How to support those working with vulnerable contributors

THE WHOLE PICTURE TOOLKIT

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Scripted and unscripted productions can involve working with vulnerable contributors.

What does 'vulnerable contributors' mean?

Vulnerable contributors can be people who take part in a production in some way to discuss or share their experience of challenging topics. They may also have individual needs that could be based on a disability or health condition at the time of filming or transmission.

These challenging or sensitive topics could include trauma, violence, abuse, mental health or crime, or locations such as prisons, hospitals, care homes, morgues, or specific places directly related to a distressing experience.

Vulnerable contributors may have lived experience of the challenge or trauma and can be engaged to share stories which benefit the authenticity of your production. As such, they deserve care and consideration to ensure their mental wellbeing and safety.

Supporting your crew

Another aspect to bear in mind is that crew in various roles throughout the production chain often feel under-trained and under-equipped to effectively support the wellbeing of vulnerable contributors. They can become overwhelmed by the responsibility, and their own wellbeing and mental health can suffer as a result.

Below you will find key actions and skills that will help make sure due care is being shown to vulnerable contributors and supporting crew involved in your production...

What should you be aware of?

At the beginning of any production that includes working with any contributors, the potential risk to them should be assessed and discussed thoroughly, and this should be ongoing throughout production. It's important to also remember that vulnerabilities can develop during the process of filming. Where necessary, seek expert advice and keep commissioners up to date with any such developments.

Vulnerabilities can include any issues that come to light during filming that might feel important to the filming but that could also put a vulnerable person at risk – or put their extended family or community at risk.

Final judgement about including such material should only be made after a full assessment of this risk and the support that is in place. Revealing aspects of a contributor's personality can also make them vulnerable to public scrutiny or gossip in the media or internet. Psychological assessment may be required to make sure they are robust enough to cope with any likely consequences of the experience. (source: BBC Editorial Guidelines)

Duty of Care and Safeguarding

As an employer, there are two main factors or principles which form the backbone of working on a production with vulnerable contributors and supporting crew. These are:

1. Duty of Care

Duty of Care is a legal term, which comes from the Health and Safety at Work Act, 1974 and refers to the obligation of a business, employer or service provider to put reasonable measures in place to ensure that everyone associated with them is reasonably protected from any physical or psychological harm.

Therefore, as an employer or manager, you must take reasonable and prudent steps to protect the mental health and wellbeing of vulnerable contributors and supporting crew.

2. Safeguarding

Safeguarding in a mental health context means protecting people's health, wellbeing and human rights, and enabling them to live free from harm, abuse and neglect. It also ensures employees struggling with poor mental health are supported appropriately, and both employer and employees are equipped to recognise the signs that someone is struggling.

Taking a safeguarding approach can help ensure that you are upholding your duty of care by taking steps to protect vulnerable contributors and supporting crew from emotional distress. It also offers guiding principles to further support anyone particularly affected. Whilst there isn't yet a safeguarding framework developed to cover both film and TV, the Social Care Institute for Excellence recommends six best practice principles:
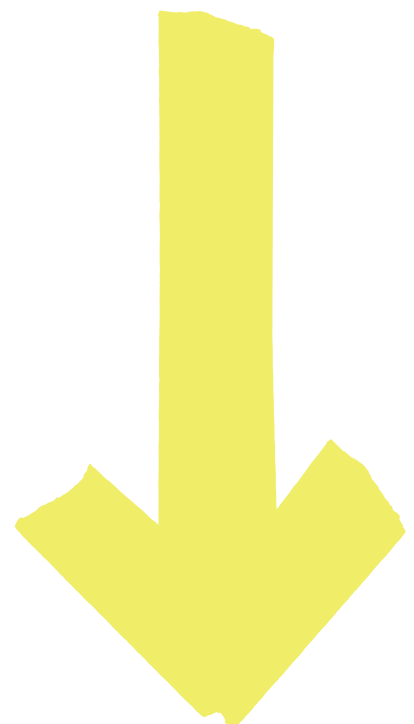
1. Empowerment: Actively collaborate with the individual involved

- Listen to their experiences openly and without judgement (see active listening skills below)

- Let *them* tell *you* what support and care they need and agree what support, tools and resources can be provided to enable them to make an informed decision about whether to be involved.

- Never coerce or encourage people to do anything they express discomfort with. Make sure people always have the opportunity to change their minds further down the line.

2. Prevention: Take action before harm occurs

- If you have serious concerns about someone, address them transparently

- Be clear with your language i.e., ask 'Is this topic distressing you?'

- Be clear that everything you discuss will be kept in confidence, unless you have concerns that they might be a risk to themselves or others.

3. Proportionality: Take a proportionate response suited to the level of need

- **Low need**: Provide a space that's suitable for having compassionate conversations and allows trust to be built

- **Medium need**: Further to the above, signpost to/provide expert support

- **High need**: Further to the above, immediately stop any exposure to distressing topics and discuss support options

4. Protection: Discern if someone is particularly vulnerable or at risk

- Think about the specific demands of the distressing topic e.g. violence, racism, rape etc

- Consider the lived experience of vulnerable contributors/ supporting crew to discern anyone at risk

- Check anyone at risk is consulted and protected from demands which may be distressing to them

5. Partnership: Seek local and relevant experts to support anyone who needs it

- Think about who on the team conducts the interviews and works closely with contributors — do they have similar lived experience or, as a minimum, a good understanding of the issue? For example, if the contributor is sharing their experience of racism, can they be given the option to talk to another person of colour on the team?

- Ask individuals who are struggling, what specific support they would benefit from

- Provide expert support for contributors with lived experience of a distressing topic, e.g. sharing the details of a charity like The Survivors Trust, if rape is a subject

- Offer support for supporting crew who are struggling (e.g. links to MHFA/ relevant counselling/support services via The Film and TV Charity)

6. Accountability: Be responsible and provide consistent follow-up support

- Don't tick boxes – make sure any agreed support is swiftly actioned

- Check back in with people to make sure any support measures are working, and if not, put together a new plan or discuss the possibility of a team member deciding to come off the project

- Vulnerable contributors may require follow-on care after the shoot, after transmission/release or both.

Navigating sensitive conversations

If contributors or crew on your production do suffer emotional distress whilst being exposed to sensitive content, upsetting topics or triggering locations, the first step is to have a discrete and compassionate conversation to identify what support they might need.
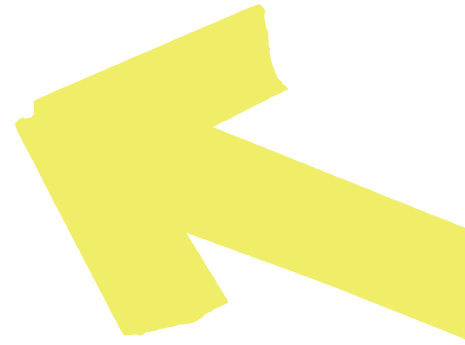
Here are some hints for handling sensitive conversations:

Build a trusting environment

- Be clear about the time you can give someone to talk (i.e. we have 30 mins)

- Find a quiet and private space

- Don't dominate the conversation or give advice – listen to them

- Validate their emotions and experiences

- Don't make assumptions

- Point them towards support available to them internally/ externally for the individual

- Seek support internally/externally for yourself, if needed, either for your wellbeing or support with the conversation e.g., occupational health.

Mind charity has some useful support for line managers you can find here.

Active Listening skills

- Listen to understand rather than to give advice

- Embrace silence – don't jump to fill it or guess at words

- Maintain comfortable eye contact, nod, lean forward, smile

- Don't get distracted by phones/emails/interruptions

Open Questioning skills

- Open questions can't be answered with a yes or no (e.g. how are you feeling today?)

- They help to expand understanding (What could I do to support you?)

- They often start with why, how, what, describe or what do you think about...?

- Ask one question at a time - try to avoid multiple questions
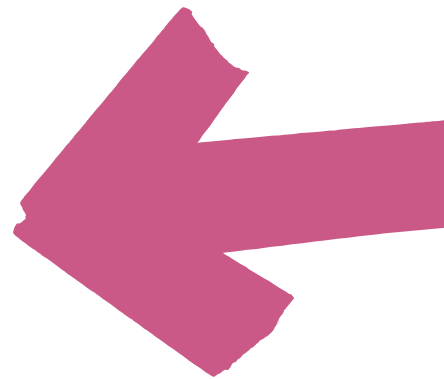
Taking care of yourself

It can feel overwhelming protecting vulnerable contributors and supporting crew who are exposed to sensitive content or distressing topics. As a manager, it's important to remember that you are not expected to be a mental health specialist. Put healthy boundaries in place, and guide others to do the same, so that you and members of your crew remain within your scope as employers, managers, supervisors or supporters.

Supporting without healthy ethical boundaries – the signs

- You feel overinvested in helping someone

- The person contacts you to talk outside of work

- You feel the person is becoming dependent on you

- You are feeling overwhelmed, triggered or distressed

Supporting with healthy boundaries – actions

- Be very clear from the start about the time and level of support you can offer

- Avoid responding outside of working hours, unless it's an emergency

- Advocate for the benefits of professional expert support

- Signpost to production resources available like MHFA's, HR, The Film and TV Charity or an Employee Assistance Programme for crew

- If you're feeling overwhelmed, seek support for yourself.

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