

Airwars: Trauma Risk Management Policy

1. Introduction

Monitoring airstrikes and assessing reports of civilian casualties is a core part of Airwars' mission, purpose and work. This means that many of our workers and volunteers will spend time professionally analysing images, video footage and written accounts that detail human suffering. The material we work with is often traumatic – meaning that it deals with death, injury or incidents that were otherwise a threat to the integrity of a person such as sexual violence.

Most professionals who deal routinely with traumatic material, for example journalists, police officers and human rights analysts, will do so without experiencing significant or long-term consequences. This is the most likely outcome for Airwars staff and volunteers. Having a sense of mission and being able to marshal analytical skills to advance human rights objectives are known to be protective.

Nevertheless, working with traumatic material carries with it certain, specific risks to health and wellbeing, which both Airwars as an organisation and individual volunteers and workers need to take steps to mitigate. We are committed to a culture of openness about these issues, which we encourage our workers and volunteers to endorse and promote to others.

2. The purpose of this policy

This policy sets out what workers and volunteers can expect from Airwars in terms of trauma risk management, and what they can do for themselves and their colleagues – with support from Airwars' management team – to understand and mitigate the risks. The policy was prepared with advice from the [Dart Centre for Journalism and Trauma](#).

At Airwars it is important to us to support our workers and volunteers to manage risks together, and remain able to deal with and recover from any personal impacts from working with traumatic material. This is the primary purpose of this policy. Adverse reactions from trauma exposure as well as other kinds of work-related fatigue can also compromise the accuracy and quality of our work, if not carefully managed. Experiencing some distress when working with traumatic material is not unusual, and does not imply pathology. Through this policy we will seek to take the steps we can to manage the risks of any problems developing, and to support anyone who has difficulties, to manage or overcome these.

The Director and Board are always available to be contacted if workers or volunteers would like to discuss anything in this policy; find out more about these issues; or have any concerns or questions in their own work or for their colleagues.

3. Procedures for induction, training and support

Airwars will provide ongoing training and support regarding these issues throughout a worker or volunteer's time with the organisation, via the following procedures:

During the recruitment and induction of individuals joining Airwars in voluntary or paid roles, Airwars management will:

- Brief individuals on Airwars' trauma risk management policy, and the training and materials that will be provided on this subject
- Brief individuals on the material that they may deal with in their role, and the proportion of their working time that this may constitute
- Give individuals the opportunity to discuss any concerns they may have, or more information they would like, and to reflect on their suitability and preparedness for their role.

Management will be attentive to the wellbeing of workers and volunteers as a policy. As part of general management procedures, workers and volunteers will have regular opportunities to discuss how their work is going, and raise any concerns (including but not limited to any issues with traumatic material). Management will also ensure that there are opportunities to discuss how work is going during intense periods, including as a team. Discussion within the team and the sharing of working strategies is also encouraged. Such basic procedures are important to ensuring effective work, while managing possibilities of burnout or overload in the team. They are also important in the context of managing risks from exposure to traumatic source material in particular.

Airwars will also endeavour to periodically offer professional training sessions provided by a qualified external organisation for new and current workers and volunteers on trauma risk management. The purpose of this training will be to help workers and volunteers understand the issues and risks, and the practical steps that can be taken to mitigate these. It will also help to ensure that managers are sufficiently equipped to deal with these issues for staff and for themselves.

4. Steps our managers, workers and volunteers are expected to take to mitigate risks

Research shows that working culture plays a major role in supporting individuals to remain able to deal with, and recover from, any personal impacts from working with traumatic material.

Airwars managers are expected to:

- effectively implement the induction, training and monitoring and other risk management procedures outlined in this policy;
- ensure their understanding of the issues;
- lead by example in their approach to their own work.

Airwars is committed to supporting managers with these responsibilities, and providing appropriate training.

A. Developing personalised working procedures

Good working procedures - to limit exposure to traumatic material to that which is strictly necessary - are an important part of managing risks. All Airwars workers and volunteers (including managers) are expected to read the Dart Centre resources on '[Working with Traumatic Imagery](#)' and '[Developing a Standard Operating Procedure](#).'

All workers and volunteers should develop their own standard operating procedure for dealing with traumatic materials as appropriate to their role, in consultation with their line manager. A standard operating procedure is a way of developing a systematic approach to a task – in this case, working professionally with traumatic materials whilst adopting techniques limiting exposure and risks. In the Dart Centre resource on developing a standard operating procedure, you will find guidance on aspects such as:

- The importance of taking regular breaks, and changing your viewing environment
- Developing working practices and using technology to minimise viewing of traumatic imagery
- Being attentive to personal stress indicators
- Taking care not to work with traumatic images when fatigued and unable to concentrate.

B. Practising self-care

Another key step that all workers and volunteers should take to manage risks is to implement good self-care. This means being aware of your feelings and reactions; maintaining balance in your life between work and home, including interests and leisure activities; and ensuring social connection to your colleagues and your support networks outside of work. Taking regular time off is also an important part of self-care. Airwars will seek to ensure that workers are able to take regular leave.

C. Being a good colleague

All at Airwars can also help to look out for their colleagues and provide social support. This can help everyone to build a positive working culture, but can also play an important part in trauma risk management. Towards this, workers and volunteers are encouraged to maintain good team communication; check in on colleagues; and encourage them in their work and praise achievement, to reinforce a culture of support.

Different individuals will have different coping styles when it comes to working with traumatic material. At Airwars, it is important that we understand and respect these differences.

5. Understanding the spectrum of the impact of working with traumatic material

Exposure to traumatic material in a professional setting carries potential risks to emotional and physical wellbeing, as well as attendant risks of impact on an individual's performance at work.

People can experience difficulties such as mental and related physical health problems, or changes in their mood and outlook, due to working with traumatic materials. The impact may also be cognitive, such as making poorer analytical decisions; or involve changes in how a person normally behaves. The impact may range from the mild to the severe.

Experiencing negative impacts from exposure to traumatic materials is known as secondary or vicarious traumatisation. In the most serious cases, this can result in problems such as Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), depression or substance abuse.

6. Procedures for dealing with any difficulties experienced by workers or volunteers

Airwars seeks to create an open culture in which people are able and supported to discuss any issues of concern. All workers and volunteers are encouraged to raise these at the earliest opportunity with their line manager. If workers or volunteers would prefer, they are also welcome to approach the Director or members of the Board to discuss any issues. Airwars management will take all possible steps to resolve issues within the organisation, and refer to external help where necessary.

7. Understanding risk factors and responses to traumatic material

It is common when engaging professionally with traumatic material to experience physical responses, such as feeling hyper-alert or having an elevated heartbeat. Many people also have experiences such as visual intrusions (seeing things related to the material whilst awake or asleep). Such reactions are not necessarily a cause for concern: they will often be transient responses that do not indicate more serious or persistent issues or feelings that can impact on a person's wellbeing or health.

However, it is important to recognise signs that may indicate that you are experiencing difficulties as a result of working with traumatic material. In particular, you should pay attention to reactions that are persistent and do not go away, or that impair your day-to-day functioning – these could be signs of greater difficulty. Reactions may include but are not limited to: hyperarousal symptoms such as nightmares and difficulty concentrating; feeling numb or despairing; feeling guilt, anger or fear; feeling irritable and impatient; feeling disconnected from loved ones, experiencing increased conflict in your relationships or withdrawing socially; feeling less interest in activities that you used to enjoy; feeling unable to listen to others' distressing stories; feeling a loss of idealism or change in your worldview; or problematic use of alcohol or other substances.

8. Workers' and volunteers' responsibilities: acting early on concerns

At Airwars we do not consider any wellbeing issues experienced by staff to be a sign of weakness or an inability to do the job. They are a matter for management and support that is critical to undertaking our work well. We are committed to a culture of openness about these issues, which we encourage our workers and volunteers to support.

Changes in workers' or volunteers' work or personal life (such as increased stress, changed life circumstances, or traumatic events experienced outside of work) may change how they are affected by traumatic material within work - and management will seek to be attentive to this. Informing your line manager early and in confidence of issues of concern in your personal or work life will assist Airwars in subsequently addressing any trauma-related implications in as timely a manner as possible.

Anyone working or volunteering for Airwars who is concerned about the impact of *any* aspect of their work on their wellbeing – or is concerned about a colleague – is encouraged to speak to their line manager as soon as possible. If preferred, they may contact the Director or Board instead. Acting earlier can mean resolving any problems more effectively and with less negative impact.

Management will take appropriate steps to support workers or volunteers experiencing difficulties, following discussion where necessary, and with ongoing assessment of progress. These steps might include but may not be limited to:

- Reviewing daily work schedules, upholding management's duty to monitor workload and ensure that this is not excessive, granting exceptional time off
- Reducing the amount of time a worker/volunteer spends working with traumatic source material, or rotating them off this work temporarily or permanently
- Referral to professional support (e.g. trauma counselling) in the rare cases where this may be needed or appropriate. Airwars will pay for staff to receive sessions of specialist counselling when this is necessary, up to an agreed limit, and discuss how further support can be accessed through the health system in a worker/volunteer's country

Workers and volunteers may wish to contact external services themselves (for example your GP in the UK), but are encouraged to seek to resolve issues within Airwars in the first instance. Airwars can help facilitate up to six sessions with a relevant trauma specialist, as part of our broader organisational staff and volunteer support package. In cases of actual or suspected PTSD, it is important to get prompt treatment.

Who to contact with concerns

If you are concerned for yourself or a colleague, your first point of contact should be your line manager, or alternatively the Chair of the Board. Management will work together to address concerns.

**This policy will be reviewed and updated on a regular basis.
Last amended: May 2018**