoms also include forced thinking about one's job even outside working hours, reduced need for social contacts and lack of time for professional, but also private duties. An alarm signal is if a person does not manage to relax even when on annual leave. The

long-term consequences of the burnout syndrome range from psychological problems such as anxiety and depression, to consequences for physical health – a heart or brain attack, other cardiovascular or neurological problems, development of diabetes, Hashimoto's disease and other thyroid diseases.

Da li Vam je poznat sindrom "burnout-a", odnosno, sagorevanja na poslu?

164 responses



Question: Are you familiar with the burnout syndrome at the workplace?

Yes

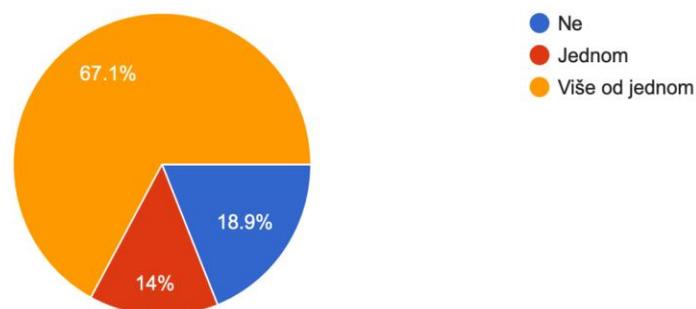
To an extent

No

Less than 4% of the surveyed female and male journalists are not familiar with job burnout, which is encouraging. Also, 82.9% say they are familiar with this syndrome and 13.4% are familiar to an extent. However, when it comes to the experience of job burnout, data is not encouraging.

Da li ste nekada iskusili sindrom sagorevanja na poslu?

164 responses



Question: Have you ever experienced the job burnout syndrome?

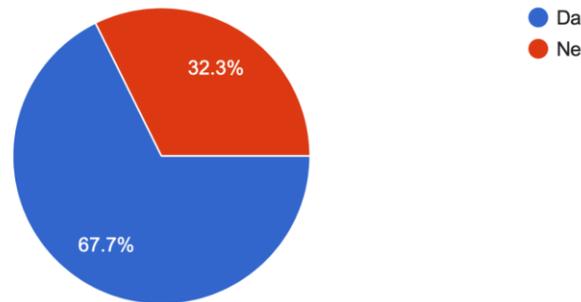
- No
- Once
- More than once

Less than a fifth of respondents (18.9%) state they have not experienced burnout. Fourteen percent believe they experienced it once, while the majority – 67.1% – more than once. In sum, (83.1%), this number is somewhat higher than the number of

respondents who consider journalism a highly stressful profession, which again leads to the conclusion that media professionals are objective when speaking about their profession in general, and are inclined to normalize the difficulties that they personally face.

Da li znate kom lekaru specijalisti možete da se obratite ako sumnjate da imate sindrom sagorevanja na poslu?

164 responses



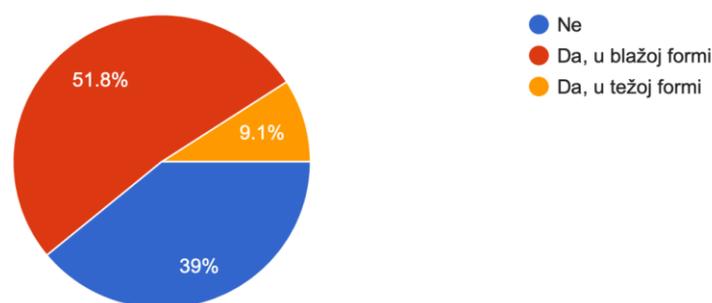
Question: Do you know what doctor specialist you can address if you suspect the job burnout syndrome?

- Yes
- No

On the other hand, more than a third (32.3%) of respondents do not know which specialist to address if they suspect a burnout. The majority (67.7%) know, but this number is still smaller than those who believe they experienced this syndrome once or several times.

Da li imate neka druga oboljenja (srčane tegobe, dijabetes, bolesti endokrinog sistema, neurološke tegobe, bolesti gastrointestinalnog trakta)?

164 responses



Question: Do you have any other illnesses (heart conditions, diabetes, endocrine disorders, neurological problems, gastrointestinal diseases)?

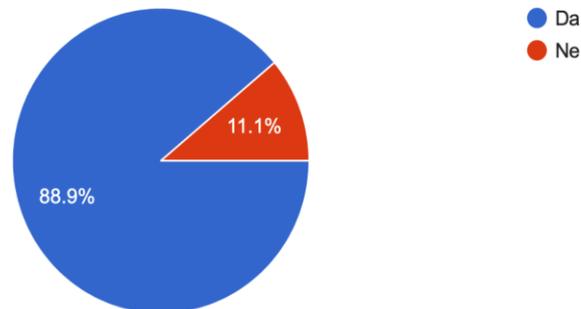
- No
- Yes, in milder form
- Yes, in more serious form

When it comes to physical diseases, more than a half (51.8%) of respondents have chronic illnesses which they consider mild, while 9.1% have more serious forms of physical diseases. Finally, at least on the sample of this research, 60.9% of male and female

journalists in Serbia have some kind of a physical chronic illness. The link to journalists' mental health is illustrated by the chart below.

Ukoliko ste na prethodno pitanje odgovorili potvrdno, da li smatrate da je Vašim tegobama doprineo stres?

108 responses



Question: If you answered positively to the previous question, do you believe your problems were triggered by stress?

- Yes
- No

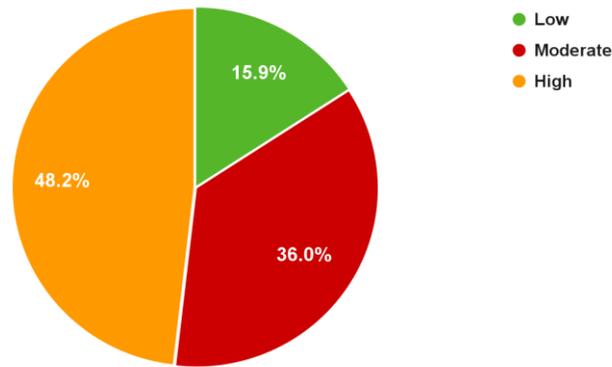
A vast majority – 88.9% of respondents believe their physical illnesses were significantly aided by stress. Again, this is much more than the number of those who consider journalism a highly stressful job, which further contributes to the conclusion about the normalisation of own difficulties related to the profession.

When it comes to the question about the job burnout syndrome and the question concerning physical health, it is worth noting that the most serious outcome of the burnout syndrome is a chronic physical disease.

The burnout syndrome may be the consequence of any problem covered by this research and no section of the survey should be observed as an isolated one.

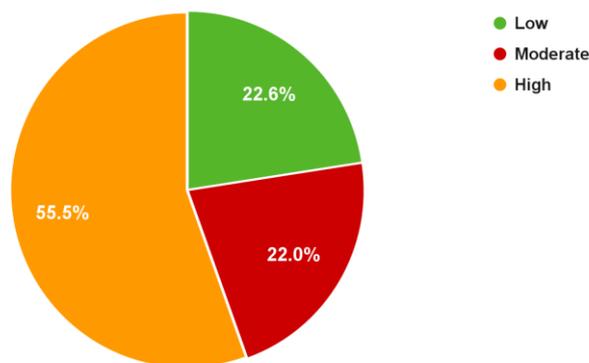
Finally, to objectivise the personal experience of professional burnout and analyse how it is manifested, the Maslach Burnout Inventory (MBI-GS), (Maslach, Jackson, & Leiter, 1996) is included in the survey. It estimates burnout symptoms based on three separate aspects – emotional exhaustion, degree of cynicism and the experience of professional efficacy.

Professional accomplishment



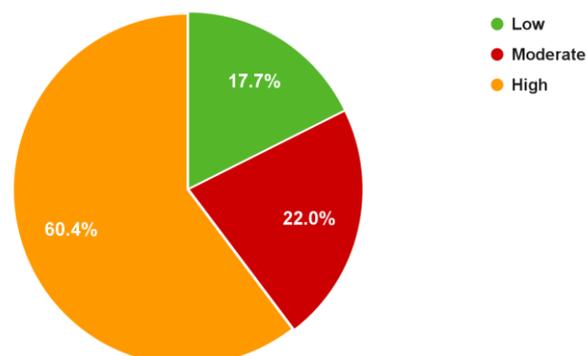
The experience of professional efficacy is of a moderate degree (average value on the efficacy scale equals 28.5), which means that journalists do not see themselves as sufficiently efficacious and successful. This is important in this highly stressful profession because satisfaction with professional success may compensate for other stressogenic aspects of the profession.

Emotional exhaustion



The degree of emotional exhaustion is highly pronounced (the average value on the scale equals 16.7). It represents the most frequent experience of job burnout and is manifested as chronic fatigue, sleeping problems, reduced capacity to experience pleasant emotions, and the lack of life enthusiasm.

Cynicism

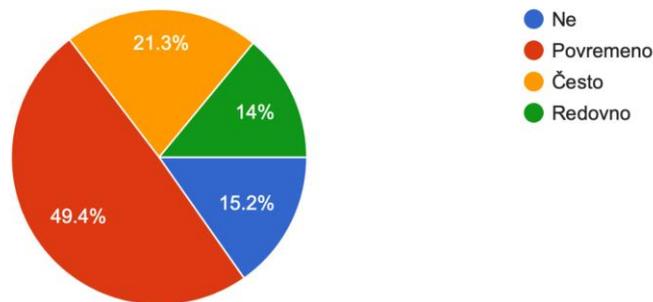


The degree of cynicism is also highly pronounced (average value on the scale equals 11.5) and is manifested as the frequent presence of negative feelings, frustration, resignation etc.

IV THE IMPACT OF TOPICS THAT JOURNALISTS IN SERBIA REPORT ABOUT ON THEIR MENTAL HEALTH

One component of the media profession is to report about traumatic topics. Female and male media professionals expose themselves, instead of other citizens, to such events or insider knowledge, in order to inform the public thereof. Of course, there are also journalists who do not deal with such topics, but they constitute a minority.

Da li u svom novinarskom radu pokrivate traumatične teme (nasilje, tragedije, siromaštvo i sl)?
164 responses



Question: Do you cover traumatic topics in your journalistic work (violence, tragedies, poverty etc.)?

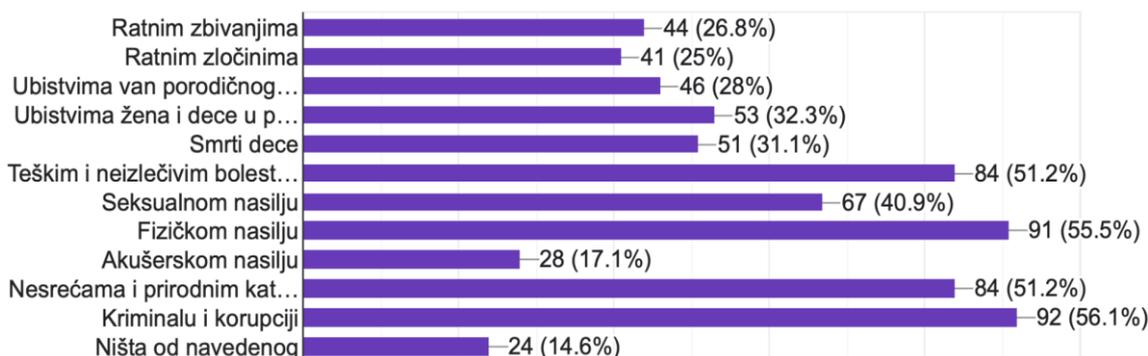
- *No*
- *Occasionally*
- *Often*
- *Regularly*

The topics that can be considered traumatic, i.e. to the extent of dealing with them can potentially have psychological consequences for female and male journalists are truly numerous and new ones appear every day.⁴ At the same time, journalists differ among themselves in terms of what topics they are more disturbed about. Of course, only few female and male professionals do not encounter anything in their careers that disturbs them, and it can be assumed that very few are surprised when having such experiences. Some, however, do get surprised about their own reaction.

⁴ The last such phenomenon are psychological consequences for journalists who deal with climate change: <https://dartcenter.org/resources/world-burning-how-can-climate-journalists-cope>.

Molimo Vas da zaokružite sve ono što se odnosi na Vas. Tokom karijere izveštavao/la sam o:

164 responses



Question: Please circle everything that concerns you. During my career, I reported about:

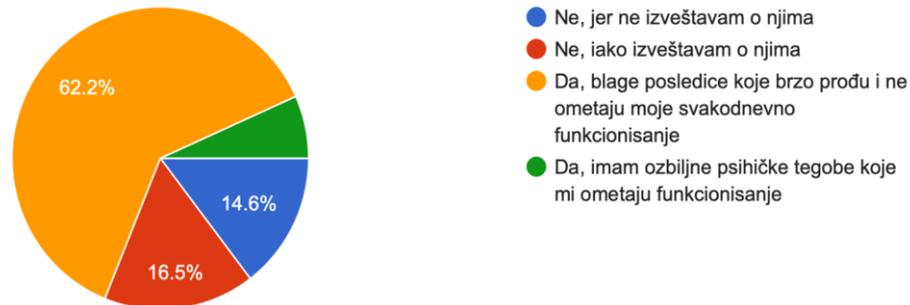
- War events
- War Crimes
- Murders outside family
- Murders of women and children in family....
- Deaths of children
- Severe and incurable diseases
- Sexual violence
- Physical violence
- Obstetric violence
- Accidents and natural disasters
- Crime and corruption
- None of the above

6.7% of respondents believe reporting about such topics leaves serious consequences for them – not a small amount. They did not assume to experience the events in such way as, otherwise, they would have probably chosen another profession. Observed in the context of the wider population, 6.7% are hundreds of female and male journalists, and it is clear that these persons must be helped to preclude even more serious or permanent consequences. Still, the question is posed whether the huge, absolute majority of over 62% of surveyed persons who feel short-term consequences, but without an impact on their “everyday functioning”, are aware that without adequate help and work, traumas can have accumulated consequences, more significant than those which they now feel and register.

These results are more than a sufficient indicator of the great need for increased knowledge and awareness-raising, first among researchers, and then among female and male journalists as well. Knowledge should be used to find ways to help a greater number of female and male journalists, and for preventive work with all participants in media production – from employers to reporters in the field.

Da li imate utisak da izveštavanje o ovim temama ostavlja neke posledice po Vaše mentalno zdravlje?

164 responses



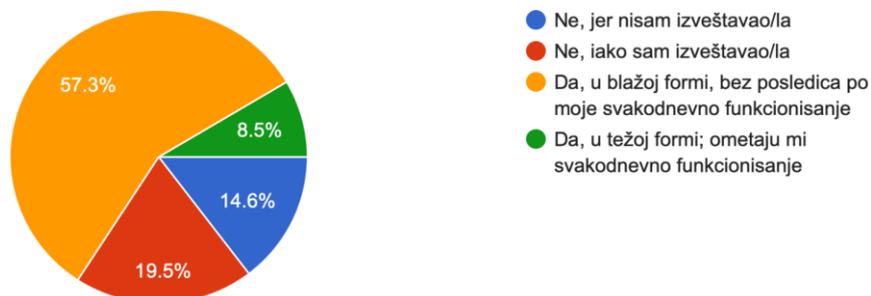
Question: Do you have the impression that reporting about these topics leaves some consequences for your mental health?

- *No, because I don't report about them*
- *No, although I report about them*
- *Yes, mild consequences which disappear quickly and do not disturb my everyday functioning*
- *Yes, I have serious psychological disorders which disturb my functioning*

The percentage of those with graver consequences increases to 8.5% when consequences are given names and when they are associated with the period immediately after facing sensitive content, events and traumatic facts. At the same time, when answering this question, a small percentage of those feeling mild consequences without an impact on their work and life is "borrowed" to those who believe they do not feel such consequences at all.

Da li Vam se dešavalo da nakon ovakvog izveštavanja imate tegobe poput napetosti, nesanice, nervoze, izbegavanja ljudi, straha, noćnih mora?

164 responses



Question: Has it happened to you that after such reporting you have problems such as anxiety, insomnia, nervousness, avoidance of people, fear, nightmares?

- *No, because I wasn't reporting*
- *No, although I was reporting*
- *Yes, in milder form, without consequences for my everyday functioning*
- *Yes, in graver form; they disturb my everyday functioning*

Experienced journalists know that in most newsrooms, particularly those with longer tradition, there is a sort of a cult of mental strength of journalists, a type of invulnerability, which female and male professionals expect from themselves and those around them. This is not illogical – whoever takes up journalism knows it is highly probable he/she will very often be in emotionally exceptional situations. In such circumstances, faith in one's emotional strength is practically taken for granted when it comes to journalists. Such spirit, however, results in ignoring, neglect and constant postponement of the need for professional or at least collegial help, and even a negative attitude towards it. This is a prejudice that can influence the mental health and career of female and male journalists.

Da li je izveštavanje o osetljivim političkim temama uticalo na Vaše mentalno zdravlje?

164 responses



Question: Has reporting about sensitive political topics influenced your mental health?

- *No, I wasn't reporting about them*
- *No, although I was reporting about them*
- *Yes, in mild form which does not disturb my everyday functioning*
- *Yes, in graver form which disturbed my functioning*

The number of respondents who register serious consequences continues to increase when they are asked about the emotional consequences of journalistic work in the field of politics. They responded that politics in Serbia includes aspects of violence, vulgarity, aggression and inhumanity they did not believe would occur when entering the journalistic profession. At the same time, respondents also considered that society is so politicized that politics wields a large influence over journalistic work, even those aspects that it should not influence. Therefore, the irritation with politics and political topics probably has dimensions that are larger than would be expected in different circumstances.

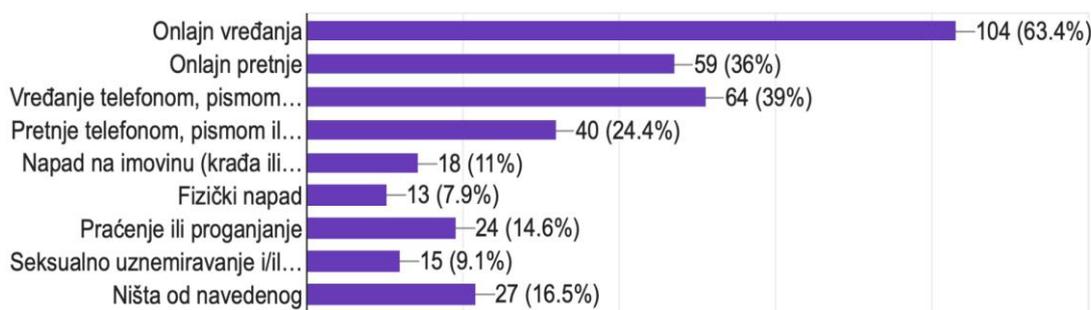
V PRESSURES ON JOURNALISTS IN SERBIA (ADDRESS FOR HELP AND SUPPORT)

Threats, insults, harassments and physical attacks on female and male journalists are a constant factor in this line of work. However, there are mechanisms to alleviate such pressures, notably through joint action and solidarity by media and journalists associations which dampened the impact of such acts on the profession. Threats, pressures and attacks have different consequences on female and male journalists, with varying degrees of feeling protected to do their work free from threats, pressures and attacks.

In a strongly polarised society such as Serbia's, divisions in the media are very strong as well – there are independent, pro-government, tabloid, professionally responsible, “patriotic” and “traitor” media. The past years have seen an increase in the number of media outlets, yet an impression of decline in the number of journalists, at least those who are responsible, professional and independent. They are more exposed to pressures, threats and attacks. As the media community is shrinking, attacks are experienced even more dramatically and pose an even stronger threat. Less strong are the media that protect journalists, and solidarity is thus less successful. Threats, pressures and attacks are, due to the available mechanisms, well-registered in various databases, both by journalist associations such as UNS and NUNS, as well as by the prosecution, yet all of them use different parameters for their statistics. Some journalists and the media are the target of threats and attacks more frequently than others. Consequences for mental health are evident. Victims often undergo secondary victimisation⁵ through criminal proceedings. In some cases, the impossibility to identify the perpetrator (notably in the online sphere) creates a permanent feeling of fear and insecurity, both for the journalist and their family.

Da li ste tokom rada doživeli nešto od navedenog? (moguće je izabrati više odgovora)

164 responses



Question: Have you experienced something of the below stated during your work? (several answers are possible)

- Online insults
- Online threats
- Insults by telephone, letter

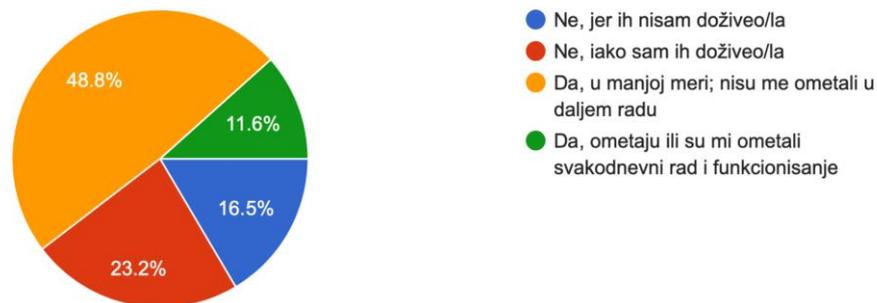
⁵ According to criminal procedure in Serbia, victims of a crime who report it to the police, need to face their perpetrator in an interview, or while being a witness in court, leading to secondary victimisation and trauma.

- *Threats by telephone, letter or...*
- *Attack on property (theft or)....*
- *Physical attack*
- *Following or stalking*
- *Sexual harassment and/or*
- *None of the above*

The chart above shows a wide array of attacks on journalists reported by the respondents, in a significant percentage. The proliferation of social networks, online communications and journalism switching to the digital sphere have created unexpected possibilities for, most often, anonymous threats, insults, harassment and verbal abuse. With an increase in the number of cases⁶, this kind of communication is becoming even more brutalised, and commonplace insults can have exceptionally disturbing effects. Each year, the Independent Journalists' Association of Serbia records over 100 different cases of threats and pressures. These are reported cases only. It is hard to imagine how many remain invisible for a variety of reasons.

Da li su se navedeni događaji odrazili na Vaše psihičko blagostanje?

164 responses



Question: Have the above events impacted your mental well-being?

- *No, because I didn't experience them*
- *No, although I experienced them*
- *Yes, to a lesser degree; they did not disturb me in further work*
- *Yes, they disturb or disturbed my everyday work and functioning*

More than 60% of respondents believe that threats, insults and attacks have impacted their physical well-being. If we add accumulation over long periods of time, the consequences are almost certainly very dramatic. Getting used to such life, without professional aid, leads to various illnesses, not only those concerning mental health. The chart below shows whether and how journalists addressed someone for help and support.

⁶ According to the prosecution's data from 59 in 2020 to 87 and 81 in 2021 and 2022

Da li ste se u vezi sa problemima na poslu (stres, pritisci, mobing, traumatične teme o kojima pišete i sl) obratili nekome u svojoj redakciji?

164 responses



**4 answers outside of the offered ones – the combination of those stated, “because I felt ill at ease” etc.*

Question: Have you addressed anyone in your newsroom in relation to problems at work (stress, pressures, mobbing, traumatic topics that you write about etc.)?

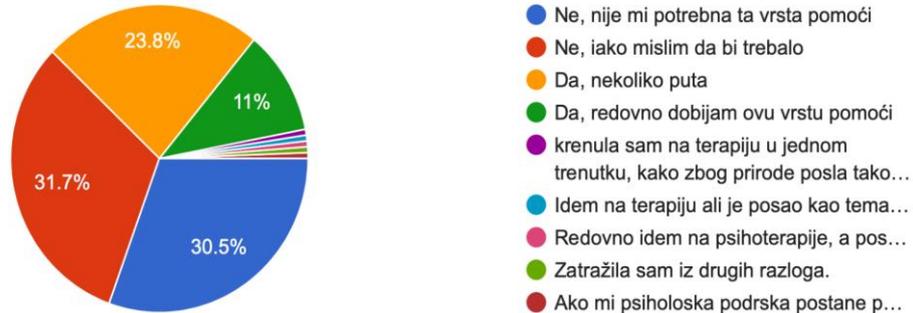
- *No, because I wasn't reporting*
- *No, because I don't believe it is necessary*
- *No, because I think they wouldn't understand me*
- *Yes, and I wasn't understood...*
- *Yes, I was understood/supported*
- *LoL*
- *Three journalists (colleagues at then...)*
- *Mobbing was part of the company's policy after...*

More than 50% of respondents said they did not use professional help or support of their superiors. This is an exceptionally high percentage and there is a lot of room for action in providing professional help to journalists.

Journalists feel unprotected and hopeless due to impunity or long, often unsuccessful and traumatic court proceedings. It is necessary to establish a reliable mechanism to create the feeling of being protected among journalists, through a system of strong legal and psychological assistance and with strong awareness-raising and advocacy activities.

Da li ste ikada zbog prirode posla koji radite zatražili pomoć psihologa ili psihijatra?

164 responses



**5 answers outside of the offered ones – they certainly go to therapy, but not only because of work; when work is the reason to seek help, one should resign, and similar.*

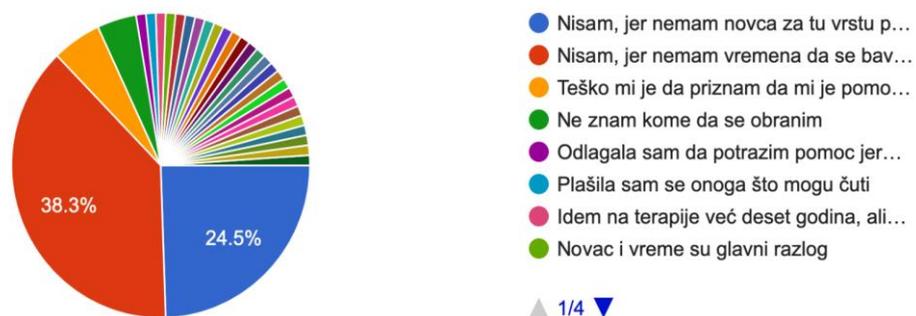
Question: Have you ever sought the help of a psychologist or psychiatrist due to the nature of your job?

- No, I don't need such type of help
- No, although I think I should
- Yes, several times
- Yes, I'm regularly receiving this type of help
- I started therapy at one point, both due to the nature of my work and...
- I go to therapy, but job as the topic...
- I regularly go to psychotherapy, and...
- I sought it for other reasons
- If psychological support becomes...

This result also suggests that there is awareness about the need for professional help, but that it was not used or was used only sporadically. As many as 37.1% of female and male journalists said they never sought the help of a psychologist or psychiatrist although they believe they needed such type of help.

Ukoliko mislite da Vam je trebala ta vrsta pomoći, a niste je potražili, koji je bio glavni razlog za to?

94 responses



** I find it hard to admit I need it – 5.3%, I don't know who to address – 4.3%. 25 answers outside of the offered ones – nine sought help, ten did not have the need, and the rest of them chose a combination of the offered items, or there is a stigma within the newsroom in relation to that.*

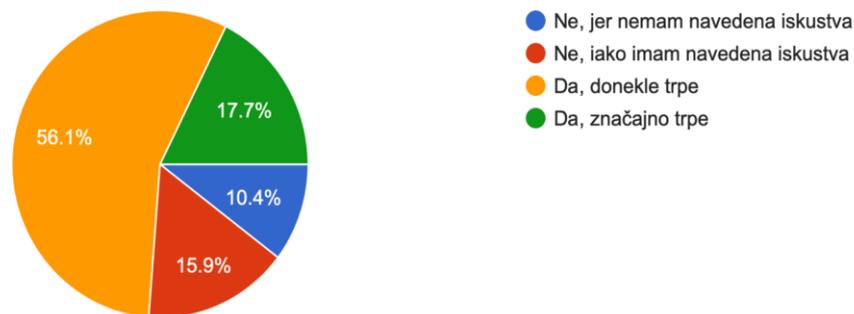
Question: If you believe you needed such type of help and you didn't seek it, what was the main reason for that?

- *No, because I don't have money for that kind of help*
- *No, because I don't have time to deal with it*
- *It's hard for me to admit that help is....*
- *I don't know who to address*
- *I delayed seeking help because...*
- *I was afraid of what I could hear*
- *I have been going to therapy for ten years already, but...*
- *Money and time are the main reason*

There is an evident very high percentage of awareness about the need for professional help, but it is not practiced for different reasons. It is obviously necessary to raise awareness, as well as to create conditions to ensure that help is easily accessible and, if possible, free of charge. As many as 62.8% of respondents stated they needed help, but they did not seek it as they lack money or time to deal with it.

Da li mislite da zbog pritiska na poslu Vaša porodica ili okolina trpe neke posledice (zabrinuti su za Vas, nemate dovoljno vremena za njih, poremećena je komunikacija i sl)

164 responses



Question: Do you think that due to pressures at work your family or environment are suffering some consequences (they are worried about you, you do not have enough time for them, communication is disrupted etc.)?

- *No, because I don't have such experience*
- *No, although I have such experience*
- *Yes, they suffer to a degree*
- *Yes, they suffer a lot*

In this answer as well, over 70% of respondents state that the family suffers. This is one more form of damage inflicted by threats, insults, attacks, with an additional factor that the demands on the profession are ever-increasing. Based on the most frequent conversations in the SOS 24/7 hotline for journalists where they can report threats and attacks, created thanks to the Permanent Working Group for the Safety of Journalists, "journalists are the most vulnerable" when it comes to a healthy, balanced family life which often "collapses" due to the exigencies of the profession. It is therefore very

important to pay attention to that aspect as well, and bear in mind that family members of journalists may require support.

Da li Vaša porodica ili prijatelji imaju razumevanja za Vaš posao i pružaju Vam podršku?

164 responses



**9 answers outside of the offered ones – combination (they both provide support and advise them to change their job), they do not talk with the family, but with friends etc.*

Question: Do your family or friends have understanding for your job and offer you support?

- *Yes, they understand and support me*
- *No, they don't understand me and criticise me*
- *They advise me to change my job*
- *They know I deal with these topics....*
- *They understand and support me, but also advise me to....*
- *They understand and support me, but I think....*
- *They understand me because....*
- *I don't talk about it with my family and...*

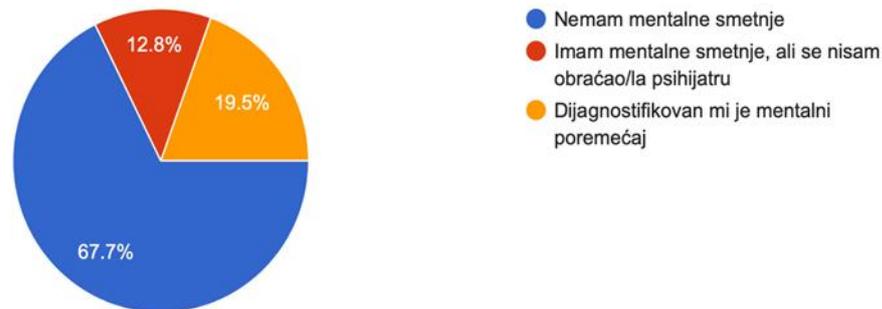
An expectedly high percentage of family support was registered, as this is the most direct support, particularly in more dangerous situations. There are often several problems that female and male journalists face – these are not only threats, but also low wages or precarious working conditions, among others. The combination of all these elements often prompt female and male journalists to leave the profession or to practice it in a Public Relations/Marketing agency or press services, where the professional standards of the journalistic profession partly loses its substance.

VI MENTAL HEALTH OF JOURNALISTS

Due to a number of specific professional stressors that journalists are often exposed to, it was important to examine how these affect their physical and mental health.

Da li Vam je dijagnostifikovan neki mentalni poremećaj?

164 responses



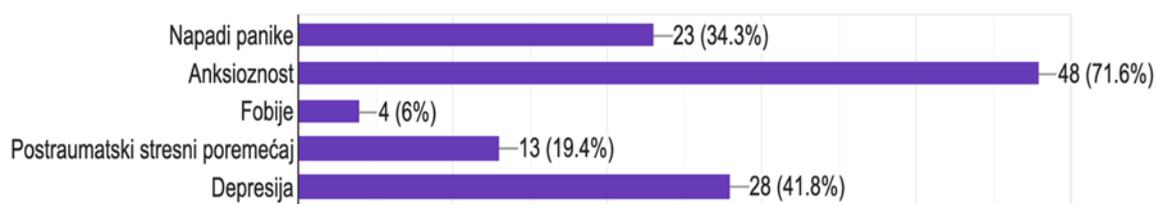
Question: Have you been diagnosed a mental disorder?

- *I have no mental disturbances*
- *I have mental disturbances, but I haven't addressed the psychiatrist*
- *I was diagnosed a mental disorder*

Although the majority of surveyed journalists do not report having mental disturbances (67.7%), almost a fifth of them have a diagnosed mental disorder (19.5%). An additional 12.8% have a subjective feeling of experiencing disturbances and not seek help. In total, this makes up a third of the surveyed sample (32.3%), which more than twice surpasses the percentage of mental disturbances in the population.⁷

Ukoliko jeste, molimo Vas da zaokružite koji: (moguće je zaokružiti više odgovora)

67 responses



Question: If yes, please circle which (several answers are possible)

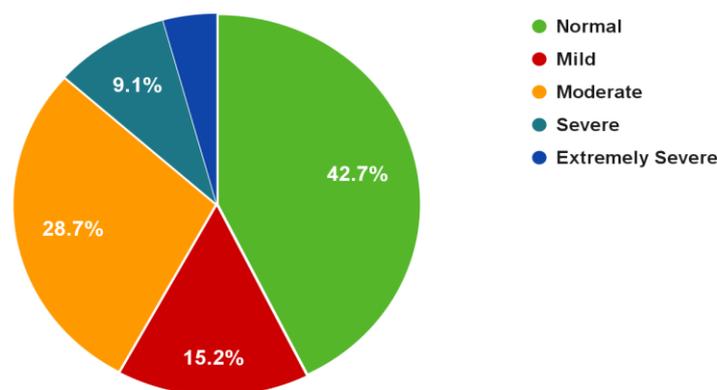
- *Panic attacks*
- *Anxiety*
- *Phobias*
- *Post-traumatic stress disorder*
- *Depression*

⁷ According to the latest data from epidemiological studies (Marić et al., 2022), mental disturbances in the general population equal around 15%.

Of diagnosed mental disturbances, anxieties are the most frequent – as much as 71.6%, followed by depression (41.8%) and panic attacks (34.3% of the total number of surveyed persons). Almost a fifth of the respondents (19.4%) suffer from post-traumatic stress disorder, which directly indicates the specific risks of the profession, as it exceeds almost 20 times the prevalence of this disorder among the population, which equals around 1%.

It should be borne in mind that mental health cannot be equalised with the absence of a mental disorder. The presence of different mental disorders disrupts the quality of life and aggravates the achievement of personal and professional capacities, although they do not reach the scope of a mental disorder. To estimate the most frequent disturbances that accompany everyday life, the DASS-21⁸ scale was used, measuring the degree of depression, anxiety and stress.

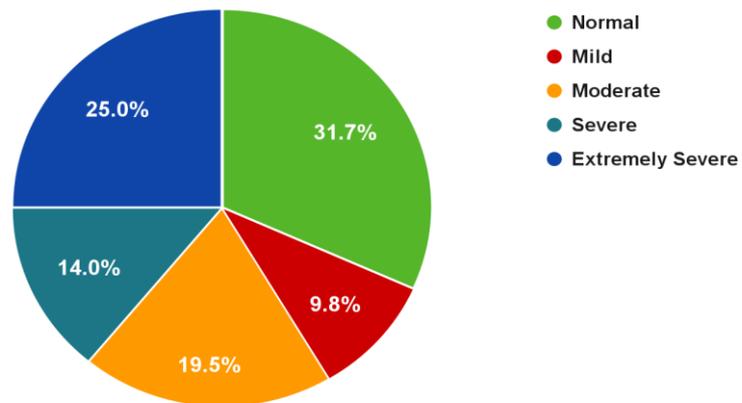
Depression



The results have shown that the average depression score in the journalists' sample corresponds to mild depression (AS=11.5), while anxiety (AS=12.8) and stress (AS=20.4) are moderate. However, when it comes to the prevalence of high scores, moderate depression is experienced by as many as by a third of journalists (28.7%). Meanwhile, as many as 13.4% of them have severe and extremely severe forms of depression of clinical importance.

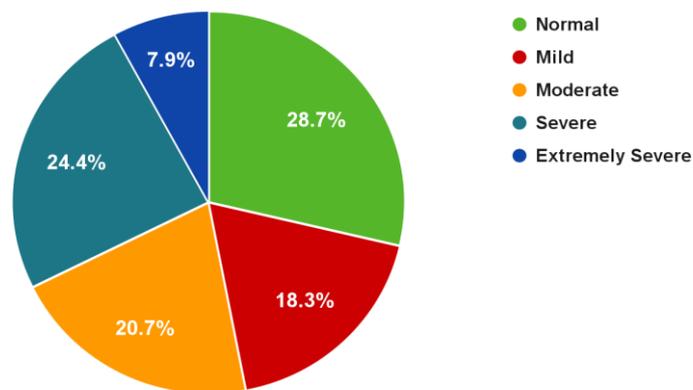
Anxiety

⁸ (DASS-21) is a set of three self-report scales designed to measure the emotional states of depression, anxiety and stress.



Close to 40% of respondents occasionally experience very high anxiety and almost a third do not feel such disturbances (31.7%).

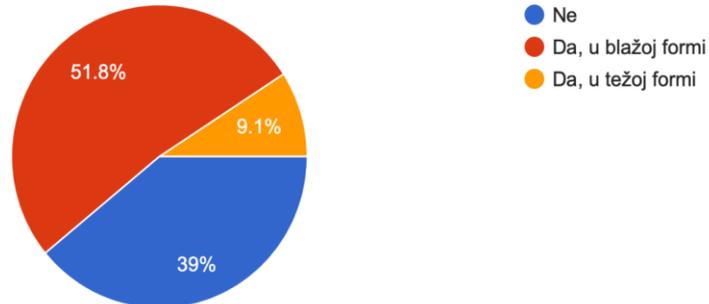
Stress



Finally, a third of respondents experience a very high level of stress (32.3%) manifested as a feeling of tension, irritability, sleep problems, and similar. More than a fourth (28.7%) do not feel stress symptoms, while the majority experience a mild or moderate level of stress (39.0%).

Da li imate neka druga oboljenja (srčane tegobe, dijabetes, bolesti endokrinog sistema, neurološke tegobe, bolesti gastrointestinalnog trakta)?

164 responses



Question: Do you have any other illness (heart problems, diabetes, endocrinal diseases, neurological disturbances, gastrointestinal diseases)?

- *No*
- *Yes, in milder form*
- *Yes, in more severe form*

In addition to mental disturbances, stress directly jeopardises physical health. The situation is even worse in terms somatic disturbances as more than half of respondents experience impaired health, of which 51.8% in milder form, and 9.1% in a more severe, somatic form.

As a reminder, almost all surveyed male and female journalists (88.9%) believe that their psycho-physical health was impaired primarily by stress related to the nature of the profession they pursue.

VII CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Conclusions and recommendations concerning the socio-demographic characteristics of surveyed female and male journalists:

- With women making up a significant majority (around 60 %), around four fifths of female and male journalists in this sample live in a form of a family community.
- A fourth of female and male journalists do not have an educational university background, and a third have a specialist background – they graduated from faculties of journalism. Over four fifths of the sample gained further education through special training courses.
- The sample contains a smaller percentage of newly arrived journalists in the profession, while there is – unexpectedly – a great percentage of those who are in the seventh decade of their lives.
- A large percentage of female and male editors in the sample (a third), work for web portals, which was by far the most prevalent type of the media where respondents work, with the vast majority of the sample working in the capital.
- Further research needs to be conducted on the relatively small sample of respondents who stated having started work in this profession recently or between six to ten years. This result merits deeper analysis as it concerns the future of the profession, as well as its reputation among the young who choose the direction of their careers.
- Further research into the specific position and needs of women and female journalists, including the impact of the profession on their mental and physical health, is required, notably what specific mental health issues arise from their gender identity, particular challenges they are exposed to, and the ways to help them.
- Quality research into the experience of stress and its consequences by age groups may provide insight into the possibilities to exchange experiences and facilitate mutual help of those experienced and less experienced persons within the profession, but would also contribute to the understanding of needs for the types of help or prevention tailored for age groups.
- **Informal forms of education and training can often fill in the voids in formal education, including training courses about stress and the need for help in facing stress and its consequences. After collecting facts and experiences, the development of informal educational programmes on this topic would probably introduce good ways to reduce the negative influence of stress in**

the profession on the health of female and male journalists, including by raising awareness on coping and support mechanisms.

Conclusions related to professional stress, mobbing and burnout from the viewpoint of female and male journalists:

- Journalists often do not recognise that individual stressors they are exposed to are directly related to the profession they pursue, and not to private or general social circumstances.
- A much greater number of journalists claim that journalism is a stressful job compared to the number of those who state they are exposed to stress that is moderate to high.
- Although they do not always relate stress to work, most journalists assess the general level of stress in life as high.
- The survey results have shown that 60.9% of female and male journalists in Serbia have some kind of a physical chronic illness. A vast majority of them – 88.9% - believe that stress significantly contributed to their physical illnesses.
- **Almost a half of surveyed female and male journalists – 47% – feel psychological consequences of mobbing.** Mobbing, i.e. abuse at work and descriptions of concrete situations that range from sexual to verbal and physical abuse, are by far more frequent in answers “Other” than in the part of the survey where offered answers were available (“bad relations in the team” and “pressures and threats within the newsroom”).
- The traumatic topics that journalists cover are high on the list of stressors and include almost all areas of society: politics, crime, healthcare, gender-based violence, war reporting.
- **A total of 83.1% of the surveyed journalists experienced burnout at their work** (14% consider they experienced it once, and most of them – 67.1% – more than once). Despite this, there is the impression that the burnout syndrome among female and male media professionals often remains unrecognised, underestimated or there is serious misconception about it among the superiors, as well as journalists themselves
- No problem covered by this part of research can be observed in isolation or as a consequence of one factor only. Both stress and burnout syndrome are the consequence of several joint circumstances: being underpaid, bad working conditions, external pressures and threats, financial insecurity, reporting about traumatic events.

- **Media outlets should consider development of internal tools for stress recognition and increasing resilience among journalists (either as tools for self-help or direct help).**
- **Possibilities for organization of education of journalists in the field of stress management and recognising the symptoms of stress and burnout should be considered.**
- Familiarising the middle management and editors with the Labour Law and the Law on the Prevention of Harassment at the Workplace.
- Education of newsrooms and media outlets at all levels about the burnout syndrome, with a focus on financial losses from employees' burnout (so that the management understand that prevention is important).
- Special work with journalists who cover traumatic events, tailored to the nature of events they cover.
- **Connecting journalists' associations with organisations that deal with the mental health of journalists at the global level (e.g. Dart Center).**
- Development of "tip sheets" upon the model of this one: <https://docs.google.com/document/d/1kC1JYEyXXd3P1TWdeBiGKN0AS43HaNBUfJoazOSZ0n4/edit> and their distribution to associations, newsrooms and journalists.
- An integrated approach to journalists' mental health as the chances that problems concerning mental health arise from a single source (e.g. threats and attacks) are minimal. There is greater probability that the causes are multiple (e.g. threats and attacks associated with being underpaid and reporting about traumatic events).
- The issue of transfer of the consequences of stress from female and male media professionals to their families can be a separate area of research into the mental health of journalists. This, by itself, is a good reason to seek additional knowledge about the influence of stress at the media-related work on the families of male and female media workers.

Conclusions related to the influence of topics that journalists report about on their mental health:

- A vast majority of female and male journalists report about sensitive, traumatic topics. **As many as 69.9% of surveyed female and male journalists feel the consequences of reporting about traumatic events** (6.7% of the sample feel

serious and long-term psychological consequences that hamper their normal functioning, while 62.2% feel mild and short-term consequences).

- When the types of stress consequences are made more precise (tension, insomnia, avoiding people...), an even greater percentage of the sample (8.5%) sees these consequences as severe and long-term. When the question asked referred only to reporting about political topics, the group of the most vulnerable ones in the sample increased to 10.4%.
- **A large number of female and male colleagues need support mechanisms to face the consequences of stress directly related to the profession they are in. The development of such mechanisms and placing them at disposal to female and male journalists - is urgent. The number of persons who need help could be measured by hundreds while the number of those who will need such help, if they are not handled in time, is even greater.**
- There is an obvious need for even more comprehensive and precise knowledge about the consequences of stress for the mental health of female and male journalists. New, quantitative and qualitative research must be carried out.
- It is exceptionally important to launch, as soon as possible, awareness raising about the impact of stress on female and male journalists, and about the need to prevent severe and long-term consequences.
- The development of stress reduction policy among the media professions from the individual to the wider media and journalists associations and through the governmental level would significantly increase the efficiency of the work by female and male media professionals, and ensure better information for the wider public.

Conclusions and recommendations concerning pressures on journalists:

- **More than 60% of surveyed female and male journalists believe that threats, insults and attacks had a negative impact on their mental well-being.** Despite such a high percentage, more than 50% have not used professional aid or support of the superiors.
- **As many as 62.8% of respondents stated they needed help of a psychologist or psychiatrist, but they did not seek it because they do not have money or time to deal with it.**
- Pressures, harassment and attacks on journalists are likely to be a permanent phenomenon in this profession, maybe even grow due to the increasing shift to online threats, harassment and attacks. **A large part of these actions is not covered by the Criminal Code and it is necessary to renew work on amending**

the Criminal Code so that actions that jeopardise the mental state of journalists can be covered by legal provisions.

- **The help of psychologists and psychiatrists must be made easily accessible to female and male journalists. It is possible to create a network of expert persons that would be available for talks, in urgent situations and for therapy cycles. The Hemofarm Foundation has launched a lifeline SOS hotline and a network of professional to help against depression.⁹ It would be good to link abovementioned ANEM's 24-7 SOS hotline for reporting threats with this SOS network of psychologists and psychiatrists so that female and male journalists receive immediate access to help and more permanent support.**
- Operators now answering the journalists' SOS telephone hotline could undergo training to recognise the need for this type of support and to offer it.
- **It is also necessary to organise training for HR departments in media houses and the management cadre so that they recognise problems and have response mechanisms, protocols and support resources available.**
- **One idea could be to create a network of shelter homes for female and male journalists in the region who experience threats and attacks, so that they have the possibility to withdraw from the public eye for a particular period. This could also create a space for a reset in cases where the mental or physical health is concerned.**
- Raising awareness about the health of all journalists is very important. Enabling health check-ups and screenings would also contribute to a preventive response to different symptoms. Journalists often die too early, and one of the reasons is a sort of health negligence.

Conclusions and recommendations concerning journalists' mental health

- Data unambiguously confirms the highly stressogenic nature of journalism, which clearly reflects on the mental and physical health of journalists, and significantly exceeds the degree of prevalence of these disorders among the population.
- **As 32.3% of surveyed female and male journalists have a diagnosed mental disorder or experience mental disturbances, concrete measures should be undertaken within the shortest time possible. This is of key importance, notably as the results of this research show that the prevalence of mental disturbance of journalists is more than double that of the general population.**

⁹ Please see: <https://www.fondacijahemofarm.org.rs/srb/blog/537/kako-se-jedna-fondacija-u-istočnoj-evropi-bavi-mentalnim-zdravljem>

- **Almost a fifth of surveyed female and male journalists (19.4%) suffer from post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), which points to the specific risks of this profession. This percentage exceeds almost 20 times the distribution of this disturbance among the general population which equals around 1%.**
- **In addition to recommendations concerning working conditions and existential security of journalism, a particular focus should be placed on preserving and improving health through: (a) regular, annual health check-ups ensured by the employer; (b) available psychological support services through preventive programmes and individual psycho-social help; (c) organisation of educational workshops aimed at early recognition of mental disturbances and strengthening the destigmatisation, which is a frequent reason for seeking help in time; (d) promoting a healthy lifestyle, organising recreational activities, ensuring conditions for relaxation etc.**