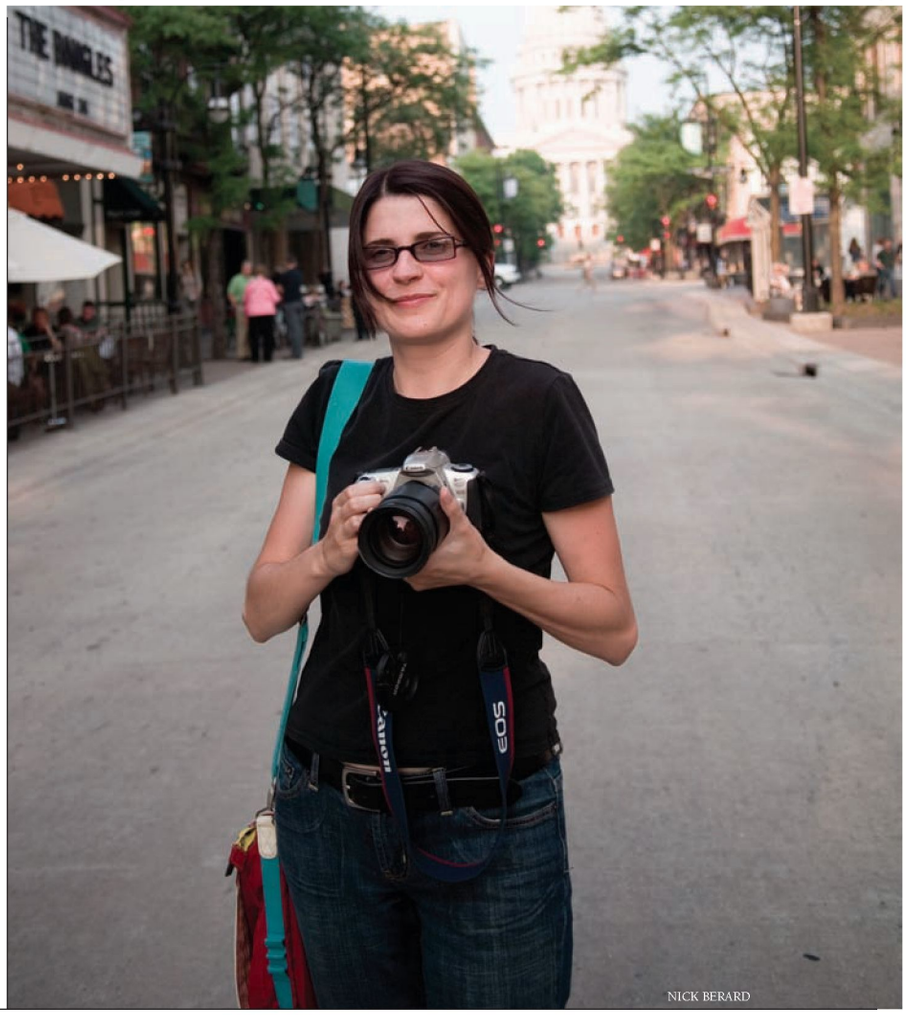
Breaking news

Early-career psychologist Dr. Monika Gutkowska helps journalists recognize the stress of covering traumatic stories.



NICK BERARD

BY ERIKA PACKARD
gradPSYCH staff

Amateur photographer Monika Gutkowska, PsyD, needed a break from researching dissertation topics. She headed to her local bookstore to page through photography books, an activity she'd always found relaxing and inspirational. The then fourth-year clinical psychology student picked up "Shooting Under Fire," (Artisan, 2002), a collection of images taken by war photographers, and she recoiled in horror at photographs of battle and victims of murder, torture and starvation.

"I had an emotionally intense reaction to some of the photos and stories," she says.

Her strong reaction made her wonder how the photographers who took the images felt.

"If I feel the horror depicted in those photographs, what is the impact of covering traumatic events on the photojournalists?" she says.

Thus, Gutkowska's dissertation topic was born. Through interviewing journalists who had witnessed traumatic events on the job, Gutkowska found that, unlike other first responders such as firefighters and police, journalists receive little or no training in how to deal with the emotional toll of their work. Yet previous research reported that 95 percent of journalists covered violence in the year 2000. Gutkowska, who's now a postdoc at the University of Wisconsin–Madison's counseling center, found that all six of the journalists she interviewed for her dissertation research reported symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), yet not one said they had sought counseling.

"There is a culture among journalists that if you can't hack it, get out of the game," she says.

Gutkowska aims to change that. Her findings prompted her to design a program to teach journalists to recognize the effects of covering distressing events, improve their coping strategies and interact with trauma survivors.

JOURNALISM'S PRICE

Gutkowska's passion for photography dates to her teen years, when she made black and white images in her high school's darkroom. Gutkowska had recently arrived from Poland and didn't speak much English, so she connected with her peers through photography.

"I was interested in people and their faces, their stories and emotional expressions as they were telling me things about themselves," she says. Gutkowska's fascination with the human condition made psychology a natural career path, and in 2000, she enrolled at the Chicago School of Professional Psychology. While completing her practicum at the Marjorie Kovler Center of Heartland Alliance, a Chicago-based center that offers services to torture survivors, she narrowed her focus to trauma and journalism.

"Unfortunately, given the state

of the world today, you do have lots of journalists covering significant traumas," says Marie Ciavarella, PsyD, Gutkowska's dissertation chair and associate professor at the Chicago School of Professional Psychology. "They are a group that largely goes ignored because we assume this is their job and they are supposed to be able to do it and handle the consequences."

Gutkowska recruited participants for her dissertation study through Chicago-based newspapers, the National Photographers Database and word-of-mouth. Three photojournalists and three reporters agreed to be interviewed. Their journalism experience ranged from 11 to 30 years, and each one had spent at least one year covering traumatic events such as conflicts in Central America and Afghanistan, car accidents, urban gangs, police abuse and the effects of poverty. One journalist was held at gunpoint and all were exposed to threats to their safety while on the job.

Gutkowska analyzed the interviews for common themes, and she found that although the journalists were among the first responders to a violent or traumatic scene, they lacked training in how to handle the emotional effects and suffered as a result.

"They talked a lot about feeling sad, crying out of the blue, feeling misunderstood by others when they come back from the assignment," she says.

In the weeks after an assignment, the journalists reported they had experienced nightmares, flashbacks and startle reactions. Most mentioned survivor guilt when their journalist colleagues died or were injured, or when they were able to leave the scenes of trauma before those who were directly affected.

Gutkowska's findings add to the growing body of literature on the topic. Previous research published in *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry* (Vol. 72, No. 4, pages 505–513) found that among war journalists, the prevalence of PTSD was 28.6 percent. Twenty-one percent of war journalists also developed depression, and 14 percent abused alcohol and drugs. These numbers exceed those for other first responders, according to a study by Caroline Pyevich, PhD, who reported that only 4.3 percent of non-war journalists developed work-related PTSD.

The issue is complicated by the prevailingly "macho" culture among journalists who routinely work in dangerous or harrowing situations. Gutkowska's participants said they often felt they had to quash their emotions to do their jobs.

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>
> Monika Gutkowska
> University of Wisconsin–Madison

"It's not OK to admit to those feelings, because you are going to be perceived as weak and no one will give you another assignment," she says.

Gutkowska also analyzed the journalists' coping strategies, which didn't include counseling. "Some journalists are afraid of therapy," adds Mary Fabri, PsyD, Gutkowska's practicum supervisor and senior director of the Marjorie Kovler Center of Heartland Alliance. "A lot of times psychology is thought of as a field of pathology, that there is something wrong with you, rather than a field of health."

Instead of seeking counseling, Gutkowska found that journalists sometimes turned to alcohol or drugs to dull the pain of their assignments. However, journalists with the healthiest coping strategies tended to view their jobs as a way to effect global change, says Gutkowska. "Their ability to find meaning in their work was one of the powerful resiliency factors that buffer the negative effects."

A WAY TO COPE

If journalists understand that it's normal to feel distressed after witnessing traumatic scenes, it may help combat the stigma of seeking help, says Gutkowska. And if they can develop healthy coping skills, it may even ameliorate the effects of covering disasters and war, she adds. So, as part of her dissertation, Gutkowska developed a training curriculum that she hopes will someday be taught in journalism schools.

The four-day seminar-style program begins with a slideshow of photographs depicting stressful events such as combat, car accidents and riots. Lecturers cover the physical and mental effects of stress and symptoms of PTSD, and discuss self-care and coping skills, such as guided relaxation.

Students also learn how to interact with trauma survivors on the job by role-playing vignettes in which professional actors portray survivors of traumas such as Hurricane Katrina, a plane crash and torture. Students practice interviewing them and learn, for example, how to recognize when interviews induce unhealthy flashbacks in the survivor.

Fabri believes Gutkowska's innovative curriculum could go a long way toward teaching young journalists that their emotional reactions to trauma are normal responses to abnormal events—education that is much needed.

"There aren't formal ways within the journalism community to really address these issues," adds Ciavarella.

Gutkowska hopes to expand her work in this area: Beyond getting her curriculum to journalism schools, she hopes to collaborate with the Dart Center for Journalism & Trauma to organize training seminars for seasoned journalists. It won't be an easy task, says Fabri, but as more journalism professionals recognize how their jobs may adversely affect their health, it's more likely the culture will change.

"I think Monika could really blaze a new trail for psychology and journalism," she adds.