

# REPORTING ROAD TRAFFIC INCIDENTS:

A resource for the media and road safety sector.

Supporting our  
community to receive  
information that does  
not trigger harm.





# Road traffic incidents are a frequent occurrence in Western Australia and place a significant burden on the whole WA community.

In 2021 there were 29,806 road traffic crashes<sup>1</sup> and 1,753 people killed or seriously injured on WA roads.<sup>2</sup> Every year road trauma costs WA \$2.4 billion,<sup>3</sup> however the true impact that road trauma has on our lives extends beyond this figure.

This resource has been developed to support the media to report road traffic incidents in a manner that has a positive effect on road safety and supports those affected by road trauma.

The reporting of road traffic incidents in the media has a significant influence on the audience's perception of the incident and

society's attitude towards road safety. Also, by nature, the media evokes emotive and personal responses in its audience, which may cause some audiences to relive their road trauma experience.

Using evidence-based reporting, media plays a key role in:

- Generating awareness of how frequent and serious road traffic incidents are,
- Increasing knowledge of key road safety behaviours, and
- Growing awareness of where to seek support if needed.



## Psychological effect of road traffic incidents

Road trauma happens unexpectedly and can impact the way in which we view the world. It is normal for the driver, passenger, witness, person who assisted at the scene of a road crash, family members or friends to experience a range of upsetting thoughts, feelings and reactions following a road traffic incident. Most people will feel better within a few days or weeks, but for some it may take longer to recover.

It has been estimated that globally more than 15% of road traffic crash survivors suffer from an acute stress disorder<sup>4</sup> and that post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) was prevalent in 21-29% of Australian road traffic crash survivors.<sup>5</sup>

There are a number of factors that influence the likelihood of an individual experiencing a psychological issue after a road crash, including; a previous or existing mental health condition<sup>5</sup>, personal fault in the incident<sup>6</sup>, perceived threat to life during the crash<sup>5</sup>, physical injury severity<sup>5,7</sup>, if the incident involved a compensation claim, expectations regarding

returning to work<sup>8</sup> and support received.<sup>5</sup> The prevalence and impact of psychological symptoms can vary over time, however research findings have indicated that psychological symptoms are still common three years after a motor vehicle crash.<sup>9</sup>

The compounding impact of this trauma can influence the individuals' quality of life, relationships, social engagements, financial independence and health outcomes.<sup>8,9</sup> Despite these potential long term implications, mental health consequences are often overlooked in comparison to physical health rehabilitation.<sup>5</sup>

Due to the frequent occurrence of road traffic incidents in WA there is the potential for crashes to be normalised and for individuals involved in road traffic incidents to be retraumatised by another incident,<sup>10</sup> reinforcing the need for consideration in road crash reporting.

## The role of the media

The media has significant power to educate the public about social issues and drive change, which can have positive and negative consequences on road safety in WA.

When the reporting of road traffic incidents is evidence-based and communicated sensitively, the media can use its leverage to help the audience understand the problem in focus<sup>11</sup>, evoke positive behaviour change, remove barriers to help-seeking and change societal beliefs by reframing road traffic incidents as a preventable public health issue.<sup>12</sup>

The media's primary function is to inform and entertain people, but they also play an important role in health promotion by supporting road safety initiatives and treatment efforts for people affected by road trauma.

Poor reporting practices involving traumatic events can sensationalise the incident<sup>13</sup>, misdirect the audience's point of concern<sup>11</sup>, obscure the solutions<sup>11</sup>, frighten victims<sup>14</sup> and increase distress among the bereaved.<sup>13</sup> In the case of suicide, there is growing evidence that irresponsible reporting can increase the rate of suicide following the media report.<sup>15</sup>

Due to these potential harms, it is vital that the media reports and portrays road traffic incidents accurately to continue reducing the impact of road trauma on the WA community.

Research into the reporting of road traffic incidents in the United States found that changing the editorial patterns of the reports can significantly affect the readers' perception of what happened, what should be done about it and how they attribute their blame for the incident.<sup>12</sup>

Road trauma happens unexpectedly and can impact the way in which we view the world.



# Key tips when reporting road trauma incidents

Eight things to consider when reporting on a road traffic incident.



Help-seeking information



Describing the road traffic incident



Language



Use of imagery



Interviews and consent



Comments from experts



Story prominence



Looking after yourself



## Help-seeking information

Stories about road trauma can adversely affect people, particularly those previously affected by another trauma.

Despite the evidence of the impact of road trauma and the effectiveness of prevention efforts, the majority of people affected by a road traffic incident do not seek help soon after a crash.<sup>16</sup> This can be attributed to individuals not understanding the impact of the incident and therefore not seeking help until several years after the incident when their mental health condition has become chronic.<sup>16</sup>

After a road traffic incident, people often find the most important things are time, understanding and support from family and friends. However, if an individual is experiencing ongoing or distressing symptoms which are interfering with their usual life, professional support should be sought.

The World Health Organization (WHO) identifies mental health care and psychological support as key components of the post-crash response due to its role in mitigating grief, anxiety and other bereavement reactions, and in preventing

psychological distress becoming a disability that interferes with re-integration into work and social life.<sup>17</sup>

If symptoms are ongoing or worsen 4-6 weeks after the road traffic incident, Injury Matters recommends that professional support is sought out.

Professional support can be offered by a variety of health professionals, including; doctors, psychologists and counsellors experienced in grief, loss and trauma.

To normalise help-seeking behaviour and reduce barriers individuals may face to accessing professional support, it is essential that information about support services are included when reporting on any road traffic incident.

At least two crisis support options should be listed and they should be selected based on the type of media output that the report is being included in and who the story is being communicated to.

Injury Matters provides free specialist support for individuals impacted by road trauma, through the [Road Trauma Support WA](#) service weekdays from 8:30am to 4:30pm. It is recommended that at a minimum the following statement is included within all reports regarding a road traffic incident:

**"If you or anyone you know has been affected by a road crash contact Road Trauma Support WA on 1300 004 814"**

Additional services that can be listed within your report include:

- Road Trauma Support WA, 1300 004 814
- Lifeline, 13 11 14
- Kids Helpline, 1800 55 1800 (ages 5-25)
- Crisis Care, 9223 1111 or 1800 199 008
- GriefLine, 1300 845 745
- Here for you, 1800 437 348
- Rural Link, 1800 552 002

Prior to the inclusion of a service's contact details, reach out to the service to allow them to prepare for a potential increase in people contacting them.

**Normalise help-seeking behaviour.**



Injury Matters' Road Trauma Support WA service provides free support, information and counselling to Western Australians affected by a road crash.

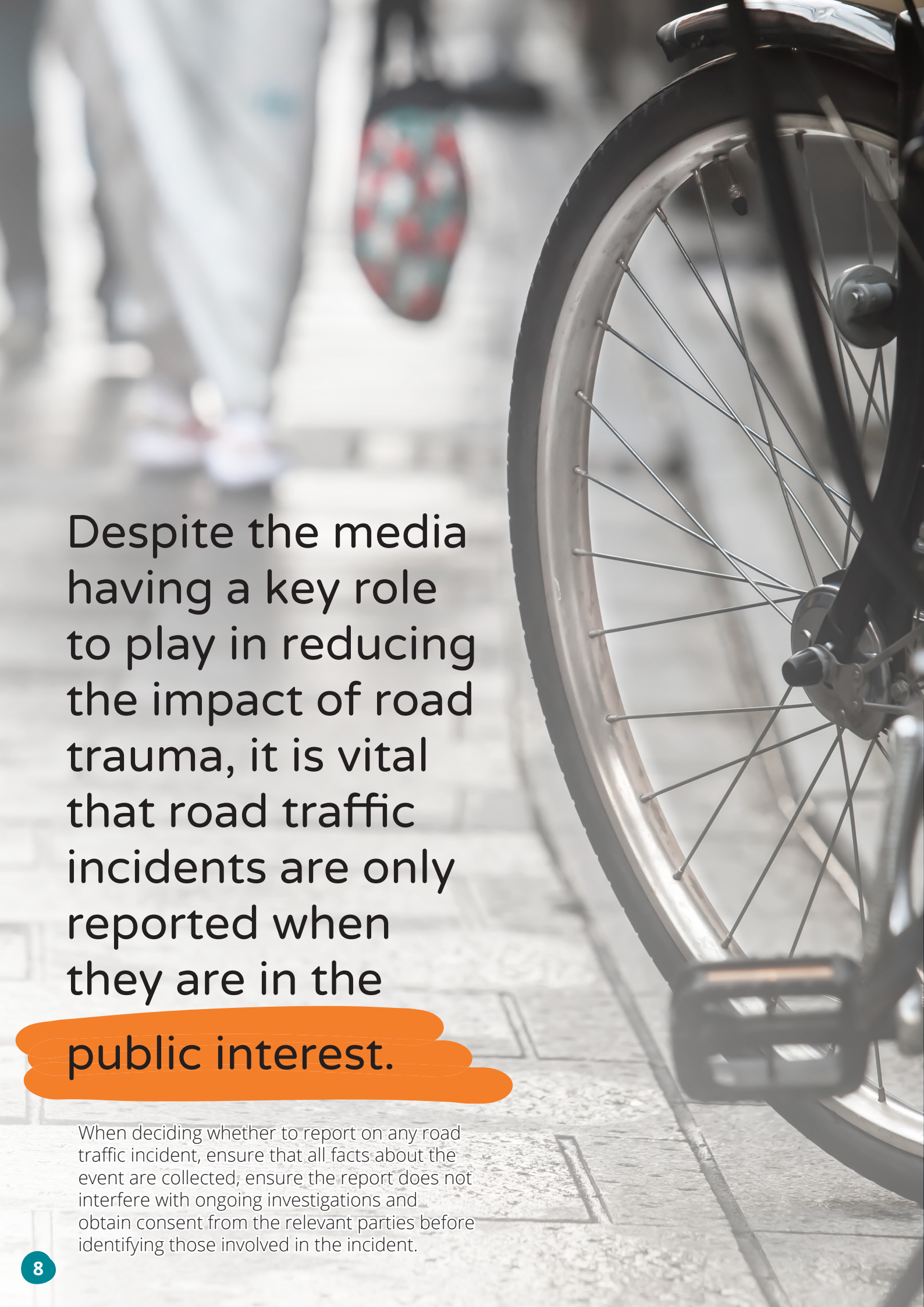
Our dedicated team provide non-judgemental, confidential and free support and counselling, regardless of when the crash occurred or what the involvement was in the incident.

No referral is required. Counselling sessions can be face-to-face, by telephone or via video call.

Resources are also available to support common reactions for affected by a road incident, what helps after road trauma and when to seek help.

**To access our fact sheets and brochures visit [www.rtswa.org.au](http://www.rtswa.org.au) or contact us on 1300 004 814**





Despite the media having a key role to play in reducing the impact of road trauma, it is vital that road traffic incidents are only reported when they are in the public interest.

When deciding whether to report on any road traffic incident, ensure that all facts about the event are collected, ensure the report does not interfere with ongoing investigations and obtain consent from the relevant parties before identifying those involved in the incident.

## Describing the road traffic incident

As with reporting any other event, it is vital that all reports of road traffic incidents are presented in context, only include information known to be accurate and provide a balanced portrayal of the incident.

Due to the long-lasting impact of road trauma on the affected community, it is important that what is being reported on is not trivialised. Evidence and local data is helpful to give the audience context around the extent of the problem in WA and in reinforcing that the incident was not an isolated event.

To access WA's latest road traffic fatality data visit the [Road Safety Commission website](#) or for traffic and crash data, visit the [Main Roads website](#). Although road traffic incidents commonly occur on Western Australian roads, they can be predictable and preventable.

Journalists play a key role in raising community awareness of the multiple factors, including behaviour, that contributed to the road traffic incident and the severity of the incident.

Approximately 75% of all serious crashes involve a mistake, a momentary lapse in attention or fatigue.<sup>3</sup> Person-based language is needed when describing the road traffic incident, however it is vital that all elements that contributed to the incident are outlined.

[Driving Change](#), WA's current road safety strategy, can assist in increasing your understanding of the core principles of a safe transport system. By ensuring all reports of road traffic incidents are inclusive of all known causalities we are increasing community understanding of the need for a Safe Systems approach to preventing road traffic incidents.

There are some components of a story that are **not beneficial** to include, such as:

- ✗ **Details that may identify individuals involved** in the incident. I.e. the inclusion of the person's occupation and the location of the incident may be enough information for a loved one to identify the individual involved.
- ✗ **Counterfactual statements** that imply that the incident could have been avoided if those involved behaved differently. Despite human involvement in the majority of road traffic incidents, these kinds of statements are not helpful for legal reasons and in consideration of the family.
- ✗ **Statements that undermine the trauma caused** to those involved in the incident and the broader community. I.e. insensitively reporting traffic delays.



## Language

Words have power. It is important to consider the language used and how it may be interpreted by the audience. The table below outlines terms that should not be used with road traffic incident reports due to the inferences that the audience may make when used.

Incorrect	Consequences	Suggested
Accident	Implies the incident happened spontaneously, without reason or human intervention.	Incident Crash Road trauma
Road Toll Road Statistics	Crashes impact real people, and people are not numbers.	Road deaths Road fatalities Road injuries
Offender	Legally, "offender" only applies once a conviction is made.	Culpable party Person/driver in question



**Be respectful of everyone involved, including those first on the scene, and their family by upholding the dignity of all individuals involved in the incident.**



**Avoid sensationalising the crash event by using language which glamorises any behaviours which led to the incident occurring.** eg. reckless driving or mobile phone use.



**Avoid using language that negatively generalises the persons behaviour to a whole subgroup of people.**

For example, if it is reported that the motorcyclist was the cause of the incident, other road users may negatively change their interactions with motorcyclists on the road.

It is important to consider the language used and how it may be interpreted by the audience.



## Use of imagery


Photos and video footage should not be published or broadcast before all families involved in the road traffic incident have been notified.


This applies to imagery of individuals affected by the incident, vehicles involved in the crash scene, personal belongings and any other identifying features of the vehicle. Where images may appear generic or dated, they are readily identifiable by the loved ones of those involved in the incident.

While family members may have provided consent, the impact of imagery to loved ones when seen in the media has the potential to retraumatise individuals involved in other road traffic incidents and must be considered.

To support a [Safe System approach](#) to road safety, where 'generic' imagery is used it is recommended that it reflects a safe road, such as sealed road shoulders with audible lines and a low travel speed.

 **Carefully consider the impact on families when using images or footage from an incident where someone was killed or seriously injured.**

 **Do not use any footage or images from a different incident.**

 **Provide a warning in the introduction of the story that the content may distress some viewers.**

 **Do not use any dashcam footage.**

 **Follow cultural protocols regarding using the name or image of a deceased Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander person.**



While images may appear generic or dated, they may be readily identifiable by those involved or their loved ones.





## Interviews and consent

Where possible, informed consent should be obtained from an appropriate contact of the individual/s involved in the road traffic incident before identifying those involved.

As mentioned on page 2, trauma is common following a road traffic incident. The media has a role to minimise the long-term impacts of road trauma by avoiding intrusion and where serious injury or death has occurred, allowing privacy to all grieving parties.

Road trauma experts recommend not approaching family members or friends for an interview or comment as it could cause further harm.

Following an incident, grieving family and friends may have reduced capacity to consent to or understand the impact the interview may have on their mental health.

When determined appropriate to progress with interviewing individuals who have lived experience, take care and consider the timing of the incident.

Even if an individual has provided consent, prior to commencing the interview ensure they are still willing to proceed. Recovery is not linear and the individual may no longer feel able to proceed with the interview.

Whether conducting the interview yourself or including information collated by someone else, ensure sensitivity and good judgement when reporting on people's experiences.

Following an incident, grieving family and friends may have **reduced capacity to consent or understand the impact the interview may have on their mental health.**

## Expert comments

The inclusion of subject experts from individuals/organisations can provide road safety messaging and trauma support messaging for your story.

Depending on the incident covered, receiving input from a road safety expert may assist in interpreting data, providing context to the causality of the incident, advice on the inclusion of road safety messages or a statement for inclusion within the report.

Organisations that you may wish to contact for input into your report are available on the Injury Matters eDirectory at:  
[www.injurymatters.org.au/informationhub/edirectory/](http://www.injurymatters.org.au/informationhub/edirectory/)



## Story prominence

Adequate length and placement of the road traffic report is important. Short duration or inferior placement can appear as an afterthought, which undermines the severity of the issue and inadvertently minimises the grieving of family and friends.

Road traffic incidents are commonly reported in conjunction with other stories. When sharing a page of the newspaper or as part of a broader news broadcast ensure the road traffic report is not juxtapositioned with stories or advertisements that conflict or diminish the report.

For example, an ethically written story about someone killed in a crash positioned above an unrelated article from someone in authority talking about drivers not taking responsibility for their actions. Effectively, it appears that the individual is speaking negatively about drivers involved in the incident reported above.

Short duration  
or inferior  
placement can  
appear as an  
afterthought.

yahoo/news

News Latest Coronavirus National World Good News Ever Wondered Environment Watch

f  
t  
e

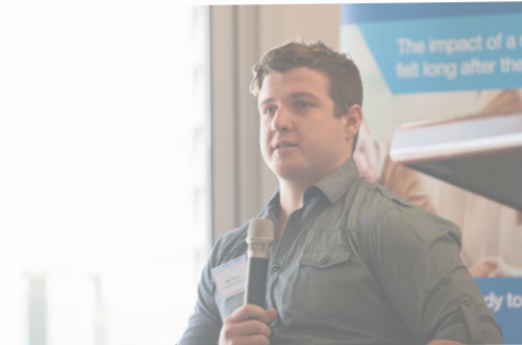
anger," Mr Daniels explains.

"I guess when we think of road trauma, we don't really think of the families. Everyone would say 'You're the lucky one, you survived, you're lucky to survive'.

"But, they weren't the ones in the hospital bed, next to me."

It took a toll of Mr Daniels' mother, who stayed with him at the hospital, while he was handcuffed to the bed, to stop him from harming himself, she was angry at the driver, who had ruined her son's life.

A police officer referred Mr Daniels' mother to Road Trauma Support WA, the group not only aids road trauma victims, but also their families and first responders.



Mark Daniels now speaks to people about road trauma and the impact it has on people's life. Source: Supplied/Steffen Gosatti

One thing that helped Mr Daniels' recovery was exercise, and since the crash he has gone on to compete as a professional athlete.

Mr Daniels is trying out for the 2020 Invictus Games, having already competed in the 2018 Invictus Games in Sydney, for wheelchair rugby where his team won gold, sitting volleyball and at indoor rowing where he won a bronze medal.

"For the rehabilitation initially I had it in my head I was going to be running within a month, walking within a week," Mr Daniels said.

"What I didn't realise was the extent of my injuries, which was the biggest setback."


Six months following the crash, Mr Daniels got a prosthetic leg, and soon learned


Reporting  
road traffic  
incidents can  
be distressing,  
especially if  
you have a  
personal  
experience.


## Looking after yourself


Reporting road traffic incidents can be distressing, especially if you have a personal experience, are present at a traumatic scene or have been exposed to multiple incidents over time.

Additionally, media personnel are often early on scene of a road traffic incident and may even constitute first responders in some instances.

 It is important to safeguard your wellbeing and that of your colleagues.

 Alert your manager if you feel covering a story may negatively affect your wellbeing.

 Keep an eye on your colleagues after they have been exposed to road trauma.

 Road Trauma Support WA is available to you, whether through our fact sheets and resources, for general information or guidance, to help support yourself and others.



**There is no 'timeline' for when people can experience psychological conditions after a road traffic incident.**

People impacted by road trauma report improvements in their mental health three months after the incident, while others can experience late onset psychiatric outcomes.<sup>18</sup>

Therefore, it is vital that individuals experiencing road trauma are supported no matter what time period has passed since the road traffic incident occurred.

The **Injury Matters eDirectory** hosts a number of organisations who are available to assist with expert advice, resources and information regarding post-crash care.

Injury Matters are fortunate to provide support to people who are impacted by road trauma in WA and encourage you to reduce the impact of road trauma and support those people affected by a road traffic incident by utilising this guide to responsibly report road traffic incidents in WA.



[www.injurymatters.org.au](http://www.injurymatters.org.au)



(08) 6166 7688



[admin@injurymatters.org.au](mailto:admin@injurymatters.org.au)



[@InjuryMatters](https://twitter.com/InjuryMatters)



[facebook/InjuryMatters](https://facebook.com/InjuryMatters)

**There is no 'timeline' for when people can experience psychological conditions after a road traffic incident.**





## References

1. Main Roads WA. Unpublished 2021 crash data extracted by Injury Matters from the Main Roads WA Reporting Centre. <https://reportingcentre.mainroads.wa.gov.au/> (2021).
2. Road Safety Commission. WA Road Fatalities and Serious Injuries 2021. [https://www.wa.gov.au/system/files/2022-06/WA%20Road%20Fatalities%20and%20Serious%20Injuries%202021\\_Final.pdf](https://www.wa.gov.au/system/files/2022-06/WA%20Road%20Fatalities%20and%20Serious%20Injuries%202021_Final.pdf) (2022).
3. Government of Western Australia. Driving Change. Road Safety Strategy for Western Australia 2020-2030. (2020).
4. Dai, W. et al. Prevalence of acute stress disorder among road traffic accident survivors: a meta-analysis. BMC Psychiatry 18, 188 (2018).
5. Heron-Delaney, M., Kenardy, J., Charlton, E. & Matsuoka, Y. A systematic review of predictors of posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) for adult road traffic crash survivors. Injury 44, 1413-1422 (2013).
6. Gabbe, B. J. et al. Association between perception of fault for the crash and function, return to work and health status 1?year after road traffic injury: a registry-based cohort study. BMJ Open 5, e009907 (2015).
7. Craig, A. et al. Psychological impact of injuries sustained in motor vehicle crashes: systematic review and meta-analysis. BMJ Open 6, (2016).
8. Kenardy, J., Heron-Delaney, M., Warren, J. & Brown, E. The effect of mental health on long-term health-related quality of life following a road traffic crash: Results from the UQ SuPPORT study. Injury 46, 883-890 (2015).
9. Mayou, R. & Bryant, B. Outcome 3 years after a road traffic accident. Psychol Med 32, 671-675 (2002).
10. Breen, L., O'Connor, M. & Le, A. Establishing a Sustainable Road Trauma Support Service in Western Australia. (2011).
11. Laker, L. Media guidelines for reporting road collisions. (2021).
12. Goddard, T., Ralph, K., Thigpen, C. G. & Iacobucci, E. Does news coverage of traffic crashes affect perceived blame and preferred solutions? Evidence from an experiment. Transp. Res. Interdiscip. Perspect. 3, 100073 (2019).
13. Skehan, J., Maple, M., Fisher, J. & Sharrock, G. Suicide bereavement and the media: A qualitative study. Adv. Ment. Health 11, 223-237 (2013).
14. Maercker, A. & Mehr, A. What if Victims Read a Newspaper Report About Their Victimization?: A Study on the Relationship to PTSD Symptoms in Crime Victims. Eur. Psychol. 11, 137-142 (2006).
15. Everymind. Reporting suicide and mental ill-health: A Mind-frame resource for media professionals. (2020).
16. Beck, J. G. & Coffey, S. F. Assessment and treatment of posttraumatic stress disorder after a motor vehicle collision: Empirical findings and clinical observations. Prof. Psychol. Res. Pract. 38, 629-639 (2007).
17. World Health Organization. Post-crash response: Supporting those affected by road traffic crashes. [http://www.who.int/violence\\_injury\\_prevention/publications/road\\_traffic/Post-crash\\_response\\_booklet.pdf](http://www.who.int/violence_injury_prevention/publications/road_traffic/Post-crash_response_booklet.pdf) (2016).
18. Mayou, R., Bryant, B. & Ehlers, A. Prediction of Psychological Outcomes One Year After a Motor Vehicle Accident. Am. J. Psychiatry 158, 1231-1238 (2001).

## Acknowledgements

Injury Matters would like to acknowledge those with lived experience of road trauma and the following organisations for their contributions to the development of this guide:

- Everymind
- Amber Community
- The Road Safety Commission - Government of Western Australia
- Western Australian Local Government Association

### Suggested citation:

**Injury Matters. Reporting road traffic incidents: A resource for the media and road safety sector. (2022).**

Please acknowledge Injury Matters when reproducing or quoting material from this source.  
© Injury Matters 2022.

All content included within this document is provided in good faith by Injury Matters and is based on sources believed to be reliable and accurate at the time of development. Injury Matters and all parties involved in the production of this report, do not accept legal liability or responsibility for the material or any consequences arising from its use.

Injury Matters acknowledge the Whadjuk Noongar people as the traditional custodians of the land on which we live and work and recognises Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples continuing connection to land, waters and community across Western Australia.

