



Teaching Emotionally Challenging Topics: An educator's guide to supporting emotional resilience skills in higher education

Leigh Downes & Ruth Wall

December 2022

About this guide

This guide aims to help educators (people with responsibilities for teaching students) in higher education to support students to engage with topics that can be experienced as sensitive, distressing, or emotionally challenging in some way. This includes face-to-face, hybrid, and online teaching and learning settings. It offers reflective questions, resources and examples that can be used and adapted to enhance the design and delivery of teaching.

Research has consistently demonstrated that what is experienced as sensitive or emotive is personally defined, highly individual and connected to lived experience (Lowe & Jones 2010; Lowe 2015; Downes et al 2022). Whilst content notes and warnings are a helpful tool to highlight potentially sensitive and triggering content, not all students and educators are aware of what can trigger or affect them. A more integrative skills-based framework that engages with the strengths, capacities and lived experiences that students bring to their learning can play an important role in reducing and mitigating barriers to learning, particularly for students with mental health difficulties and/or lived experience of topics.

This guide aims to complement the student guide '[Your emotional resilience skills: A guide for students studying emotionally challenging content](#)' (Appendix 1) by offering practical suggestions for how educators can scaffold and support students' emotional resilience skills, enhance staff and student mental health and wellbeing, and maximise the benefits in teaching and learning about emotionally challenging topics. Many of the approaches recommended here may already be part of your established practice and you are invited to send us suggestions of your best practice as well as feedback on how we can improve this guide in the future.

The first draft of this guide was developed by the Emotional Resilience team at The Open University as part of [Positive Digital Practices](#) (Office for Students, Mental Health funding competition 2021). This guide also includes quotes from some of the students that we worked with in 'Supporting student learning of emotive and sensitive content': a two-year research project with distance students led by Leigh Downes, Ruth Wall and Anne Alvaer funded by the Faculty of Arts and Social Science Centre for Scholarship and Innovation (FASSTEST, 2020-2022).

Acknowledgements

We want to acknowledge the great support and valuable contributions made to this educator's guide including from Anne Alvaer, Kate Lister, and the emotional resilience team.

We want to acknowledge those before us who have made valuable contributions to, and been influential in, our practice of teaching and learning sensitive topics so far. This includes Sarah S. Amsler, Nicole Bedera, Audrey Bryan, Lisa D. Butler, Darren O'Byrne, Janice Carello, Laura Connelly, Derek Dalton, bell hooks, Helen Jones, Remi Joseph-Salisbury, Christian Klesse, Pam Lowe, David Morrison, Stephen Robinson and Michalinos Zemblyas

Finally, we give our gratitude to all the students who generously shared their experiences of learning emotionally challenging content with us in the Student Minds Panel and in our research project. None of this would have been possible without you.

Please cite as: Downes, L. and Wall, R. (2022) *Teaching Emotionally Challenging Topics: An educator's guide to support emotional resilience skills in higher education*. Milton Keynes: The Open University.

Teaching Emotionally Challenging Topics

An educator's guide to supporting emotional resilience skills in higher education

Wider policy context

It is well established that the number of students who disclose mental health conditions at university is increasing (Office for Students 2019). This is accompanied by growing awareness of how challenges and barriers are compounded and made more complex when mental health intersects with one or more inequalities, including ethnicity, socio-economic status, and sexuality. Research has demonstrated that mental health difficulties have a serious impact on student study outcomes. Students with mental health difficulties have been found to be less likely to complete and/or pass a course, withdraw from studying, or achieve the highest grades (Richardson 2015; Eaton et al 2015; Eisenberg et al 2009). Furthermore, students are more likely than non-students to develop mental health issues (Brown 2016). This suggests that the wider university environment is an important contributing factor to student mental health and wellbeing.

The Student Minds' [University Mental Health Charter](#) (Hughes & Spanner 2019) and the strategic framework [Step Change: Mentally Healthy Universities](#) (Universities UK 2020) both called for universities to take a 'whole university approach' to mental health and wellbeing. This shift aims to move the conversation away from service provision for students experiencing poor mental health to consider the impacts of the wider university environment (including structural inequalities) and encourage universities to take a more proactive and preventative approach to supporting student and staff mental health and wellbeing.

For educators this includes the 'design and delivery of the curriculum, teaching and learning to position health gain alongside learning gain' (UUK 2020, p. 14) and making sure that 'curriculum design, pedagogic practice and academic processes consider and seek to impact positively on the mental health and wellbeing of all students' (Hughes & Spanner 2019, p. 28). However, what educators can and should do in practice to promote student and staff mental health and wellbeing can be unclear.

Towards emotional resilience

One approach to supporting student and staff mental health and wellbeing is to embed and sustain emotional resilience skills within teaching and learning. Emotional resilience is a universally relevant skillset for all educators and students. Research has indicated that many members of the university

community arrive with lived experience and skills in navigating emotionally challenging and demanding situations and with support can successfully apply them in their study of sensitive and emotive topics (Downes et al 2022). The onus is therefore on how higher education institutions, cultures, and practices can be rearranged to better recognise and respond to students and educators' lived experiences and support opportunities for transformative learning.

This requires a pedagogical approach that is both trauma informed (Carello & Butler 2005) and social justice orientated (Zemblyas 2020), key features of which include:

- Regular acknowledgement of the breadth of emotional responses
- Affirmation of existing emotional resilience skills and creation of opportunities to develop and apply them to enhance learning, personal growth and/or employability
- Integration of tools that activate emotional resilience skills and remove barriers to engagement with emotionally challenging or demanding content
- Promotion of help seeking with clear and accurate signposting to available specialist support services and resources inside and outside the university
- Opportunities for staff and students to translate learning into action towards social justice

DESIGNING AND PREPARING TO TEACH EMOTIONALLY CHALLENGING CONTENT

1. Build on existing policy and guidance

What policies and guidelines around teaching sensitive topics does your institution already have in place?

Your institution may already have a policy or guidelines on sensitive or 'distressing' content, which may include:

- a standard approach to highlighting sensitive topics in the curriculum (i.e., content or trigger warnings)
- an outline of the boundaries of your role (not a counsellor or clinician)
- opt-out opportunities for students (e.g., from lectures or activities, and use of alternative assessments)
- recommended ground rules/guidelines for group discussion
- signposting to support services for students and staff

That is a helpful way to understand how engaged your institution is with student mental health and wellbeing as well as the unique challenges faced by your institution.

If you cannot find an institutional approach it is worth contacting your equality, diversity and inclusion, disability and/or mental health teams to see what work is underway.

2. Support informed study choices

Are students provided with comprehensive information about the content of programmes at the first point of contact and registration?

Students told us that they wanted more information about the content of courses before they signed up for them. For example, this student suggested that:

“You could advise prospective students of the subject types they are going to be learning about so they can make a more informed decision on whether they could handle the content before they start their studies”

Providing comprehensive information about programme content early in the application and registration process will enable students to make a more informed study choice. Some ideas on how to achieve this include:

- Provide a detailed list of topics and case studies with formats (video, audio, written) in all public-facing information about programmes of study, including print and online prospectuses.
- Include a section on supporting the study of emotionally challenging content in the accessibility guide/statement that details the approach taken by the institution or programme (e.g., content notes, guidance, adjustments, available support etc.)

Best practice example: Accessibility guide/statement

Emotionally challenging/sensitive content

[module code/name] covers topics that some students might find distressing, including [death/ suicide/ slavery/ rape/ abuse/ violence/ self-harm/ traumatic events/ other]. You will see a content note before studying [this/these] and topic-specific specialist support services will be signposted as appropriate. Speak to your tutor if you have any concerns about your ability to study [this/these], and we will support you.

Adapted from Accessibility Guide Template published by Securing Greater Accessibility (SeGA) at The Open University by Kate Lister, The Open University

3. Normalise emotional responses early on

Are there opportunities to normalise discussion of the emotional dimensions of learning, particularly in the study of sensitive and emotionally challenging topics, in student orientation or induction activities?

Students told us that they would really value early opportunities to examine emotions and find out about the support on offer around emotionally challenging topics. For example, one student recommended that:

“If people can have [an] induction, like where they can be taught a few things and can feel full [of] information [about] what they could expect and [...] understand what is going to happen to them, what they are expecting, what they will find. So, when

somebody is enrolling in that topic having that in mind, they will be a little bit prepared and will cope with it."

You could achieve this by:

- Finding ways to acknowledge and normalise any emotional draws to your discipline. This may include explicitly acknowledging people who have publicly spoken about their lived experience who have made significant contributions to your discipline and/or made significant changes in society.
- Providing information about the support available for students as well as the benefits and challenges that engaging with this content can offer for learning and wellbeing.
- Including this information in induction and/or bridging materials that students use to orientate themselves to a new programme or qualification or between modules and levels of study.

Best practice example

[Your emotional resilience skills: A guide for students studying emotionally challenging content](#)
(Appendix 1)

This guide was initially authored by Ruth Wall, Associate Lecturer at The Open University based on her professional teaching expertise. It has now been updated in collaboration with the emotional resilience team led by Dr Leigh Downes, Senior Lecturer in Criminology at The Open University.

4. Maximise student choice and control by design

The classroom can be understood as a 'space for feeling' (O'Byrne 2014, p. 66), in which students are identifying and working with their emotional responses as they reconsider their identities, make sense of lived experience, and put what they are learning into practice (Dalton 2010; Klesse 2010; Bryan 2016; Connelly & Joseph-Salisbury 2019).

Given current knowledge of how widespread experiences of traumatic events, mental health issues, and violence are, it is highly likely that some of your students and colleagues will bring lived experience into their learning. Some students recognised the strengths that this lived experience can add to a discipline:

“You need everyone from all different kinds of backgrounds to a topic like this. You need that diversity, I think. Someone who comes with a little bit of experience will have value, can add value to the discipline in its own right.”

Some students recommended that educators should engage more with student’s backgrounds and lived experiences when teaching sensitive topics. For example:

“Asking a bit more about the individuals background in case some has been through difficult times in the past or present”

“Ask students more about their background and if they have experienced any issues that may occur in the modules.”

However, students will be at different stages of recovery, so it is crucial to prepare teaching materials that do not pressure students to disclose their lived experience and personal connections to a topic in front of their peers and offer a range of opt-outs that maximise student choice and control over how and when they engage with topics.

When preparing your teaching materials:

- Start from the assumption that students who are directly affected by the case studies, examples, and topics you use in your teaching will be in your class. If you can remove the barriers to learning for these students, you will remove barriers for all students.
- Think about what is pedagogically important for your course – are graphic pictures, rich descriptions, and audio-visual accounts necessary? Can you design in alternatives such as figure descriptions, transcripts, or case studies to offer choice for students on how they can best engage with these materials?
- Communicate adjustments that are available for students who can identify any content that is very likely to be emotionally challenging for them. Adjustments could include opting-out of one or more group discussions, attending certain lectures or sessions online (thereby allowing students to step away more discreetly), or providing recordings of sessions that students can then study at their own pace.
- Explore opportunities to collaborate with your university student mental health and wellbeing team, student support colleagues and the safeguarding team. They may hold valuable information about what kinds of emotional challenges students are experiencing in your subject or course, which can inform how you prepare your materials. They may also be

well-placed to help you to evaluate the impacts of your teaching on student mental health and wellbeing.

- Explore opportunities to signpost to, and collaborate with, wider campaigns in your university and local area on issues raised. Students value opportunities to use their experiences to contribute to social change.
- Give students and your wider teaching team (including teaching assistants) as much notice and information as possible. This will allow people the time needed to prepare to engage with these materials.

5. Notify students and staff about content in advance

Are students made aware of any emotionally challenging content before the course?

Trigger warnings have been the subject of much debate. However, whilst most students do not use content notes students are generally supportive of them being there for the students who do need them. Research suggests that students who use content notes do so to enhance their engagement with material rather than to avoid material. For students who use them, content notes and warnings can be crucial in helping students to engage with materials they find emotionally challenging. Content notes are particularly important for students who have previously experienced traumatic events and students with post-traumatic stress disorders.

For instance, one student told us:

“I was more prepared for what was coming, I could make myself as calm as possible before embarking on the sensitive material. If the warning was not there I would have dissociated almost immediately.”

Some ideas on how to achieve this include:

- Make a comprehensive list of topics, case studies, and examples available for students and your teaching team before or at the start of the module.
- Develop and implement a strategy on content notes that best fits the requirements of your institution and subject.

Best practice example

[Content Note Guidance](#) (Appendix 2)

Adapted from Distressing Content published by Securing Greater Accessibility (SeGA) at The Open University by Kate Lister, The Open University

6. Design and integrate emotional resilience skill activities in your teaching

Have you included a variety of opportunities for students to identify and reflect on their emotional resilience skills?

Whilst early acknowledgement of emotional impacts was helpful for students, students also valued multiple opportunities to return to this issue and embed it throughout a module or course. For example, this student told us:

“I guess one of the things I kind of felt was that it wasn’t really an aspect of the course that was talked about much after [the start]. So you know, it was really helpful at the time ... but then that whole notion of being emotionally impacted by stuff was kind of just put in the bin [...] So for me there definitely could be some work done to make it a topic of conversation throughout the course.”

Below are some ideas of how to embed and integrate opportunities to examine emotional responses and emotional resilience skills:

- Design a dedicated teaching session with students to identify and share techniques. This could be online, hybrid or face-to-face. These sessions benefit from finding innovative ways for students to contribute to the discussion anonymously in real time via polls or online notetaking tools like Padlet.

Best practice

[Emotional resilience study skills tutorial slides](#) (Appendix 3)

Designed by Anne Alvaer and Ruth Wall, The Open University

- Scaffold courses with activities, which could form part of a workshop or seminar, or independent online task, that help to validate a wide range of emotional responses to content they are learning about or doing independent projects about.

Best practice

[Top Tips: Using the Emotional Resilience Video Series in your Teaching](#) (Appendix 4)

This resource offers some suggested questions and activities around eight short videos (with students, educators, academic researchers, and student mental health advisors) that are available for you to use in your teaching on the [emotional resilience resource hub](#). This is particularly helpful in supporting students to achieve the following learning outcomes:

- identify emotional responses to content
- understand the impacts of emotional wellbeing on study
- understand the emotional and personal journeys in sensitive research
- build a personal emotional resilience toolkit
- identify the benefits of engaging with sensitive topics for learning and wellbeing

7. Include clear and accurate signposting to available support for staff and students

Is information about available support services made accessible to staff and students?

Having access to clear information about available support for students was considered very important for some of the students we spoke to:

“I do think that it’s really important that there were the resources, like if you found something challenging this is where you can go on the page. Where there was something emotional. I think that was really, really, really good because sometimes you might not be able to – or maybe you might feel so triggered that you might just want to shut down. So having that right at your fingertips, you know, that you can just click there and you find all these resources”

The amount of information that students and staff receive in universities can be overwhelming. Many students shared their frustrations about not being able to quickly find information about support around emotionally challenging topics when they needed it:

“Making it easier to find places that can aid and support us, because I have found that I feel like I should just call student support, and that isn’t really helpful when struggling with issues dealt with in the material”

Therefore, making sure that all students have access to clear and accurate information that can signpost them to sources of support is crucial. Some ideas on how to implement this include:

- Providing a clear ‘what you can do if you have been affected by the content in your studies’ section in mental health and wellbeing information offered at a subject level, for instance in a student or programme handbook available in hard copy and online.
- Providing signposting information about local and/or national specialist support services as well as any specialist support offered by your university for topics that have any specific specialist support service provision (e.g., suicide, domestic abuse, addiction, bereavement).
- Consider providing this information in range of formats such as a slide at the end of a lecture or tutorial, a list of support services sent out to students by email or included as a section in module guide available in print and/or online.

Best practice example

Content note and topic-specific specialist support services

Please be aware, this week focuses on [domestic abuse] and contains [a video featuring a victim of domestic abuse talking about her experiences, which includes arrest and child separation]. If you are likely to find this distressing, please consider carefully how you might want to engage with this. You can find suggestions and help in ‘Your emotional resilience skills: A guide for students studying emotionally challenging content’ that you can access [here]. You might also want to check in with your tutor at this point to see how they may be able to support you. You will find a list of specialist support services that support [people who are affected by and/or use domestic violence and abuse] below.

Specialist services for [domestic and sexual violence]

If you want to talk to someone about, or get support for, your own experiences of [violence and abuse], then you may find the following organisations useful. Please check the websites for further information, including telephone helpline numbers and opening hours.

- [Karma Nirvana](#) (support for victims of forced marriage and honour-based violence)
- [Men’s Advice Line](#) (advice and support for men experiencing domestic violence and abuse)
- [National Domestic Violence Helpline](#) (run by Refuge)
- [National LGBT+ Domestic Abuse Helpline](#) (run by Galop, an LGBT+ anti-violence charity)
- [National Rape Crisis helpline](#)

- [Survivors UK](#) (online help for men who have experienced sexual abuse either as a child or an adult).

If you feel that you or someone you know is at risk of harming a partner, you may find the following helpline useful:

- [Respect helpline](#) (concerns about harming family members).

Domestic abuse and gender-based violence are a barrier to equal access to education and employment. The Open University has produced a Domestic Abuse/Gender Based Violence Policy for all students who disclose that they are subjected to domestic abuse and gender-based violence. You can find out more about this policy and how the Open University will respond to these disclosures and support students here.

Adapted from 'Week 19 Contesting responses to gendered violence' DD105: Introduction to Criminology at The Open University by Leigh Downes

8. Design optionality and flexibility into assessments

Assessments are a key source of stress and anxiety for students. Assessments that require students to engage with topics that they find emotionally challenging will add to this emotional burden. When it came to assessments, students told us that they valued having choice over what topics and case studies they needed to cover:

"I mean there was an option to do an essay on it and I chose the other option, it was a or b and I chose right, well, that's okay, I can do b, had I had to have done an essay on that I would have done but because there would have been no choice but because I had the choice I thought, no, I'm not going to read about it."

Students also valued being offered extensions as a matter of course. This eased the pressure on students and the emotional burden of approaching a tutor or lecturer when times were tough:

"I never had to ask for an extension, it was always offered which again made me think you know what, these people actually do care that I'm struggling a wee bit and I'm not having to ask, you know, please, please extend my timeline, they're making that available to me."

Some ideas for assessment design include:

- Avoiding assessments that require students to disclose their lived experience of an emotionally challenging topic

- Include a wide choice of questions and topics in assessments
- Consider a no-fault extension policy, particularly in courses with a lot of emotionally challenging content

9. Make sure that teaching teams have adequate support and training to deliver teaching and assess work

Are the staff involved in delivering the programme/module appropriately resourced and equipped to teach and assess emotionally challenging material?

Like our students, educators can also be affected by the subjects they teach, therefore it is crucial that the entire teaching team has access to the resources and training necessary to prepare to deliver this teaching safely and effectively. Some ideas on how to achieve this include:

- Include issues around teaching and supporting students to learn emotionally challenging topics in your early discussions, for instance during recruitment, induction or briefing sessions at module start, or in teaching team meetings.
- Clarify what mental health and wellbeing support is available for educators in your institution. Provide this information to your teaching team before the module starts.
- Add an item to your regular teaching team meetings to identify any issues that anyone in your team is facing teaching particular topics and develop a collective approach to challenges. You may also want to schedule meetings to support each other, debrief after teaching sessions on emotionally challenging topics, and regularly check-in on the wellbeing of the teaching team.
- Provide a workshop session or space for teaching staff to share and develop approaches to teaching emotionally challenging content. This could be module, department, or faculty wide.

DELIVERING TEACHING ON EMOTIONALLY CHALLENGING CONTENT

1. Top tips on delivering teaching sessions

Delivering a teaching session that includes potentially emotionally challenging material is skilful and many of the approaches recommended here may already be part of your established practice. The aim is not to avoid or dilute difficult materials, but to introduce them in a considered way, recognising students' individual capacities and skills, and giving them space to exercise these in the session to manage any emotions that may come up.

Are students aware of what sessions will cover?

- Provide a schedule of session topics at the start of the course as part of the course outline (see 'Notify students and staff about content in advance' section above). If the session plans have changed or new topics added, ensure students are informed in advance of the session taking place.
- At the start of a session, give students information about what will be covered, making clear any sensitive topics that will be touched on. This can form part of a session outline or can be a standalone content note highlighting sensitive material.

Are students given choices over how and whether to engage with material?

- One way to create an emotionally safe learning environment is to give students as much autonomy over their learning as possible. Plan activities that allow students to choose which topic/s to engage with, or how they engage with it. For example, give them a choice over whether to work alone or with others, or which case study to discuss.
- Make it clear that students can engage with material at the level that feels comfortable and offer 'opt-outs' – such as regular breaks, the option to leave the room (or online space) as required, or the choice to make notes by themselves rather than work in a group.

Are you modelling emotionally resilient approaches to the content?

- Embed emotional resilience skills in your teaching practice (see 'Design and integrate emotional resilience skill activities in your teaching' section above). Recognise that some learning materials may elicit an emotional response and build in teaching on skills to manage

this.

- Consider how you model emotional responses to sensitive material to your students, for example by talking about your own strategies, or the emotional aspects of the course content. You could also draw on 'Educators experiences of teaching and learning emotionally challenging content' videos from the emotional resilience video series (available on the [emotional resilience resource hub](#)), to help normalise emotional responses and model ways of managing emotions in learning and teaching.

- Think carefully about whether and how to run group discussions on potentially emotive topics. If you decide to go ahead, ensure you set boundaries and expectations with the group, and be prepared should students express their feelings about the material. It can be useful to:
 - Remind the group of the learning outcomes of the activity to help them stay on course. It can also be useful to remind them that there may be people in the group with lived experience of the issue.
 - Respond to any emotion displayed by students respectfully, with understanding and compassion. Give them time to express feelings if they wish.
 - Gently refocus students on the learning activity if they become engaged with it emotionally in a way that is taking over the time and preventing the learning outcomes being met

Are you prepared if students need further help?

- Include signposting to support at the same time as introducing potentially emotionally challenging content (see 'Include clear and accurate signposting to available support for staff and students' section above). For example, provide a helpline number or information on the student support available in your institution.

- Be prepared that students sometimes choose to disclose personal experiences in group activities and think about how you will manage this. A good model is to **recognise** the disclosure, **respect** the student's experience, and then gently **refocus** the group on the task. At the end of the session, **respond** to the student's disclosure by checking in with them and

seeing if they need further support.

- Be open to discussions or emails with students after sessions that raise difficult issues and make it clear to them how to approach you if they need to – for example by being available after the class, or making it clear they can email you.

2. Marking assessments

The process of setting and marking assignments can have emotional impacts on both students and educators. Students may find the topic of the assignment emotionally challenging, be dealing with assignment stress, or find receiving the feedback emotionally difficult. Staff may face emotional challenges when reading assignments on potentially distressing topics and may have to deal with student distress around assignments, or disclosures of traumatic experiences in the assignment itself. This is a form of emotional labour often invisible in institutional terms (Koster 2011).

Are expectations of the assignment and feedback clear for students and teaching teams?

- When preparing your students for their assessment task, be as clear as possible about what is required. In most cases, there is no expectation that students disclose personal lived experience, but sometimes students can be unclear on this, especially if they are new to higher education, the discipline, or are unfamiliar with the assessment mode. If students are asked to draw on personal experience, educators should work with students to give them autonomy and choice over how and what to share. Students should never feel pressured or expected to disclose any traumatic events.

Does everyone in your teaching team have clear strategies and guidelines for responding to student's emotional responses or disclosures in assessment tasks?

- If a student displays emotion in their assessments, consider how to recognise and validate this in feedback, even if the student also needs guidance on how to write more objectively.
- Make clear in assessment feedback that students can speak with you about anything concerning them about their studies.
- Do not ignore a student's disclosure of lived experience of trauma. If a student discloses something from their past, recognise and validate this in your feedback, and offer to signpost them to your institution's support services as appropriate. If the disclosure was not appropriate for the assessment task (for example, if a student discloses personal

experiences of domestic abuse in a formal essay on domestic abuse), it is important to recognise and affirm the disclosure, while at the same time guiding the student to write more appropriately for the context.

- If a student discloses ongoing traumatic experiences in assignment tasks, be aware of your organisation's safeguarding policies and act accordingly if you feel the student is at risk.

Is everyone in your teaching team aware of the impact on their own wellbeing?

- Repeated and prolonged exposure to potentially distressing content in student assignments can have an emotional impact on staff, and this should be considered at the design stage of the course.
- Recognise whether the assignment content is becoming emotionally challenging for you as an educator as you work through assignments and make use of your skills and the support structures provided by your institution.
- Discuss the assignment of work with colleagues and line managers, to explore the possibility of limiting your repeated exposure to material that may be particularly challenging for you.
- Recognise the emotional labour of the task of marking assignments and take what steps you can to manage your wellbeing, seeking support from your employer if necessary (see '3. Looking after your wellbeing' section below).
- Be aware of 'compassion fatigue' when delivering student feedback, as see this as a sign you may need to take a break or need more support around the marking task.

3. Look after your wellbeing

The needs of staff delivering emotionally challenging content will, ideally, have been considered at the design stage of any module or course (see 'Make sure that teaching teams have adequate support and training to deliver teaching and assess work' section). However, staff may have ongoing needs around the teaching, researching, and writing of potentially distressing material to manage any vicarious or secondary trauma (see, for example, Nikischer 2019). This may be especially a consideration for staff who must engage with distressed students, or who face repeated and prolonged exposure to distressing content, for example through marking assessments.

An open and supportive community of practice will provide some safeguards. However, the risk of teaching emotionally challenging material can be considered a workplace harm and mitigating this needs to be a focus of the institution and managers, as well as educators themselves.

Are staff aware of the sources of support available to them, and are these support structures accessible and varied?

- Ensure formal support such as an Employee Assistance Programme or line management structures are clearly advertised and discussed regularly. As an educator, make use of these services and signpost colleagues to them.
- Encourage collegiate and supportive relationships within teams of educators delivering emotionally challenging material and create spaces where discussion of the emotional impact of the work is acceptable, valued and encouraged. This can be through regular discussions in team meetings, online forum postings, or informal 'check-ins' with colleagues.

Are educators able to exercise their own emotional resilience skills in their teaching?

- Just as students may need to take breaks, work through some content differently, or seek support, so staff may need to exercise similar skills. Ensure time and space for educators to use and develop emotional resilience skills is encouraged and welcomed within the teaching community on the course.
- Consider the impact of repeated exposure to traumatic content on yourself or colleagues and be aware of the risks of secondary trauma.
- Exercise agency when possible – for example by discussing assessment design, teaching, or marking responsibilities to avoid or manage exposure to material that is particularly distressing or triggering for you or a colleague. Because distressing topics are different for everyone, it may be possible for educators to work together to support each other's emotional resilience, by dividing work between them.

References

- Brown, Poppy (2016) The invisible problem? Improving students' mental health. *Higher Education Policy Institute*, 88, 66. Available at: <https://www.hepi.ac.uk/2016/09/22/3592/>
- Bryan, Audrey (2016) The sociology classroom as a pedagogical site of discomfort: Difficult knowledge and the emotional dynamics of teaching and learning. *Irish Journal of Sociology*, **24(1)**: 7–33, DOI: 10.1177/0791603516629463
- Carello, Janice & Lisa D. Butler (2015) Practicing What We Teach: Trauma-Informed Educational Practice. *Journal of Teaching in Social Work*, **35(3)**: 262-278, DOI: 10.1080/08841233.2015.1030059
- Connelly, Laura & Remi Joseph-Salisbury (2019) Teaching Grenfell: The role of emotions in teaching and learning for social change. *Sociology*, **53(6)**: 1026-1042
- Dalton, Derek (2010) 'Crime, law and trauma': a personal reflection on the challenges and rewards of teaching sensitive topics to criminology students. *Enhancing Learning in the Social Sciences*, **2(3)**: 1-18, DOI: 10.11120/elss.2010.02030008
- Downes, Leigh, Ruth Wall & Anne Alvaer (2022) *Towards Emotional Resilience: Supporting student learning of emotive and sensitive content*. Final internal Open University report for FASSTEST (Faculty of Arts and Social Science Scholarship of Teaching and Innovation). More information at: <http://www.open.ac.uk/blogs/FASS-Scholarship/how-can-we-better-support-student-learning-of-sensitive-topics-in-distance-education/>
- Eaton, W. W., Sampson, N., & Kessler, R. C. (2015) Long-term effects of mental disorders on educational attainment in the National Comorbidity Survey ten-year follow-up. *Social Psychiatry and Psychiatric Epidemiology*, 50(10), 1577–1591. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s00127-015-1083-5>
- Eisenberg, D., Golberstein, E., & Hunt, J. B. (2009) Mental health and academic success in college. *The B.E. Journal of Economic Analysis & Policy*, 9(1), 522–541. <https://doi.org/10.2202/1935-1682.2191>
- Hughes, G. & Spanner, L. (2019) *The University Mental Health Charter*. Leeds: Student Minds
- Klesse, Christian (2010) Teaching on 'race' and ethnicity: problems and potentialities related to 'positionality' in reflexive and experiential approaches to teaching and learning. *Enhancing Learning in the Social Sciences*, **2(3)**: 1-27, DOI: 10.11120/elss.2010.02030003
- Koster, Shirley (2011) The self-managed heart: teaching gender and doing emotional labour in a higher education institution. *Pedagogy, Culture & Society*, 19:1, 61-77, DOI: [10.1080/14681366.2011.548988](https://doi.org/10.1080/14681366.2011.548988)
- Lowe, Pam & Helen Jones (2010) Teaching and Learning Sensitive Topics. *Enhancing Learning in the Social Sciences*, **2(3)**: 1-7, DOI: 10.11120/elss.2010.02030001
- Lowe, Pam (2015) Lessening Sensitivity: Student experiences of teaching and learning sensitive issues. *Teaching in Higher Education*, **20(1)**: 119-129, DOI: 10.1080/13562517.2014.957272

Nikischer, Andrea (2019) Vicarious Trauma inside the Academe: Understanding the impact of teaching, researching and writing violence. *Higher Education* **77**: 905–916, DOI: 10.1007/s10734-018-0308-4

Office for Students (2019) Mental Health: Are all students being properly supported? Insight brief 5, November 2019. Available at: <https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/publications/mental-health-are-all-students-being-properly-supported/> (Accessed 23 July 2022)

Richardson, John T. E. (2015). Academic attainment in students with mental health difficulties in distance education. *International Journal of Mental Health*, 44(3), 231–240. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00207411.2015.1035084>

Universities UK, (2020) *StepChange: Mentally Healthy Universities*. London: Universities UK Available at: <https://www.universitiesuk.ac.uk/what-we-do/policy-and-research/publications/stepchange-mentally-healthy-universities> (Accessed 14 July 2022)

Zembylas, Michalinos (2020) Against the psychologization of resilience: towards an onto-political theorization of the concept and its implications for higher education. *Studies in Higher Education*, **46(9)**: 1966-1977. DOI: 10.1080/03075079.2019.1711048

Appendix 1



Your emotional resilience skills:

A guide for students studying emotionally challenging content

This guidance is for higher education students who may come across emotionally challenging content as part of their studies. It aims to provide you with practical help and suggestions to help you study topics that are emotive or difficult for you.

What are emotionally challenging topics, and why do we study them?

Academic study involves being curious – about the world, about people, and about the way things are and why, as well as how things could be different. Academics ask questions and seek answers, and as a student in higher education you will be introduced to a wide range of sources, examples, and case studies to help you grasp the central issues and debates of your chosen academic subject.

Many academic disciplines may require engaging with materials that are emotionally challenging. This might be what made you interested in your chosen discipline. There are no fixed rules about what people find upsetting, but common topics that students may find distressing can include:

- human suffering and distress,
- animal suffering or environmental destruction
- injustice or inequality such as racism, homophobia, ableism, or gendered violence

What's the impact of studying emotionally challenging topics?

Studying emotive topics can be motivating and engaging and help relate your developing academic understanding to real world examples. This material can also be empowering. It can help you to make sense of your own past experiences in new ways and find out how you can contribute to making change in your community, career, or wider society.

However, sometimes emotional responses can impact on your learning and wellbeing. Case studies featuring emotionally challenging content can feel different for different people. It is normal to have a wide variety of emotional responses to case studies featuring violence, injustice, or human suffering. Most people find materials like this upsetting, and you may even be surprised by your own emotional responses to this content. When faced with emotionally challenging content, you may feel a range of emotions such as sadness, anger, frustration, or fear. Over time this might lead to sleep difficulties, nightmares, low energy and feeling tired or worn out.

Some people may find that stimuli (such as images, words or phrases, sounds, smells, people, places, and situations) can bring back or 'trigger' vivid memories and emotions of a previous traumatic

event. This can be experienced as emotional or physical symptoms such as feeling frightened, stressed, or panicky, or becoming breathless, nauseous, or dizzy. Some people may experience a worsening of symptoms of conditions such as anxiety, depression, or post-traumatic stress disorder.

Your emotional responses may contribute to feeling a sense of imposter syndrome (not feeling cut out to study a subject with a lot of emotionally challenging topics). This could even lead you to think about withdrawing from your studies. You are not alone in feeling this way and there are suggestions for who you can talk to below. Remember your emotional responses are important, you already have some skills to process them – and you can develop new ones. Noticing and working with the wide range of emotional responses you might experience in your study (see figure 1), and then identifying and applying your emotional resilience skills, can enrich your learning and wellbeing.

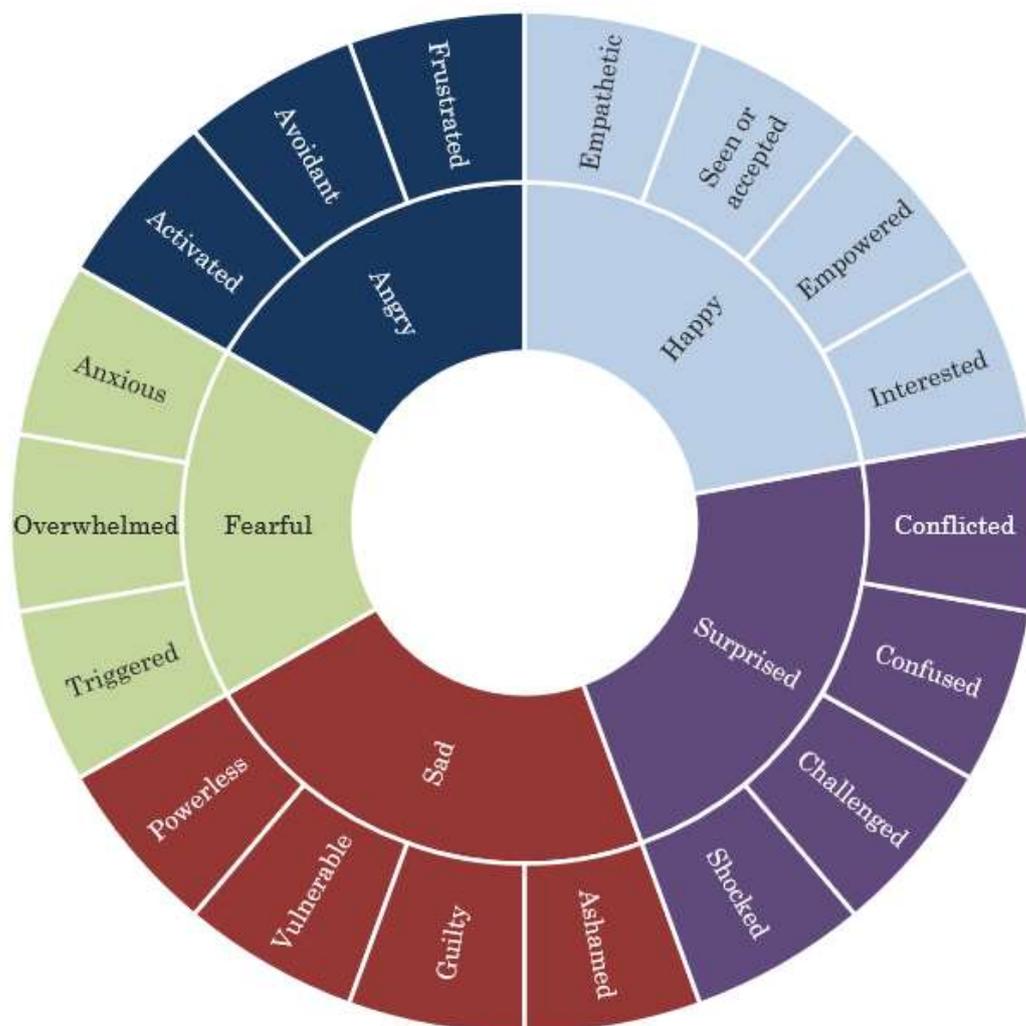


Figure 1: The range of emotional responses that students reported when studying emotionally challenging content ([Downes et al 2022](#))

How to take care of yourself when studying emotionally challenging topics

There are various strategies that you can try if you find course content emotionally challenging. Here are some strategies and skills that draws on research with Open University criminology students ([Downes et al 2022](#)) about how they managed their emotional responses to topics they found challenging in their studies:

Apply your existing skills

- You may already have a whole range of skills that you can now apply to your studies. You may be, or have been, in other environments where you learnt to detach yourself from difficult emotional experiences, used 'professional distance' to cope with upsetting situations, or did things to help you to 'switch off' or look after yourself after a stressful event. Think about how you might now apply these skills in your studies. Your skills can help you to decide how and when to best engage with content that you might find challenging.

Plan ahead

- If you know that there are certain topics (such as sexual assault) that will be difficult for you, you can take steps to prepare how and when you study these topics. You might find that you are able to engage with this content if you know about it in advance; or you may need to avoid it altogether.
- Some courses have content notes, and others give a preview of topics at the start, which will help you make an informed decision about how and when you can engage with the material. Alternatively, your tutor or lecturer can let you know what topics will come up in your course and help you make a study plan to ensure you look after yourself whilst still meeting the learning outcomes of the course.

Embrace flexibility

- Many people find that simply taking a short break helps them manage their feelings and gain a sense of calm. Plan regular study breaks and allow yourself more time for breaks if you are studying material that you find challenging.
- Explore your options of how you can best participate in learning events on topics you find challenging. Adjustments could include opting-out of one or more collaborative activities, attending some tutorials online instead of face-to-face (thereby allowing you to step away discreetly), or accessing recordings of sessions that you can then study at your own pace.
- Think about where and when you study material that you find challenging. What boundaries can help you to switch off and avoid carrying difficult emotions into your personal life? This might include studying materials in a particular place, for instance in a library or workspace rather than at home. Or it might help to study materials at certain times of the day rather than studying it late at night just before you go to bed.
- If there is content that is very emotionally challenging for you, explore how you can engage with it differently. For example, if it is written material you could decide to skim read it, or if

it is audio or audio-visual material you could decide to read a transcript rather than watching or listening to it. You might also be able to avoid using a particularly distressing case study or example in your assignment.

- You could engage with the material in short bursts and intersperse your study time with something you enjoy, helping you to relax. Alternatively, you might decide to leave the topic for now, and return to it later when you feel stronger – sometimes gradual and repeated exposure to an emotionally challenging topic can strengthen your ability to study it again.

Use your support system

- Sometimes being a distance student is isolating and thinking about emotionally challenging content alone can make it harder to deal with. Talking to others about the content can help you name and manage what you are feeling. You could talk to friends or family, or to other students on your course, face to face or online.
- You can talk to your tutor or lecturer about a topic or assignment that is coming up on your course that you expect to find challenging. You can also talk to your **[insert details of available student support services and resources]**. Your emotional wellbeing is important and using these services when you need to is all part of caring for yourself and succeeding in your studies.

Be reflective

- Thinking about why you are studying can help you make sense of your feelings. Your motivations to study might relate to academic or career goals, or to your personal life or past. Having your motivation clear can help you to carry on when the material is challenging. For example, students have reported that reflecting on how they could use their own experiences to help others in the future helps them to work with challenging content. This can help you to stay engaged with what you are studying.

Physical self-care

- Many people find movement – such as exercise, gardening, or walking – a useful way to channel difficult or strong emotional responses.
- Physical self-care such as taking a nap, a relaxing bath, or having a favourite meal or a hot drink, can all help you to find calm and balance if you are experiencing a challenging emotional response to what you are studying.

Emotional self-care

- Recognising that emotional responses are a normal part of learning can be very helpful because it validates and acknowledges that feelings are an important part of learning new things. Be gentle with yourself and acknowledge that having a strong emotional response to a topic is a normal and empathetic reaction. Even experienced academics can become emotional about the topics they study.

- People can find various things helpful for managing difficult feelings, including journaling /writing. Some people also find mindfulness, breathing exercises, positive self-talk or affirmations are helpful in managing challenging emotional responses.
- You may find it useful to set up some ‘glimmers’ in your home or study space. You can think of glimmers as the opposite of triggers. Glimmers are cues of safety that can help to bring yourself back to a calm and peaceful place. This could include a picture of a loved one, a playlist of music, or using a favourite scent, essential oil, or candle. Feel free to try out different things to find out what works best for you.

Engage with the things that bring you joy

- Studying can feel all-encompassing at times. Engaging with the things that make you happy – anything from TV shows or video games to music, craft, art or pets – can help you cope with any difficult feelings.
- Make time for play and fun with your loved ones. Give yourself space and time to enjoy yourself. Experiencing joy can help you to manage your studies when they get tough.

Where to get further help

If your course content has made you very distressed, or exacerbated a mental health condition, you might need to seek further help, below are some suggestions for where you can find help inside and outside of **[name of institution]**.

- **If your feelings have made it difficult to keep up with your studies or complete your assignments**, speak to your tutor or lecturer. They may be able to offer you an extension, or help you catch up. Remember that your tutor can also advise where potentially challenging material is in the course and guide you on the extent to which you need to engage with it to complete your assignments.
- **If you need to talk through your emotional responses to study content** **[insert information about available student support services]**.
- **If your studies have exacerbated an existing mental health condition** you may want to talk to your GP, counsellor or professional if you are already in touch with mental health services. **[Insert information about available mental health support services for students]**
- **If during your studies, you recognise that you are, or have been, affected by domestic abuse or gender-based violence (GBV)** you may wish to disclose this to **[name of institution]** **[Insert information about GBV student policy and link to information about local/national support services]**.
- **If your mental health and wellbeing has been impacted by an incident of discrimination** that has happened to you or someone else at **[name of institution]**, you are encouraged to report it **[insert information and link to reporting mechanism e.g. Report and Support tool]**.

- **If you are interested in support and resources around studying with a mental health issue and the everyday challenges of student life** [Student Minds](#) is a charity that provide specialist support for students struggling with their mental health. They also run [Student Space](#) that provides expert advice and information, student stories and support to help all students to navigate the challenges of student life, as well as support via [text chat](#), [phone](#), [webchat](#), and [email](#). There is a list of other [external mental health services](#) available on the Help Centre.
- **If you are in crisis, you should seek help immediately.** If you or someone else is in danger, call 999 or go to your local Accident & Emergency department now. Alternatively, you can speak anonymously to a helpline like the [Samaritans](#), who are open 24 hours a day on 116 123 (UK). If you need help urgently for your mental health, but it is not an emergency, [get help from NHS 111 online](#) or call 111.

Appendix 2



Content Note Guidance

Some topics can be emotionally challenging for students to engage with. Certain topics can bring up distressing emotions, memories, or mental health issues. For students with mental health issues or who have experienced trauma, this can be a crucial accessibility issue.

Students who have experienced trauma may find that stimuli can bring back (or trigger) memories and distressing emotions associated with a previous traumatic event. Helping students to identify and manage these trauma triggers can help recovery. Therefore, when modules refer to content that is likely to be distressing or triggering for students, we need to signpost this and support students to engage with these topics in a way that is less compromising to their wellbeing.

It is, of course, difficult to identify all the content that can be distressing for students. What is experienced as sensitive or emotive is personally defined, highly individual and connected to lived experience. The ability to engage with emotionally challenging topics, to make sense of lived experiences and develop skills to help others in the future, may also be a key motivator behind students' study choices. Students may also find different things difficult at different times, dependent on changes in their own personal circumstances and global events. Different topics can also require a different response. So, it may be helpful to start with the following approach that classifies content into three categories with recommendations for content notes and signposting to support and guidance.

Category A

Category A topics require the most signposting and support, as these can trigger harmful behaviours in students. Category A topics include:

- Suicide

- Eating disorders
- Self-harm or body hatred
- Addiction

If a module contains category A topics, it should have the following adjustments:

Strongly advised	A section on emotionally challenging content in the accessibility and module guide
Strongly advised	A content note at the beginning of the session or section containing emotionally challenging content
Strongly advised	Signposting support, e.g. links to guidance (Your emotional resilience skills: A guide for students studying emotionally challenging content) mental health, wellbeing and topic-specific specialist support (university and/or local/national service)
Strongly advised	A content note at the beginning of the module

Category B

Category B topics may trigger flashbacks of experienced trauma. Category B topics include (but are not limited to):

- Abuse (sexual, physical, emotional, domestic or other)
- Rape
- Severe or graphic violence
- Murder or genocide
- Child abuse, paedophilia, incest or child death
- Abduction or kidnapping
- Human trafficking or forced prostitution
- Racism, hate speech or targeted abuse (e.g. transphobia, antisemitism, homophobia, islamophobia, ableism, etc.)
- Stillbirth, miscarriage or traumatic childbirth
- Colonialism, slavery and intergenerational trauma
- Severe mental distress or illness, psychosis or trauma
- Severe debt

If a module contains category B topics, it should have the following adjustments:

Strongly advised	A section on emotionally challenging content in the accessibility and module guide
Advised	A content note at the beginning of the session or section containing emotionally challenging content
Advised	Signposting support, e.g. links to guidance (Your emotional resilience skills: A guide for students studying emotionally challenging content) mental health, wellbeing and topic-specific specialist support (university and/or local/national service)
Optional	A content note at the beginning of the module

Category C

Category C topics may be painful or distressing to students. Category C topics include (but are not limited to):

- Animal cruelty (including testing and experiments)
- Death or severe illness
- Mental illness
- Divorce or family separation
- Impacts of mental illness on children (e.g. post-natal depression impact on child attachment)
- Common phobias (e.g. needles, blood, spiders)
- Gender dysphoria (please note, if this relates to body hatred or self-harm, it should go in category A)

If a module contains category C topics, the following adjustments are advised:

Advised	A section on emotionally challenging content in the accessibility and module guide
Advised	An in-text content note at the beginning of the session or section containing emotionally challenging content
Optional	Signposting support, e.g. links to guidance (Your emotional resilience skills: A guide for students studying emotionally challenging content) mental health,

	wellbeing and topic-specific specialist support (university and/or local/national service)
Optional	A content note at the beginning of the module

As discussed above many topics can be distressing, depending on context and how they are addressed in a module. **This page aims to provide broad guidance, but the decision of what adjustments to adopt is made by the teaching team. It is recommended that you regularly seek anonymous feedback from your students to identify topics and develop your approach.**

Example text: beginning of module

The following is example text that may be adapted and included in advance of the first teaching session or included in a module guide or handbook.

Some topics we are covering in this module may be distressing. They may touch on difficult experiences that you have come into contact with (like *[examples]*) or deal with subjects which may be distressing for you (e.g. *[examples]*).

We'd suggest that before reading on you check whether any topics in the module might be challenging for you to engage with. This might involve looking over the titles for each week of the module and noticing whether any emotions come up for you and what they are. Do you feel anxious or angry at the thought of certain topics, for example? If so, we recommend looking at the guidance 'Your emotional resilience skills: A guide for students studying emotionally challenging content' which you can find *[add details of how students can access this guidance]* and speaking to your *[add appropriate educator/academic support]* about your support needs to ensure they are able to support you.

Example text: beginning of week or activity

The following is example text that may be adapted and included in at the beginning of a session containing potentially distressing content.

Please be aware, this week/session/activity discusses *[topic.]* If you are likely to find this distressing, please consider carefully how you might want to engage with this. You can find suggestions in the 'Your emotional resilience skills: A guide for students studying emotionally challenging content' guidance, *[add details of how students can access this guidance]*. You might also want to check in with *[add appropriate educator/academic support]* at this point to see how they may be able to support you.

Or

In this activity/session, you'll be asked to *[activity]*. If you are concerned this might adversely affect your mental health, you might like to skip this activity or engage with it only very lightly. Please speak to *[add appropriate educator/academic support]* if you have any questions.

This guidance is adapted from Distressing Content published by Securing Greater Accessibility (SeGA) at The Open University initially authored by Kate Lister.

Appendix 3: Student emotional resilience study skills tutorial slides



Emotional resilience study skills

Based on materials produced as part of an emotional resilience research project by Leigh Downes, Ruth Wall and Anne Alvaer

All photographs are used under the terms of [Creative Commons](#) licensing, exclusively for educational purposes.



Content warning

This tutorial focuses on how to study potentially emotive and sensitive material.

Participants will be encouraged to participate and may give examples of topics and case studies that could be distressing.

Agenda

Why do we study emotive topics?

What is emotional resilience and how do we develop it?

Study approaches for emotionally challenging module material.

Techniques for managing well-being when studying.

A bit about this session

- This session is based on a research project on how undergraduate criminology students managed studying emotive topics
- The research project emerged from a recognition that we need to talk more about the impact of studying this content, and how to do it well and safely



Academic study can be emotive...

- Case studies that are distressing
- Case studies that connect to our own lived experience
- Accounts of human pain or suffering
- Accounts of injustice
- No 'easy answers' ...

So why do we do it?

NOTE:

- What counts as an 'emotive' topic is different for everyone! There is no 'right' way to feel about a particular topic or case study.

What motivates us to study or research hard things?

What motivates us to study or research hard things?

- Wanting to understand why things happen
- Wanting to prevent human pain or suffering
- Wanting to make sense of our own experiences and the world around us
- Wanting to 'give voice' to people – or ourselves
- Wanting to 'bear witness' to injustice
- Wanting to work in a related field

Mixed feelings ...

Many students expect to study real life and potential difficult issues.

Many experience a complex a mix of positive and negative emotional responses during their study, for example, feeling sad and angry alongside feeling interested and empowered.

What are some of the benefits and challenges of studying emotionally challenging topics?

Benefits	Challenges


To study these topics, we need emotional resilience

Emotional resilience: the ability to 'bounce back' from difficult or traumatic experiences.



Benefits of emotional resilience skills:

- reduced stress
- improved well-being
- greater academic achievement
- increased social engagement
- important employability skill



Emotional resilience study techniques

Some approaches to study emotive content



Suggestions: (the list is not exhaustive)

Theme	Technique
Flexibility	Take a break, time out, take space
Support	Family and friends, therapist, mentor, tutor, pets, peers
Body	Exercise, go for walk, sleep/rest, bath/shower, food/drink, gardening, medication, smoking
Joy	TV/ films, video games/audio book, music and sounds, hobbies, faith
Self-care	Mindfulness/Meditation, positive self-talk and affirmation, relaxation, diary/journal

Know when you need help

- Most of the time, most of us are good at managing our emotional responses
- Occasionally, we might need more help...
 - Your tutor is not qualified in mental health, but can provide encouragement and support in your studies
 - Available student support services
 - Other students can be a great source of support
 - Friends and family outside study
 - Professional help and support

Take home message

Studying can expose us to emotive and difficult content.

Emotional resilience skills:

- are important for well being
- can be learnt, developed and improved upon
- leads to greater academic achievements, increased social engagement and is an important employability skill

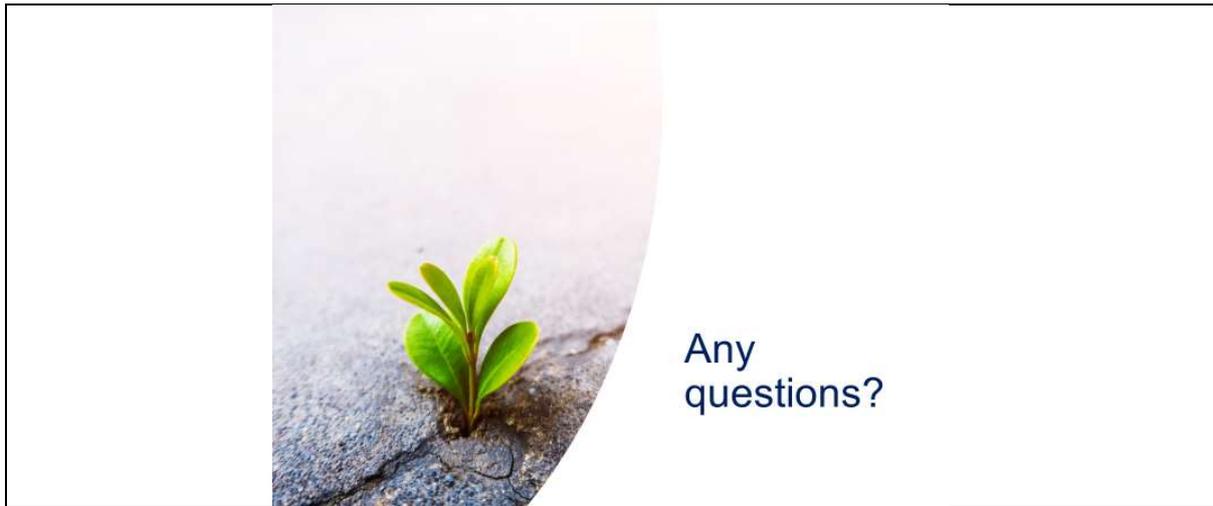
So

- develop a strategy that works for you
- listen to your body and emotions
- plan how to reduce stress if you are negatively affected by the module material

Going further

[How can we better support student learning of sensitive topics in distance education? | FASS Centre for Scholarship and Innovation \(open.ac.uk\)](#)

- **If you are interested in support and resources around studying with a mental health issue and the everyday challenges of student life** [Student Minds](#) is a charity that provide specialist support for students struggling with their mental health. They also run [Student Space](#) that provides expert advice and information, student stories and support to help all students to navigate the challenges of student life, as well as support via [text chat](#), [phone](#), [webchat](#), and [email](#).



Appendix 4: Top Tips: Using the Emotional Resilience Video Series in your Teaching



Top Tips: Using the Emotional Resilience Video Series in your Teaching

The emotional resilience video series consists of eight short videos that have been co-created with students, educators, academic researchers, and student mental health advisors. Each person was asked to share their insights from their experiences of learning, teaching, or researching a topic that they found emotionally challenging in some way.

These videos can be accessed on the [emotional resilience resource hub](#) and used in any combination to support university students to achieve any of the following learning outcomes:

- identify emotional responses to content
- understand the impacts of emotional wellbeing on study
- explore how the personal and emotional can overlap in the study of sensitive topics
- build a personal emotional resilience toolkit
- identify the benefits of engaging with sensitive topics for learning and wellbeing

This guide provides a summary of each video, ideas for questions and student-centred activities, as well as suggestions of resources to go further, which you may wish to try out with your students.

1. Student experiences of learning emotionally challenging content

These videos may be of particular benefit to introduce students to the impacts of mental health and wellbeing on learning.

1.1. Video summaries

Arabella Cox (02:30 mins)

Arabella is a mature part-time criminology distance student who initially struggled with her diagnosis of bipolar depression. In this short video Arabella shares her experience of withdrawing from a course on mental health after she was triggered by some of the content. She talks about how she returned to study criminology, her insights into being triggered, and what she has learned from her study of sensitive content.

Kyle Andrews (05:30 mins)

Kyle studied social science at a distance whilst he was dealing with depression and anxiety. In this short video Kyle describes some of the challenges he faced in his studies including self-motivation, confidence, and work-life balance. He shares his insights on how he overcame these challenges and reflects on his capabilities and achievements.

1.2. Questions to consolidate understanding

The following questions may be helpful:

1. How can mental health and wellbeing impact on learning?
2. How can sensitive topics impact on learning?
3. What does 'being triggered' look and feel like?
4. What challenges can students with mental health issues face?
5. How can these challenges be tackled?
6. What are the benefits of studying sensitive topics?

1.3. Student-centred activities

You could design an activity that could include supporting students to:

- identify what they would do if they or someone they knew was triggered by study content
- identify barriers and enablers to engaging with available support if faced with mental health and wellbeing challenges during their studies

1.4. Going further

Student Minds offer a wide range of [resources](#) to navigate the challenges that university students can face as well as help to [find support](#) for mental health at university for themselves, their friends or their loved ones.

2. Academic experiences of emotionally challenging research

These videos may be of particular benefit to students who are undertaking their own dissertations or independent projects.

2.1. Video summaries

Steve Tombs (04:26 mins) *This video has a content note for discussion of death, bereavement, disasters and the Grenfell Tower Fire.*

Steve is a Professor in Criminology who specialises in research and campaign work around state and corporate killing and avoidable deaths. In this short video, he talks about his emotional responses and how his personal and professional worlds overlapped in his research on the Grenfell Tower Fire.

Sharon Mallon (07:05 mins)

Sharon is a Senior Lecturer in Mental Health who specialises in suicide and suicide bereavement research. In this short video, she talks about her experience of doing research about the impacts of suicide on bereaved families. She talks about how she prepared herself for doing interviews with bereaved family members in their homes and what strategies she developed to process and manage the emotional responses she experienced during her fieldwork.

2.2. Questions to consolidate understanding

1. What emotional challenges did the academics experience in their research?
2. To what extent do you think that not having a personal connection to a topic is protective?
3. What strategies did the academics put in place to help them to get through their research?
4. How could emotional responses in research be a useful form of knowledge?
5. What are some of the rewards of emotionally challenging research?

2.3. Student-centred activities

You could design an activity that could include supporting students to:

- Develop a plan for doing emotionally challenging research
- Explore existing policy on emotionally demanding research that mitigate risks to student mental health and wellbeing
- Consider what a policy on emotionally demanding research could look like in their department or institution

2.4. Going further

[Sheffield Emotionally Demanding Research Network](#) – this network was co-led by a postgraduate student Emma Nagouse. They co-produced a brand-new guidance paper related to Emotionally Demanding Research with the University Research Ethics Committee, which can be accessed [here](#).

Campbell, Rebecca (2002) *Emotionally Involved: The Impact of Researching Rape* (1st ed.). Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203613511> (this book is mentioned in Sharon Mallon's video)

3. Student Mental Health Advisors experiences of supporting students

These videos may be of particular benefit to help students to identify the key signs of emotional distress, develop their emotional resilience skills, and demystify accessing university mental health and wellbeing support services.

3.1. Video summaries

Ashley Cave (04:20 mins) This video has a content note for mention of suicide and childhood sexual abuse.

Ashley is a student mental health adviser working in a campus university with experience of supporting students with mental health difficulties. In this short video Ashley shares her experience of issues that she can find difficult that come up in her job and how this has been shaped by changes in her personal circumstances. She also talks about the key signs of emotional distress as well as the draw to and challenges of studying sensitive topics.

Neill Boddington (06:38 mins)

Neill is a mental health advisor at a distance learning institution with experience of supporting students and staff. In this short video he talks about how to spot some of the key signs of emotional distress, the benefits of creating a coping strategy, how to talk to someone about support needs, and offers some practical strategies to help navigate emotional responses.

3.2. Questions to consolidate understanding

The following questions may be helpful:

1. What are some of the key signs of emotional distress?
2. How does our sense of emotional sensitivity connect with our unique personal circumstances?
3. How can independent projects on sensitive topics be challenging?
4. What strategies are suggested?
5. What positive opportunities are there in studying topics that are emotionally challenging?

3.3. Student-centred activities

You could design an activity that could include supporting students to:

- identify what their coping script could look like by completing the sentence: 'when I feel, [X], I will, [X]'
- identify their own support needs
- identify what strategies work for them across different situations e.g., in a seminar, a lecture, in student accommodation, at home, or at work.

4. Educators experiences of teaching and learning emotionally challenging content

These videos may be of particular benefit to normalise emotional responses in teaching and learning identify and develop their emotional resilience skills.

4.1. Video summaries

Anne Alvaer (04:18 mins)

Anne is an Associate Lecturer at a distance university who teaches on a range of social science and access modules. In this short video, she talks about the kinds of topics that she finds emotionally challenging to teach and how she deals with her emotional responses. Anne also offers advice for students who are facing emotionally challenging content in their learning.

Ruth Wall (08:19 mins)

Ruth is an Associate Lecturer at a distance university who teaches criminology and social sciences. In this short video, she reflects on the emotional responses that she experienced in her teaching of emotionally challenging topics. Ruth outlines what educators can do to support students to engage with content that is emotionally challenging to study. She offers some advice for people who are going to be teaching and learning emotionally challenging content.

4.2. Questions to consolidate understanding

1. What did the educators find difficult to teach?
2. What strategies did the educators put in place to help them to deal with their emotional responses?
3. Why can it be difficult to express emotional responses in academic spaces?
4. What advice do the educators offer for students who are preparing to study difficult or triggering content?
5. What are some of the rewards of learning emotionally challenging topics?

4.3. Student-centred activities

You could design an activity that could include supporting students to:

- carry out a module content review and identify potentially difficult topics
- identify their emotional resilience skills or ‘what works for you’ (you may find the table below helpful)
- create a study plan to prepare students to identify what they can do if they experience emotional responses in their learning
- map what resources and support are available for students

Emotional resilience skills can include:

<i>Studying flexibly</i>	Taking a break; taking time out; studying in short bursts, studying ahead of schedule, opting out of group discussions/lectures, studying online or independently for some topics
<i>Social support</i>	Talking to and/or spending time with family & friends, seeking support from a mentor, tutor or counsellor, spending time with pets, connecting with peers
<i>Reflection</i>	Making connections between course content and personal life, work experiences, motivation for study. Please note that not all students will be

	ready to engage in reflection activities about topics they have lived experience of and/or find sensitive.
<i>Shift of study approach</i>	Taking a different approach to study which can be more detached, objective or have a sense of academic/professional distance. Extra planning and preparation to study a particular topic.
<i>Physical self-care</i>	Practices that involve movement and/or nurture the body can help to process emotions and provide a distraction. This can include doing exercise, going for a walk; gardening; sleep/rest; taking a bath/shower; favourite food/drink; and medication.
<i>Joy</i>	An activity that is joyful, which could be used as a reward, way to unwind or to switch off from study. This could include TV, film, video games & audio books; music and sound; hobbies; faith practices.
<i>Emotional self-care</i>	Practices that attend to emotional self. This could include mindfulness/meditation; positive self-talk & affirmations; relaxation; diary/journal.