



Coping strategies for content moderators

Content moderators are often exposed to graphic and distressing material including hate speech, violence and child sexual abuse in the online material they monitor. Studies show that repeated exposure to graphic content can be harmful, leading to secondary traumatic stress. Workplace stress can also be exacerbated by the need to meet performance indicators and high volume workloads. Chronic work stress is associated with both mental health problems such as panic attacks and depression, as well as increased rates of physical difficulties that at the most severe end include heart attacks and strokes. It can also affect self-care, which manifests as increased alcohol and drug consumption, unhealthy eating and little to no exercise.

What are coping strategies?

Coping strategies are conscious or unconscious actions we put in place to manage distressing situations. These can be behavioural (actions) or cognitive (ways of thinking) and can be specific to the individual, organisation or both. Developing coping skills enables you to increase your own and/or your team's

resilience by improving the ability to deal with negative emotions and stress. This in turn improves our mental and physical wellbeing.

WHO WE ARE

This publication is based on qualitative research conducted by the Centre for Abuse and Trauma Studies, Middlesex University, UK investigating the psychological impact of content moderation and how moderators can be best supported.

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For more information see:
<https://www.mdx.ac.uk/our-research/centres/secondarytraumaresearch>

Our qualitative work based on interviews with current content moderators suggested there is a role for both individual coping strategies that moderators can use to help them deal with the stress, and organisational policies and procedures that can be put in place to better support moderators in their role:

Individual strategies

Many content moderators worry that talking about what they have witnessed will be traumatising for other people, which can make it difficult to speak with friends and family. However, social support is protective against the development of mental health problems and stress-related work burnout, which is characterised by physical and emotional exhaustion.

-Talking with colleagues exposed to similar content can help you process negative content, normalise emotional reactions and reduce feelings of isolation. If you cannot speak with those closest to you about the work content, try discussing work stressors that are common across jobs such as deadlines or workload.

-At the end of a difficult day, you may lack energy or not want to socialise, but having a good work/life balance is important.

Relationships and activities outside of work can offer a distraction from work stressors and give you something to focus on besides content seen at work. Creating a ritual that marks the end of your working day, such as going for a short walk or playing a game, can help you mentally separate your work and home life.

-Exercise is also a helpful way to work through difficult emotions. Many moderators find that intense physical activity such as running or boxing helps release tension. This releases endorphins and helps reduce stress levels. Activities that create a sense of 'flow' are also good at helping regulate your emotional state. Flow is where you reach a state of being completely absorbed in the moment. To achieve flow, avoid distractions and find something that is challenging but not too difficult. Many moderators enjoy baking and art as ways to distract themselves from potentially unwanted thoughts and increase their sense of wellbeing. Some people watch television programmes in the hopes of achieving the same distraction.

Organisational strategies

It is also important for organisations to introduce policies which help content moderators cope with their work. Of



particular importance is creating a supportive work environment where mental health and negative reactions to content are openly discussed.

Mandatory specialist support by therapists or counsellors that understand the effects of exposure to upsetting material can help content moderators talk about any difficulties they might be having. It is preferable to have support services delivered on an individual basis by an external provider for reasons of privacy and confidentiality. A leadership team who are empathetic to the effects of distressing content can also help foster a work atmosphere where people are open to sharing their feelings and how any distressing content affects them.

Similarly, facilitating opportunities for moderators to build supportive relationships with their colleagues and leadership team is crucial. This can be done informally through breaks and internal as well as external networking events, as well as more formally through peer support programmes. Allowing moderators to manage their own time, through taking breaks when needed in a way that works for them (e.g. leaving the building versus using a break room) gives them a sense of autonomy and trust and increases a sense of wellbeing.

Companies can also provide practical support through providing computers that have screens which are not easily viewable by others, and the option to mute content or minimise content.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR WORKPLACES

- Create opportunities for content moderators to talk to their colleagues about the content and their reactions
- Allow content moderators autonomy over when they take breaks and in a way that suits them (e.g. leaving the building versus going to a break room)
- Make sure the leadership team has experience of the content their moderators will be exposed to and are able to normalize and talk about possible reactions to the material
- Provide mandatory specialised support services from an external provider that has experience of working with those exposed to difficult content
- Provide equipment that allows moderators to minimise their own and others' exposure to content