

**Ruth.Tudor**

Yeah. And that kind of leads, us quite nicely onto kind of the next kind of topic is what kind of strategies and skills there for can help navigate those sensitive and emotive topics on a course. You know what, as as a tutor who I I my my course has children and young people and so we we have been covering COVID and the mental health and poverty and things like that in the course of that I I lecture on. So, what can I be doing as a lecturer or what can the OU or any institution be doing to support students when we are dealing with those emotive topics and those in those emotive situations, how can we support students in that situation?

**Cinnomen.McGuigan**

Can I say something really, really trite? Be there, literally be there, have that open door policy and be that person that says I am here. I am willing to listen. Might not be able to fix everything for you but I'm able to be a space where you can help unpack some of that and look to signpost to people who are better able to offer those levels of support. That for me during some of the worst times of my life having somebody that was there to go. I can't fix this.

**Ruth.Tudor**

Just, yeah.

**Cinnomen.McGuigan**

There's nothing I can do that's gonna make any of this any better. But I'm here. I have ears and a shoulder, and I am here for whatever you need to unpack and process. And that for me, even though knowing nothing's gonna change, I'm still gonna have to deal with all of the crap that's been brought up. But just knowing that I had somebody unjudgementally willing to listen, and I find that within my friend groups as well. And the tutors that I respect and love and still have relationships with now.

Are those that are willing to go? I may not have all the answers, but I'm willing to listen to the question and let's see if there's anything we can do. So, for me, the be in there is key and now I'll leave it to people who actually have real answers to talk.

**Ruth.Tudor**

No, that's that's a very real answer Cin. But sorry Arabella.

**Arabella**

So. Yeah. No, I was saying not at all Cin. But for me, if I was in say, I've only ever been to 1 tutorial since I started the OU three years ago.

And if we were in that situation and we we were doing, say, DD105 where there's you know, Grenfell tower and domestic abuse and all sorts and the riots, which is one thing that, that or in DD102, the riots triggered me.

And then I think, you know, discussion is great, having an open discussion and because we're terrible about talking about stuff, we still skirt over issues we don't talk about the elephant in the room.

And we I I can't imagine being a tutor and and evoking all these emotions and then just letting my students walk out the room knowing that some of them are more sensitive than others, knowing that some of them are more vulnerable than others and just let them get on with it. It's not all about your TMA and how to present an argument there's there's more to teaching and I think tutors as well have a responsibility or at least to acknowledge that.

But I know when we did the student support, uh spoke to the student support panel, umm, one thing that came up which I've actually included in my EMA and that's coming up. Is a cool down session.

And and I was involved in it. And it it just meant, no, you didn't have to talk about what we discussed, but just to have a chat. Just to sort of like alleviate, that sort of possible tension that may have built up during the actual conversations we were having and and that was really nice. And also as well, I'll just say one more thing. So I don't take over, but.

Talking in the third person. Uh it creating scenarios and talking about that person in the scenario. So the person who's actually affected by the, you know, the subject during the tutorial doesn't have to own up to those feelings themselves. They can say "ohh well, she might feel like this" or "he might do this as a result and blah blah blah". So they're not actually they don't have to say "ohh look at me. I'm over here, I'm vulnerable and blah blah blah." I think that might help.

### **Alison.Kingan**

And so for me, I I I think.

Uh, particularly being a student in isolation, it is knowing that I'm not the only person feeling these emotions and so not necessarily having somebody to speak to. It's just that the the Open University or the institution could provide a document beforehand saying that it's OK to feel, emotion, emotion about these things that you know most or all students will feel this way.

Uh and like Cin said, having somebody to speak to, then who can signpost me to other places where I can get help if I needed to, but something I think would have been really helpful for me, which I didn't receive because I studied these kind of emotive subjects many years ago, was to have strategies sent to me beforehand or available beforehand so that I can consider what I will use.

So, it might be listening to music. It might be going for a walk, it might be doing exercise, it might be, you know, even talking to the Samaritans or somebody else like that. And all students will be different about how they react and what they need. And they will also probably differ according to what the subject is. For me, sometimes it would be listening to certain music would be fine, but other issues, you know that that wouldn't even touch it. You know, I might need to speak to somebody else or I might need, you know, to think right this is a TMA. I'm going to need to do for three weeks because I'm only going to be able to do a little bit of it at a time.

So you know not to suddenly say on the sort of third month this is your really difficult subject. We're going to deal with it now and oh, here are all the strategies for you. Those are the sorts of things the student like me, who likes to be prepared, would like to have beforehand so that I can think about things so that I can do all that I need to do for myself so that I can, I can look through strategies and think, yes, that will work. That won't work and then I can test them rather than you know, because when you're in that.

Really emotive state. That is not the time to be bombarded with the help of the strategies or or whatever. You know, if something can be done beforehand to make students you know, be able to prepare if they want to. That I think that would be really helpful for me and also obviously having the trigger warnings and a little bit about what what the subjects might be because as we've all said today, different things will trigger different people and there will be subject to our think well, yes, I'll be slightly upset over those but it wouldn't stop me doing the module.

There was one module where I didn't do it because I found out what the module was going to include and I knew that I wouldn't be able to do that module and that you know that was fine. That was really useful for me. So that kind of information would be useful kind of beforehand.

As a tutor, I think it's being sensitive because the tutor who wasn't sensitive. Yeah, it really did affect me. And he's the one I remember. His response to something that I said, you know, he told me how I should be feeling about something and that, you know, stuck with me because I was really in a bad emotional state and I didn't need somebody to tell me how I should be feeling, how I should be dealing with things. So, it is being there. But it's also being there in a sensitive way.

### **Ruth.Tudor**

As I was just gonna say , if I look at it at the day job, I'm a pastoral support tutor in my day job as well. So have kinda got two hats. And I suppose if I come at it from the tutor role, not every tutor has the skills to to do that supportive role and maybe like to think that I'm quite unusual in so much as that. I mean obviously Cath can do it as well. But obviously my day job as the pastoral support tutor. So, I'd like to think that I can support my students if they start to feel that emotional drain and that difficulty and that trigger and all the rest of it.

And that obviously my students, their EMA is due in today. So, I have had quite a few panicky emails saying "no I can't do this" and all the rest of it which is fine and I'm quite happy to provide them with the support they require in order to do their EMA. But equally in my day job I do deal with suicidal students, students who are self-harming, the aftermath that we've had a couple of suicides this year. So it you know I deal with that as well.

And it's. But then we don't do emotive subjects, but we still get that sort of, you know, we still get that mental health stress and it's partly because the lecturers don't know how to deal with it. So, they just turn around and say here you go, go and talk to Ruth and because they they haven't got a clue. It's not within their skill set. They're farmers. They're vet nurses, they're vets. They're, you know, they they don't really know how to deal with it. So part of the issue, I suppose, can be that not every tutor is comfortable with or knows how to

provide the support required in order to deal with a student who and that obviously you know is appropriate for a brick institution as well, doesn't know how to support a student who is undergoing any form of mental distress, and so.

**Arabella**

You still signpost, can't you?

**Ruth.Tudor**

Well, absolutely absolutely.

**Arabella**

You don't have to be a counsellor, you know, and Alison said if you had, like, a document you could read, but every tutor or every student has a tutor. So, if you're coming to a block in the study that is gonna be like that, then email your students and let them know in advance that we're coming to a, you know, a tough area that, you know, some of you may find difficult, but I can signpost you to or list the actual you know student support because there's not a huge amount of communication is my biggest bug bear with you you there isn't a huge amount of communication between the student in my experience and what else is available within the OU.

**Cinnomen.McGuigan**

Yeah.

**Arabella**

There's stuff that's been discussed about what's out there that yeah, after three years, I still didn't know about.

You know, I think maybe we need to create a package for every student, regardless of what we're studying, because we don't all know our triggers.

You don't necessarily. You could read something and be triggered by it and be completely blindsided by that.

But you know, maybe have a tutorial in the beginning.

Especially at level 1 to prepare students, these things may come, come along and just to let them know and inform them what's available within the OU and ways of dealing with, difficult areas, not just to read about, but in life, you know, we're all subject to the cost of living crisis at the minute.

You've come across suicides that had nothing to do with emotive, life goes on. Life doesn't stop just because you become a student as it, and it still impacts on your life.

But I really think that's that should be something done at the very beginning and it should be taken seriously enough to be on its own within its own tutorial. That not necessarily the tutor does.

But people say, maybe the student support teams within universities getting involved in or. Don't know how that would pan out, but I really think it should be made more than just a few warnings in a textbook.

### **Cinnomen.McGuigan**

I think what Arabella just said is key, because if we had a session at the start of each module, maybe an empty box recording where you say because what we do is we default to trigger warnings when what we really need are full content warnings because you don't know which bits are gonna hit you until they do, as Alison said. So if we literally had a quick breakdown of each of your chapters, each of the bits of the module, what things might be covered and if you think any of these things are going to affect you.

### **Arabella**

Yes.

### **Cinnomen.McGuigan**

Or, if at the time it happens, you find that any of those things affect you, here's a list of resources. Here's a list of help that we can signpost to, and if that was, if that was embedded at the start of each module, particularly if it was a little recorded event that you could then access later. Because as Alison says, if you find here's a pile of resources because we're discussing this topic today, it's too late. We need to embed and find out what works for us before we need it. Because once you're in it, it's too late. You are not thinking straight. To be able to use these lovely techniques. Brilliant though they might be if you're not in the space to be open to them because you're too triggered and too upset, then it's not, it's neither use nor ornament to anybody. So it's the getting that embedded from the start so that we can then look back to it when we're coming across those things. And if you know what sort of topics each section of that module is gonna gonna take. You can factor in the extra time that you're gonna need. Like Al says, sometimes with some topics, you can literally just do 10-15 minutes at a time on it because you are massively overwhelmed. So if you know that in advance and it's not just enough to go, you know.

This week it may be, if you knew all that upfront, you're making an informed decision to then either gloss over particular chapters with discussion with your tutor to find out how best to manage being able to avoid completely topics that you know you are not going to be able to work through and which ones you may well find that in the moment you're in a space where that is triggering today it wasn't yesterday and it won't be tomorrow, but today I've had a really bad day. Something's happened and my sensitivity is all of my nerve endings are raw and the slightest little thing is going to tip me into that mess. So having that built in up front with each of our modules, particularly the ones that have content that's triggering.

But as as Arabella says we don't know what it's gonna be, we don't know what in any module is gonna is gonna upset us until we're in it.

### **Arabella**

I mean, we are involved in an emotional resilience project, so we don't necessarily have to focus on emotive topics because Farmers, they have one of the highest rates of suicide within their communities because of the stress of it.

And it's every day. Where'd you find the motivation to to get your TMA in or to read a book or text or whatever, whatever. At the minute we've done a tutorials online and drop in sessions, and that's all it would take is one drop in session with someone. I mean, they don't even have to move around. They can be in their living room or or their office and and talk to a load of people like that.

You know, access shouldn't be difficult, but we need to equip students of all ages, all backgrounds and all situations because, like I said, life carries on. You know, they could have just dealt with losing a loved one in the COVID situation or also all sorts. You know, so that that would be great if we could forewarn people and support them to be more emotionally resilient.

**Ruth.Tudor**

Sure, Alison.

**Alison.Kingan**

Yes, I think it is about building up your own emotional resilience and knowing you know what's going to benefit you. But I don't think that it should be all on Tutors to support and help students, whether they have those skills and the experience or not.

**Arabella**

No.

**Alison.Kingan**

I think that the Open University and any institution, if they're going to be covering these subjects, if they're going to be putting students through exams, they need to ensure that there is somewhere for students to go as well. And that's something that I think we might need to explain to what TMAs are and what EMAs are, because those are those are OU acronyms. So TMA is. Yes. So so TMA is is like a continuous assessment. So, we have maybe four or five of those throughout the module and the EMA is the longer thing that we have instead of an exam at the end of a module. It's I can't remember what the acronym stands for, but it's end of module.

**Arabella**

Otherwise, it's just for an essay.

**Arabella**

End of module assignment.

**Alison.Kingan**

Yeah. Yes, that's that's right. I know what it is.

**Arabella**

And I know because I'm in the thick of it right now.

**Alison.Kingan**

Yes. Yeah. So it's it's being aware and and it might be that that tutors who have the skills and the experience provide the empty room tutorial or or the podcast or whatever. So that other tutors can signpost students to to them, but it it isn't, you know, if I go to a tutor, it isn't that I'm expecting them to have all the skills and experience and be able to deal with with me and in an emotive state. But it certainly is for them to be aware if they don't have the skills and experience or the time, to know where to signpost me to or which staff member to contact me or other students if they recognise a student is in a a really troubled way. Uh, you know, as you said, it could be about an exam, which is extremely stressful for many students. Or it could be just about what you're reading, or it could be, you know, life experience.

**Arabella**

Those drop-in sessions I envisage being with a tutor who's who's doing the course doing the module for obvious reasons because it's their module. But, they're not the ones with that professional specialist knowledge. That's not their role to help the students and I don't think it's fair on tutors to expect them to do that either they've got enough on their plates.

**Alison.Kingan**

Yeah.

**Arabella**

But to have someone else like yourself, Ruth, who's a pastoral what's it person?

**Ruth.Tudor**

Yeah.

**Arabella**

Or a wellbeing officer, could call it that, or just someone who who's knowledgeable in creating emotional building on emotional resilience.

**Ruth.Tudor**

Yeah, it.

**Arabella**

But it's it's not a tutor thing.

**Ruth.Tudor**

No, and a lot of tutors don't want to do it or simply just don't have the skills in it. You know, it's definitely not