



Co-Designing Trauma-Informed Wellbeing Support for Researchers Conducting Emotionally Challenging Research

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Introduction

Why is this project needed?

- Vicarious Trauma (VT) refers to the emotional and psychological impact of repeated exposure to others' traumatic experiences.
- Researchers conducting Emotionally Challenging Research (ECR) may be exposed to traumatic topics, distressing narratives, images, videos, interviews, and sensitive case materials throughout the research process.
- Repeated exposure can negatively affect: 1) mental wellbeing, 2) emotional resilience, 3) physical health, 4) research productivity, 5) career sustainability. Researchers with prior personal trauma may be particularly vulnerable.
- Despite increasing recognition of VT in academia, dedicated trauma-informed support for researchers remains limited.

Project aim

To develop and evaluate a trauma-informed wellbeing programme and an open-access online resource repository that supports researchers undertaking emotionally challenging research.

Project objectives

- Raise awareness of vicarious trauma within the research community.
- Identify researchers' support needs.
- Co-design practical wellbeing resources with researchers.
- Build a sustainable peer-support community.
- Evaluate the effectiveness of the programme using validated wellbeing measures.

Focus Groups – Findings

Experiences of conducting ECR

- The 'emotional weight' of research: conducting interviews, transcribing, closely reading materials, and undertaking archive and museum visits.
- Research that draws on personal experiences or relates closely to one's own life can generate emotional challenges and costs for researchers.
- There is a tension between maintaining academic rigour and standards while navigating the emotional challenges associated with conducting research.
- Researchers may experience both psychological and physical impacts, including fear, loneliness, anxiety, nightmares, insomnia, and headaches, alongside compounding pressures from external sources.
- The boundaries between ECR and personal life are often blurred, with emotional demands extending beyond the workplace.

Current coping strategies

- Self-care strategies: taking time after emotionally demanding work; sleeping; listening to music; spending time with pets; engaging in physical activity, such as walking.
- Social support: talking with family members and friends; talking with colleagues; seeking support from professional networks.
- Professional support: psychological counselling.

Unmet needs and gaps in institutional support

- Supervisory support appears uneven: postgraduate researchers require more tailored guidance, while supervisors may find it difficult to elicit open discussions about the emotional challenges their students face.
- Although departments are often perceived as supportive environments, institutional-level provision seems sometimes unclear or ineffective.
- The emotional burden of ECR can be difficult to articulate, contributing to isolation, and awareness among non-ECR academics remains limited.
- There is a lack of funding to support PGR students and staff in obtaining the necessary specialised counselling and external wellbeing support.
- For international students, there is a need for wellbeing support in their mother tongue.

Feedback on proposed wellbeing resources

- It would be helpful to provide training sessions for researchers conducting ECR.
- Creative wellbeing methods, such as writing poetry, are recommended.
- It would be useful to create safe spaces and active, supportive communities where researchers can discuss ECR and share their experiences and feelings.
- It would also be helpful to raise awareness of the impact of ECR among academics who do not conduct ECR.



Methodology

Study design

Qualitative, co-design study. 4 online 1.5-hour focus groups via MS Teams with researchers conducting ECR. Discussions explored: 1) experiences of conducting ECR, 2) current coping strategies, 3) gaps in institutional support, 4) feedback on proposed wellbeing resources.

Participants

17 researchers from the University of Warwick.

1) Career stage: 14 postgraduate researchers (PhD/MPhil/MRes), 2 early career researchers/postdoctoral researchers, 1 academic staff member

2) Gender: 12 females, 5 males

3) Age: 25-47 years (mean age ≈ 34 years). Most participants were in their late 20s and early 30s.

4) Ethnicity: 10 Asian/Asian British, 2 Black/African/Caribbean/Black British, 2 Mixed ethnicity, 2 White, 1 Prefer not to say

5) Research backgrounds: Law, Politics and International Studies, English and Comparative Literary Studies, Modern Languages and Cultures, Sociology, Education Studies, Theatre and Performance Studies, Warwick Business School, Cross Faculty Studies

6) Research experience: 8 months to 20 years of experience conducting ECR. Most had 1-5 years of experience.

7) Experience of VT: 11 occasionally experienced VT; 5 frequently experienced significant VT; 1 had not experienced significant VT but wanted to learn prevention and resilience strategies.

Wellbeing Workshop Series

A series of wellbeing workshops for researchers conducting ECR are developed in collaboration with institutional services and external specialists with expertise in wellbeing, trauma, creative health, and researcher support.

Workshop 1: Possible Impacts and Positive Interventions when Undertaking Emotionally Challenging Research (led by Dr Tina Skinner from the University of Bath)

- Explores the emotional impacts of challenging research and strategies for managing them.
- Introduces individual, team, and institutional approaches to researcher wellbeing.
- Supports participants to develop a personal Researcher Wellbeing Plan.
- Encourages consideration of strategic approaches to wellbeing within research teams and institutions.

Workshop 2: Taking a Pause: Creative Writing for Researcher Wellbeing (led by Dr Helen Foster from the University of Leicester)

- Introduces creative writing as a practical tool for reflection and emotional wellbeing.
- Provides a supportive, non-judgemental space to pause, decompress, and emotionally reset.
- Encourages researchers to incorporate reflective writing practices into a sustainable research career.

Workshop 3: Supporting Doctoral Students through Difficult Research: A Storytelling Approach to Practice, Participants, and Praxis (led by Dr Catherine Rees and Anastazie Toros from Loughborough University)

- Explores and demonstrates how storytelling can support researchers working on challenging or distressing topics.
- Focuses on understanding and managing risks faced by doctoral researchers.
- Highlights creative and reflective approaches to promoting researcher wellbeing and resilience.

Participant feedback and findings

- Participants reported a very positive overall experience, with 80% finding the workshops highly relevant to their research experiences.
- Participants gained practical coping strategies and valued opportunities for peer connection, shared reflection, and discussion, highlighting the importance of reducing researcher isolation.
- Findings suggest that the workshops created a supportive and psychologically safe environment for discussing ECR.
- The workshops improved participants' understanding of the emotional risks of ECR and showed strong potential to promote self-care, healthy coping strategies, and confidence in managing emotional demands.
- Overall, the feedback supports the value of trauma-informed, co-designed wellbeing programmes as an important component of research culture, helping researchers develop practical skills while strengthening peer support and wellbeing.