

# Guidance on studying emotive topics and developing emotional resilience

Studying emotive topics can be motivating, engaging, and an important part of your study experience. It can help relate your learning to the real world, spark your curiosity and help you to understand your role in society and social change. However, this can be an emotionally challenging process. Learning about yourself and your emotional responses to topics is a study skill: the skill of emotional resilience. You may already have some skills in this from your experience in work and life that you can draw on. You can also develop your emotional resilience, just as you can develop your essay-writing or note-taking skills.

Reading about emotive and sensitive content can feel different for different people. It is normal to have an emotional response to research about children's lives that feature violence, injustice or human suffering. It is also normal to have an emotional response to learning about topics that touch on difficult experiences you, or children you know, have had.

When faced with this content, people may experience feelings of sadness, anger, powerlessness or shock, or be reminded of their own painful or traumatic experiences. Some may find the content exacerbates symptoms of conditions such as anxiety, depression, or post-traumatic stress disorder.

There are various strategies that you can try if you find module content distressing or triggering. These strategies are not meant to replace medical advice or support for significant mental health needs or mental distress, but may give you some ideas on how to study emotive topics:

## Learning about childhood

Learning about childhood can evoke memories of what we have experienced ourselves as a child or as a parent. Topics such as early development, parenting and mental health, among others, can cause us to reflect on our own earlier years, or other aspects of our own circumstances. Although this may be positive, many students may find an aspect of this content upsetting at some point in their studies, and you may even be surprised by your own reaction to this content.

## Know yourself

Emotions are normal when studying difficult topics. However, it is helpful to pay attention to your own wellbeing. You might already have a way in which you check in with yourself and how you are feeling; this could include mindfulness and grounding exercises. However, if you find that you are very distressed, or the content has exacerbated your mental health condition, you should seek further help (see the 'Sources of further support' section). Some signs that you might need to take care of yourself or seek help include:

- changed or disturbed sleep
- finding you cannot stop thinking about a topic or case study
- feeling the urge to behave in a way that may be harmful to yourself

- finding yourself tearful, moody or upset even a few days after you have finished studying the material
- having unexpected or intrusive thoughts about the topic, even after a few days have passed.

## Study strategically

If a particular topic is very distressing, you could choose to engage with it lightly. For example, you might decide to just skim read it, or avoid using the content in your TMA. In your independent study time, you might decide to focus on a different case study instead. You could engage with the material in short bursts, take breaks and intersperse your study time with something you enjoy to help you relax. Alternatively, you might decide to leave the topic for now, and return to it later when you feel stronger – sometimes gradual, repeated exposure to difficult topics can strengthen your ability to study them.

## Prepare yourself

If you know particular topics will be difficult for you, you can take steps to prepare. You might find that you are able to engage with this content if you know it is coming up; or you may need to avoid it altogether. E102 has content notes or warnings about topics at the start of each study week, which will help you make an informed decision about whether you can engage with the material.

Your tutor can help you make a study plan to ensure you look after yourself, while still meeting the learning outcomes of the Block. This may include planning more time to study a topic, studying in chunks and taking regular breaks, or planning an activity before or after study to help clear your head.

## Control your environment

Some people find it easier to engage with distressing topics if they have particular comforts or supports in their study environment. This might include playing upbeat music while studying, eating comfort food, keeping your hands occupied with a task or hobby, or having a pillow or something comforting to hold. It's also a good idea to stay away from the news or anything distressing after you've finished your study session, and instead find something relaxing or uplifting to do.

## Engage with others

Sometimes being a distance learning student is isolating, and thinking about content that is distressing for you can be harder to deal with if you're doing this alone. Talking to others about the content can help you manage difficult feelings. You could talk to friends or family. You could contact other students via the Open University forums, at a tutorial, or on social media. You can also talk to your tutor, or to your Student Support Team about the module content.

## Accept your feelings

Sometimes just acknowledging content has made you feel sad or angry is helpful. It is not wrong to have a strong emotional response to a topic involving human suffering or distress, or that touches on difficult experiences you or those close to you have had. Some people find it helpful to take time to feel and express their feelings; this could include writing in a journal, a creative hobby, going for a walk or gardening.

Be gentle with yourself and acknowledge that having a strong emotional response to a topic is a normal and empathetic reaction. Experienced academics also sometimes become emotional about the topics they study.

## Channel your feelings

Some people find that learning about a distressing topic motivates them to work for change. For example, learning distressing facts about child poverty might inspire you to campaign, volunteer, or fundraise. For some people, sadness and anger give them the energy to try to change things they feel strongly about. Case studies may relate to experiences in your own life, and help you make sense of your past, or make positive decisions about your future.

## Seek help if needed

If your module content has affected you strongly or exacerbated a mental health condition, you might need to seek further help.

- If what you are experiencing has made it difficult to keep up with your studies or complete your assignments, speak to your tutor. They may be able to offer you an extension, or help you catch up. They can advise you on the extent to which you need to engage with it to complete your assignments.
- [Togetherall](https://www.togetherall.com) is a safe, totally anonymous online space to air concerns, explore your feelings and learn how to self-manage your mental health and wellbeing. It's available to Open University students 24 hours a day, seven days a week. To access Togetherall, register at [www.togetherall.com](https://www.togetherall.com). You will need to use your OU email address (provided with Microsoft Office365) to register. This will be OUCU@ou.ac.uk (where OUCU is your OU computer username, for example abc123@ou.ac.uk ). You can then choose an anonymous username for your time on the site.
- There is a comprehensive list of external sources of support in the [Student Help Centre](#).
- You may want to talk about your feelings with your GP, counsellor or with a mental health professional if you are already in touch with mental health services.
- If you feel you are in crisis, you should seek help immediately. You can contact emergency NHS mental health services in your area, or speak anonymously to a helpline like the Samaritans, who are open 24 hours a day on 116 123 (UK).

*This guidance was originally created by Ruth Wall for social sciences students, in partnership with Anne Alvaer and Julia Downes and with input from Kate Lister. It was adapted for a broader audience by Kate Lister, with input from Julia Downes, Ruth Wall, Anne Alvaer and the Cross-Faculty Accessibility Working group (CFAWG.) and has been adapted by the E102 team for use with this module.*