

Working with emotionally demanding material

SIPR WORKSHOP BRIEFING

Briefing written by

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On 31st October 2025, SIPR hosted a workshop on 'Working with emotionally demanding material' at Abertay University. Attendees represented law enforcement, the Scottish Prison Service, third-sector organisations, and academia.

The day started at 11:00 with a warm welcome from [Professor Penny Woolnough](#), and introductions from attendees, including their reasons for attending the workshop and past experience of working with emotionally demanding material. This was followed with a presentation by [Dr Juliane Kloess](#) and [Dr Amy Burrell](#) on their experiences of working with emotionally demanding material, what emotionally demanding material is, and the impact this can have on people at different points in their lives and careers. This was followed by a series of reflections from the presenters around what they found to be helpful and working well in the context of working on a research project as a team over the course of five years.

Emotionally demanding research has been described as "research that demands a tremendous amount of mental, emotional, or physical energy, and potentially affects or depletes the researcher's health or well-being" (Kumar & Cavallaro, 2028, p. 648). While this may be directly because of the topic/material being researched (e.g., violence, abuse, mental health, sudden death), it can also be emotionally demanding when it concerns topics that are of a similar nature to the personal/traumatic experiences of the researcher, as well as when unexpected events arise during the research that were not previously identified as a sensitive issue ([Being prepared for emotionally demanding research | Communications Psychology](#)). It is therefore essential for researchers and managers to recognise the often emotional demands surfaced by research, and to put in place measures that support researchers before and during research projects, especially where emotionally demanding material is involved. A more detailed description based on an earlier presentation by Dr Kloess and Dr Burrell can be accessed here: [Doing Emotionally Demanding Research: A Dual Perspective of Supervisor and Researcher](#)

Specifically the workshop aimed to:

- Explore what is meant by emotionally demanding research/material
- Discuss challenges experienced by researchers who undertake emotionally demanding research
- Identify potential ways in which these challenges can be approached/managed to maintain researcher wellbeing
- Recognise individual differences
- Encourage an open dialogue about challenges and experiences
- Facilitate networking and the building of connections among researchers

While the main focus of the workshop was on policing research, attendees represented a wider range of academic and professional backgrounds. Most of the content from the small-group exercise does reflect the policing context, but we believe that the learning is still applicable beyond.

As part of the small-group exercise that followed after a lunch break, attendees worked in small groups to:

- 1.)** Map the journey, including:
 - a.** defining a project,
 - b.** charting its different stages (e.g., preparation & design, data collection, data analysis, and dissemination & aftercare), and
 - c.** identifying the potential emotional demands and triggers across each stage
- 2.)** Build a “first-aid kit” for the research journey by drawing up actions and strategies for support and safeguarding, taking into account how these may be applicable before, during, and/or after any potential emotional demands and triggers. These actions and strategies could be at the individual, team, institutional, and/or project level.

In terms of mapping a journey, a number of potential emotional demands and triggers were identified across the different stages of a research project, as well as actions and strategies for support and safeguarding.

Potential emotional demands/triggers:

- Studying a topic area of a sensitive nature (e.g., rape)
- Listening to participants sharing their experiences
- Being 'triggered' by aspects of participants' accounts/information within reading or wider literature
- Undertaking a significant amount of interviews, and the sense of overwhelm that comes with a large amount of data, and time spent analysing it
- Immersing oneself in information/reading/literature/data over longer periods of time – be mindful of repeat exposure
- Placing participants at risk of re-traumatisation through inviting them to share their experiences

Possible actions/strategies:

- Adopting a trauma-informed approach to undertaking the research, and interacting with participants (i.e., taking into consideration approach, location, setting, safety)
- Ensuring that language throughout the research, including all materials and documentation, is accessible and inclusive
- Being mindful of digital exhaustion, and requiring participants to engage with pages of information that are presented digitally
- Seeking out opportunities for collaboration and representation with stakeholders, third-sector organisations, and patient and public involvement and engagement (PPIE)
- Identifying a safe word at the beginning of the interview that easily enables participants to pause and/or end the interview
- Allowing participants to withdraw at any time (or up to a particular date that is clearly communicated), without implications, and easily, without losing face
- Making them feel at ease, easing them into the interview, taking time to build rapport, and building in plenty of flexibility to be able to adapt in line with their needs/requirements/preferences
- Managing expectations and creating clear boundaries in terms of the role of the researcher (i.e., the researcher being there in a research capacity rather than a therapeutic capacity)
- Creating opportunities for debriefing following research engagement
- Signposting participants to support organisations and helplines for further independent advice and help
- Sharing summaries of findings and accessible outputs with participants, their communities, and the wider public to follow through on the promise to advance

knowledge and understanding in a particular field, which is often the reason for participants to take part in research

- Being mindful of your audience – where working with sensitive data, sanitise examples or extracts, where appropriate or needed
- Limiting time dedicated to data analysis, and alternating tasks to avoid working on the data for too long – structure tasks, set time limits, and take breaks!
- Where working within a team, sharing responsibilities and duties, and allowing swapping and changing of tasks to give a team member a break
- Separating everyday life from research, and implementing clear boundaries (e.g., work vs. home/private space, working hours vs. times to switch off and recharge, working on more sensitive content outside of one's home so not to contaminate private spaces, planning hobbies and leisure activities outside of the working environment, including to signify the 'end' of a task that involved emotionally demanding material

First-Aid Kit:

- Building oneself a community as a researcher, within and outside of academia, for support throughout the research journey – some attendees reflected on the usefulness of peer-support groups within their research environment
- Establishing a support network for participants post-research engagement, either through stakeholders and collaborators involved in the research project, or through good signposting
- Taking time to think about what self-care strategies work for you, and actively building them into your work schedule and daily routine – continuously review them to see if there may be other things that would work well for you/help you too
- Drawing up a clear work schedule, allowing enough time to complete data collection and analysis, while interspersing this stage with other tasks, to limit the amount of time spent on sensitive and/or emotionally demanding material (e.g., allow sufficient time in between and space out interviews/focus groups)
- Building 'wellbeing' breaks into your schedule – these can be short breaks every day, or longer breaks following a more intense period, as well as just breaks away from certain tasks
- Identifying an external mentor, critical friend, or clinical supervisor (where possible), to debrief, reflect, and sense-check, and asking supervisors/managers for their support with accessing this
- Scheduling regular supervision meetings with your academic supervisors, and use these, or separate meetings, to debrief, and engage in open and honest conversation (if comfortable) about how the research may be affecting you
- Keeping a reflective diary/research journal, and noting down any thoughts that come to mind

- Regularly stocktaking to keep aims and objectives in check and mind, and catching yourself going down rabbit holes – this also helps with reminding yourself what you can do, what is possible within the context of the task at hand, and the positives/benefits of what you are doing – for example, giving participants the opportunity to share their stories, being listened to, and for you to give voice to them through your academic piece of work
- Reviewing and adapting your strategy, if needed
- Last, but not least, prepare, plan, and practise! This will help you to get into good habits and feel more confident, both in terms of your work, and your mental health and wellbeing

Workshop contributors:

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