

Targeted support is needed to protect the wellbeing of researchers working with emotionally challenging material

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About the research

Poor mental health and wellbeing is a national workplace crisis. In the UK employers are losing 17.9 million workdays due to workplace stress, anxiety or depression. Universities are disproportionately affected, in the top three of all industries. [Research carried out](#) in Higher Education institutions shows that wellbeing is considerably lower than recommended levels and is deteriorating further. In 2018 the University of Bristol committed, as a priority, to promote and support the wellbeing of staff and PhD students, but this is proving to be challenging. Two years after this strategic commitment, 64% of academic staff reported feeling stressed frequently or all the time. Furthermore, according to a staff survey carried out by the University of Bristol in 2020 there is a significant disconnect between awareness of wellbeing support and willingness or ability to engage.

Exposure to emotionally challenging and traumatising material puts researchers at even greater risk. Although the University of Bristol's updated [Mental Health and Wellbeing Plan](#) in 2022 commits to provide additional support to this group, at present no specialised support exists.

This project, funded by the ESRC IAA, focused on the lived experiences of PhD and early career researchers who are routinely exposed to emotionally challenging material. It investigated existing wellbeing resources and piloted counsellor-led training workshops and peer-support networks to test whether this intervention could act as a low-cost but high-gain wellbeing tool. Though carried out at the University of Bristol, findings are applicable to all research organisations seeking to improve wellbeing and reduce talent loss and staff absences.

"I think peer-support is an invaluable tool in supporting researchers' wellbeing. It is refreshing to be able to be honest about how you feel / the issues / challenges you may be facing, without worrying whether it may affect your role / future career. The safe, supportive space created by working with peers and the sharing of similar experiences has made me feel empowered to try and make changes to support my own wellbeing."

Policy implications

The mental health and wellbeing of researchers working on sensitive, emotional and challenging topics is at crisis point but there are opportunities to rapidly address this:

- Universities should recognise the specific needs of researchers working with emotionally challenging and traumatic source materials, and their potential to cause secondary traumatic stress and vicarious trauma. This should represent a dedicated wellbeing work-strand.
- Staff wellbeing policies and training should acknowledge the emotional risk and labour involved in this form of research to ensure both researchers and the university are equipped to pursue the work. Developing interactive and talk-based tools should be considered a priority for institutions.
- Targeted interventions should focus first on establishing clinical supervision and peer-support networks for sensitive research topics. To be effective these need to be supported by suitably qualified mental health professionals and administered by university faculties.
- The equality and diversity impact of wellbeing policies must be considered, especially assumptions around access to informal academic networks, available time and financial resources.



Photo by [Hannah Busing](#) on [Unsplash](#)

Key findings

- While institutional support services exist, there are signs these aren't working effectively. An unintentional 'one size fits all' culture has resulted from policy gaps, and this approach fails those most at risk of harm due to their research. Informed discussion with researchers is needed to understand and tailor planned responses to the risks faced. Without this, universities may be failing in their legal duty of care to their staff and students.
- Without interactive and talk-based wellbeing tools that are overseen by clinical supervision and specialist training, researchers lack the space to process trauma. Participants felt empowered and de-stigmatised by the counsellor delivered pilot workshop on self-care and peer-support. Researchers gained the knowledge and language to discuss experiences with secondary traumatic stress and vicarious trauma. If provided annually, alongside peer-support networks administered by faculties, this would represent low-cost, positive impact support.
- Participants felt current wellbeing policy disadvantaged researchers whose protected characteristics meant they lacked their own informal support networks within universities. This can include members of groups who are underrepresented in universities and researchers who are the first generation in their family to attend university. Others are excluded because they do not have the financial means or personal time for self-care, for example those with caring responsibilities. Access to support networks is not only an equality, diversity and inclusion (EDI) issue, precarious workers also suffer as they move between institutions on short-term contracts.
- Academic support networks are fragile, especially for PhD and early career researchers, and when they fail there is a risk of further harm. Faculties need to manage peer-support groups to ensure that all research staff have access to them, appropriate training is provided, and to adjust groups if, for example, they are not a good fit, members leave the institution, or to ensure supervisors are not placed in with supervisees (preventing open and safe discussion).
- Researchers reported feeling disillusioned and exhausted, they also considered levels of academic stress to be at crisis point. The costs of failing to sufficiently support staff are undocumented, but there is a likely impact on staff days lost to illness, increased staff turnover, recruitment costs and talent loss.

Further information

Researcher-led initiatives on working with challenging material:

Researcher Wellbeing: Guidelines for History Researchers (2021): <https://researcherwellbeing.blogs.bristol.ac.uk>

Challenging Research Network: <https://challengingresearch.org>

Emma Williamson et al (2020), '[Secondary Trauma: Emotional Safety in Sensitive Research](#)', Journal of Academic Ethics, 18.

Resources for training and support:

Training for this project was provided by the School of Applied Mental Health, who have expertise in support for researchers working with challenging material: <https://schoolofappliedmentalhealth.com>

Mental health and wellbeing support can also be accessed through MIND: <https://bristolmind.org.uk>

Contact the researchers

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