

# How to support those working with sensitive content



## What's classed as sensitive content?

Sensitive content is a broad term, and whilst there is no strict definition, it could include themes of sexual abuse, racism, bereavement and emotional distress, images of torture, suicide, crime, illness, natural disasters, terrorism, or even locations like morgues, hospitals or prisons.

### The detrimental impact

During the research for The Film and TV Charity's 2019 Looking Glass report, people told us that exposure to sensitive content can have a detrimental impact on their mental wellbeing. In some cases, it can lead to vicarious trauma – a collection of symptoms which may include an over-identification with the sensitive content (or person) resulting in experiencing feelings of anger, sadness, or guilt.

It can also mean becoming preoccupied with the specific content to the detriment of one's own wellbeing and can even have a negative impact on interpersonal relationships. For example, if a person of colour on your team has lived experience of racism and is working with similar content, this content can trigger difficult emotions and potential distress.

As an employer, it's important to know that if your production engages with themes or depictions which may be deemed as sensitive or distressing, steps should be taken to actively anticipate, manage and reduce the impact on your team. It can affect people in any role in the chain, from pre through to post, and all stages must be equally considered.

# Duty of Care and Safeguarding

Anticipating and reducing the impact of sensitive content is not just a 'nice to do'. Protecting your crew from psychological harm and completing mental health risk assessments are legal requirements, essential to ensuring your production remains legally compliant.

## 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 to protect people from harm or damage with proportionate measures. It includes making sure that:

- Employees struggling with poor mental health are supported appropriately, especially when they might be at risk of harming themselves through suicide for example.
- Employees know where they can access appropriate support to address any mental health needs.
- Both employer and employees are equipped to recognise signs when someone may be struggling and ensure they are responded to and supported.
- Carrying out risk assessments and putting in place protections following from this assessment(s).

Taking a safeguarding approach can help make sure that you are upholding duty of care by taking steps to protect vulnerable contributors and supporting crew from emotional distress. Additionally, it offers guiding principles to further support anyone particularly affected. Whilst there is not currently a safeguarding framework developed to cover both film and TV, the Social Care Institute for Excellence recommends [six best practice principles](#).



## **General actions to reduce the impact of working with Sensitive Content:**

There are steps that can be taken by crew at any stage in the production (pre-production/ production/postproduction) which are shown to support wellbeing and emotional resilience and buffer distress for those exposed to sensitive content. Your production should encourage and advocate for the following for everyone working on the production:

- Lunch breaks and tea breaks being taken
- People to maintain connections with their family and friends
- Encourage colleagues to support one another
- Physical health, exercise and movement
- Healthy, balanced lunches and snacks and regular hydration
- Access to natural daylight or breaks outside where possible
- The benefits of adequate sleep
- Knowing where to turn if help is needed

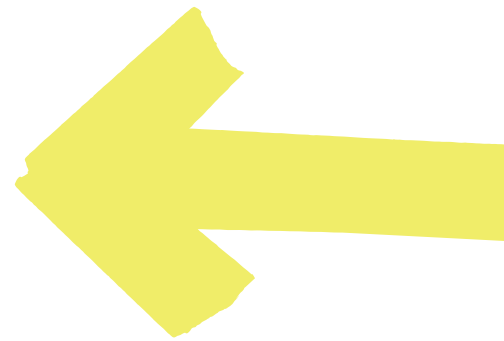
## **Specific considerations and key actions to take at each stage**

### **Development and Pre-Production stage**

Considerations: Your production should be designed to limit the impact of sensitive content right from the start. Development and pre-production are key to setting the tone for a safe production.

#### **Actions:**

- If difficult themes are being explored in development or writers rooms, give a sensitive content briefing covering what to expect.
- Everyone should have access to support – so check that anyone working remotely (i.e. writers/researchers) knows how to access this.
- If potentially distressing locations are being scouted, give a sensitive content briefing and ensure support is available.
- All crew should receive sensitive content briefings as necessary.



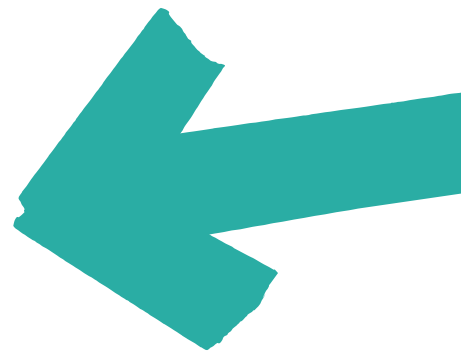
- The filming schedule should be designed to give regular breaks to crew exposed to sensitive content.
- Stress risk assessments must be undertaken based on the scripts, depictions, locations and schedules. [Discover more on mental health risk assessment here.](#)
- Define and implement support options e.g. Intimacy Coordinator, Mental Health First Aid, WellBeing Facilitator, Counsellor, Employee Assistance Programme, HR, Set Medic.
- Create a pool of related resources, organisations and free support that all crew will have access to throughout i.e. The Film and TV Charity, Mind, Samaritans.
- Design a simple and clear process for feedback and support requests for crew affected by sensitive content to follow.

### **Production stage**

Considerations: During production, stress levels often rise and it might be tempting to forgo actions to reduce impact. Despite this, it's important to ensure you fulfil your legal duty of care and continue to actively reduce the impact of working with sensitive content.

### **Actions:**

- Things can change quickly – undertake a [mental health risk assessment](#) on the spot if changes occur and make sure you follow through on any actions.
- Call sheets should clearly brief on the nature of sensitive content.
- Call sheets should clearly list access to support for all crew on set, on location or working remotely.
- Emails can include short briefing messages and reminders of support.
- Ensure sensitive content briefings are carried out in advance for crew directly involved, telling them what to expect.
- In briefings, explain the context of the sensitive content to help alleviate distress.



- Anyone expressing severe emotional distress should be discreetly and sensitively taken off set or location and offered strong support.
- Encourage and facilitate open conversation around the topics for those wishing to talk. You can explore more about working with vulnerable contributors [here](#).
- Make sure crew know that they can access support, e.g. Intimacy Coordinator, MHFA, WellBeing Facilitator, Counsellor, set medic, HR or an EAP programme to help process emotional distress.

### **Post-Production stage**

Considerations: The post-production teams often work extremely long hours in isolation and have the highest degree of repeated exposure to sensitive content. As such, any measures to protect crew should be emphasised at this stage in the production.

### **Actions:**

- Give a sensitive content and context briefing to the crew involved in post.
- If this stage is particularly long, check in with the crew regularly about their wellbeing.
- Frequent breaks should be scheduled for crew repeatedly exposed to sensitive or distressing content (i.e. editor, post supervisor, colourist, sound editor etc.)
- Consider rotating crew to reduce repetitive exposure.
- Experiment with different ways of building some distance into how you view images. Some people find concentrating on certain details, for instance clothes, and avoiding others (such as faces) helps. Consider applying a temporary matte/mask to distressing areas of the image. Film editors should avoid using the loop play function when trimming footage of violent attacks and point of death imagery, or use it very sparingly.



- Try adjusting the viewing environment. Reducing the size of the window or adjusting the screen's brightness or resolution can lessen the perceived impact.
- Make sure all support options are known about and available throughout the post-production stage (MHFA/Counsellor/HR/EAP etc.)
- Check digital files with sensitive content are clearly flagged to reduce unnecessary viewing.
- If crew are working in windowless spaces, encourage them to take breaks where there is natural light and access to nature.
- Anyone expressing severe emotional distress should be discreetly and sensitively removed from the situation, and robustly supported. [Discover more about working with vulnerable contributors here.](#)

