

## HUMAN RIGHTS WATCH GUIDELINES

# DISTURBING MATERIAL and SECONDARY TRAUMA

**Many Human Rights Watch staff members will at times work with disturbing material, such as graphic photos, videos and text. Exposure to such material can have a serious impact on a person's well-being, and in some cases cause secondary trauma. Symptoms can include sleeplessness, nightmares, irritability, and anxiety.**

These reactions are normal and can be addressed through awareness, prevention and care. Human Rights Watch is committed to minimizing the risk of trauma that staff may experience from work and to providing support, no matter what job a person performs or where they are based.

Human Rights Watch expects managers to take feasible steps to minimize staff's exposure to disturbing material and to mitigate against its effects. At the same time, staff can take steps to bolster their resilience and to support colleagues. Towards these aims, below are some practical tips and organizational guidelines for managers and staff to minimize the risks of secondary trauma and to promote mental health.

## GUIDELINES FOR MANAGERS

- **Discuss with your team the normal responses to secondary trauma and steps staff can take to minimize them (see below).**
- **Share your experiences with disturbing material and efforts at self-care.**
- **Address mental health and self-care at team meetings and individual check-ins.**
- **Inform your team about HRW resources to deal with mental health (see below).**
- **Consult regularly with team members who work with disturbing material. Help them devise strategies to pace their intake and to get support.**
- **When possible, share work with disturbing material across staff to limit any one person's intake.**
- **Have clear guidelines on how disturbing material is processed, stored and distributed.**
- **Encourage peer support among team members.**

## GUIDELINES FOR STAFF

### Appreciate the risk

Think of disturbing photos, video and text as radiation – a harmful substance with a dose-dependent effect. In small amounts the effects can be innocuous but cumulative exposure can cause harm.

### Limit repeated and unneeded exposure

The frequency of viewing or reading disturbing material can be more harmful than overall volume, so pace your intake. Minimize exposure to distressing material that is not essential to your work.

### Take breaks

Stand up, stretch and step outside. Work near a window if you can. Avoid working with disturbing material before going to sleep. And take care with alcohol – it disrupts sleep and can worsen nightmares.

### Develop personal techniques

Some people concentrate on specific details when viewing disturbing images, such as clothes, and avoid others, such as faces. Try adjusting the viewing environment: reduce the size of the window or dim the screen's brightness. Turn off the sound for graphic videos when you can.

### Organize your files

Store digital files in a way that reduces unnecessary viewing. If a project involves a lot of disturbing material or repeated reviews, consider sharing tasks with colleagues and pacing the work over time.

### Limit distribution

Consider whether you must share disturbing material and with whom before sending it to colleagues. When graphic material must be sent, thank the recipient and check how they are doing.

### Consider timing

Whenever possible, send disturbing material only during the recipient's work hours, and not at the end of the day. Unless it's urgent, don't press for immediate turnaround.

### Alert colleagues

As you would flag graphic material that we share with the public, alert co-workers to particularly disturbing videos and photos that you distribute internally. If you are unsure what constitutes particularly disturbing material, err on the side of caution.

### Talk and Debrief

Speak with colleagues, supervisors, friends and family about disturbing material and your reactions to it. Even general discussions can help you process upsetting content.

### Craft a self-care plan

Reserve time for activities outside of work. Research shows that resilient individuals are more likely to exercise regularly, to maintain outside interests, and to invest in their social life.

### Seek help

Human Rights Watch offers an array of services to promote mental health, including a full-time mental health professional available for all staff:

#### Tony Kearney

Human Rights Watch Mental Health Professional  
Tel: +1 (201) 303-6679  
Email: [tonykearneylcsw@gmail.com](mailto:tonykearneylcsw@gmail.com)  
*Confidential consultations and referrals.*

For the full list of HRW services, please visit the Intranet at HR/Benefits/Wellness Resources. For questions, contact [askHR@hrw.org](mailto:askHR@hrw.org).