NABS+ Network Plus for Analytical Behavioural Science in Security and Defence

Researcher Safety and Wellbeing: Advice for Supervisors, PIs, and Institutions

CONTENTS

List of Acronyms....2
Executive Summary....3
Emotional & Mental Wellbeing when Researching Harmful or Distressing Content....4
Advice from Dr Allysa Czerwinsky....4
Do....4
Don't....4
Advice & Suggestions from the Research Community....5
Do....5
Don't....7
Resources....7
Physical & Digital Operational Security when Conducting Research....9
Advice from Dr Ashton Kingdon....9
Do....9
Don't....11
Advice & Suggestions from the Research Community....12
Do....12
Don't....13
Resources....14
Safety & Wellbeing when Disseminating Sensitive or Controversial Research....15
Advice from Dr Antonia Vaughan....15
Do....15
Don't....16
Advice & Suggestions from the Research Community....16
Do....16
Resources....18

Compiled by the NABS+ ECR Steering Group

LIST OF ACRONYMS:

CANSES	Canadian Network for Research on Security, Extremism and Society
CREST	Centre for Research and Evidence on Security Threats
CSAM	Child Sexual Abuse Material
CSTPV	Handa Centre for the Study of Terrorism and Political Violence
EAP	Employee Assistance Programme
ECR	Early Career Researcher
EXIF data	Exchangeable Image File Format data
GDPR	General Data Protection Regulation
IAPSS	International Academic Partnerships for Science and Security
ISP	Internet Service Provider
NABS+	NetworkPlus for Analytical Behavioural Science in Security and Defence
NCITE	US National Counterterrorism Innovation, Technology and Education Center
NCMEC	National Centre for Missing and Exploited Children
OSINT	Open Source Intelligence
PI	Principal Investigator
VPN	Virtual Private Network

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Researcher safety and wellbeing is an area receiving growing recognition in the extremism, security, and defence space, particularly in light of emerging threats involving hybrid harms and new forms of distressing content. It is also an area particularly salient for early career researchers (ECRs) due to comparative lack of experience, the pressure to be visible and 'successful' in academia, and emerging risks in digital landscapes, among many other challenges.

Many resources do exist, but are disparately spread across many institutions, disciplines, and parts of society (academia, government, and industry). Therefore, the NABS+ ECR Steering Group have developed this guide to synthesise advice from researchers in the field, and direct researchers to existing resources and supports.

The guide is structured around three themes:

- Emotional and mental wellbeing when researching harmful or distressing content
- Physical and digital operational security when conducting research
- Safety and wellbeing when disseminating controversial or sensitive research

For each, we have compiled advice from experts following a NABS+ workshop held in February 2026, and from researchers in the field through responses to a survey disseminated in Spring 2026.

This guide is directed explicitly at supervisors, PIs, and institutions, alongside individual researchers themselves. **However, these parties should also consult the accompanying guide directed at ECRs and researchers**. You can read all the outputs from the survey at: www.crestresearch.ac.uk/resources/researcher-safety-and-wellbeing-advice/ or by scanning the QR code below.

We would like to thank all those who completed or shared this survey. We greatly appreciate your time in supporting the safety and wellbeing of current and future researchers.

Note: the advice in the following document is subjective and is based on individual experiences of researching difficult topics. We cannot guarantee that any/all of the recommendations made are relevant to your research, or that they should be used to replace any existing mechanisms which work for you. Different people may find some suggestions more useful or relevant than others. This advice does not represent the opinions of NABS+, CREST, or the members of the ECR steering committee.

EMOTIONAL & MENTAL WELLBEING WHEN RESEARCHING HARMFUL OR DISTRESSING CONTENT

Advice from Dr Allysa Czerwinsky

Dr Allysa Czerwinsky is a Research Fellow in AI, trust, and security at the University of Manchester. Her research specialises in the intersections of technology, extremism, and online harms, and her PhD focused on the narratives used in incel forums. She has previously worked on many distressing topics, including the manosphere and hate facilitated by AI.

DO

Be proactive:

- Discuss with students the potential impacts on wellbeing of a degree or research project, before they begin
- Build in opportunities for support and wellbeing into projects – e.g., avoiding lone working and isolation
- Ensure ECRs are prepared for what they might come across in research (or out of curiosity), which might have short- or long-term effects on wellbeing – and ensure this is done early, e.g., for undergraduates

Train staff members:

- Ensure there is a consistent approach from PhD supervisors regarding researcher wellbeing, proactive and reactive guidance, and pastoral support
- Train and prepare lecturers and supervisors to spot warning signs, emotional vulnerability, or overload

Set up staff networks for those working in sensitive or emotionally demanding research, to enable peer support and engagement

Provide, recommend, or fund specialised, tailored, therapeutic intervention options and adequately trained mental health professionals

- Generic counselling is not suitable for the complexity and potential trauma relevant to this field of research

Increase emphasis on research wellbeing in ethical processes:

- Ensure there is a focus on risk, safety, vulnerability, and wellbeing of researchers in the immediate and longer term – the current focus is more (or exclusively) around research participants
- Ensure this is also in place for staff, as well as students

DON'T

Let responsibility lie with researchers:

- Avoid an atmosphere where the responsibility for researcher wellbeing falls on their own shoulders
- Instead, create sustained institutional responsibility and care for support mechanisms, and encourage frank conversations with researchers about risks and mitigations

Let support be only reactive:

- Instead, be proactive – don't expect or wait for researchers to reach out for support or raise concerns

Advice & Suggestions from the Research Community

DO

Create and share internal toolkits detailing the advice and resources relevant to your team/institution

Provide mental health support – ensure additional provision is available for those who need more than supervision:

- Cost this in to grant proposals if projects involve exposure to harmful/distressing content. Or, provide emergency funding to support mental health interventions for researchers
- Encourage engagement with this regularly or as and when needed.
- There are many issues that staff and students could and should discuss with professionals, including those related to work (e.g., exposure to extreme content), the workplace (e.g., contract related uncertainty), or stressors external to work
- Not all potential issues are appropriate or easy to talk about with untrained PIs/colleagues
- Generic mental health support/therapy is not always sufficient:
    - EAPs do not understand the nuances of this work or provide the opportunity to develop trusting relationships
    - People may be concerned about sharing details of extreme content to counsellors who might also be affected by those details
    - Need emotionally intelligent support services who understand the research context and have access to range of support strategies

Proactively reach out and check in with students and staff:

- Consider weekly debriefs about distressing content and mitigation strategies
- Make this a regular agenda item in supervisions
- Discuss triggers and red lines – e.g., some researchers want to avoid all content linked to children
- Be transparent at the beginning of projects that some material is distressing
- Emphasise the importance of taking breaks, giving themselves grace, and not rushing through the research

Emphasise that it is normal to be upset by this content, and you do not want to become numb to it or no longer recognise it is shocking:

- Have discussions to avoid desensitisation – e.g., discussions about impact on victims
- At the same time, encourage staff and students not to push themselves and work with things that make them too uncomfortable

Remember everyone processes harmful situations and content differently, so might need different support:

- Distribute workloads/content so those more affected or less experienced are not immediately exposed to more severe content (e.g., could grade content based on severity of cases)
- Be aware that isolation in research in this field might be cumulative – the nature of research and inability to talk about it with family and friends might close down those social support systems outside of work

Use trauma informed approaches

Funders:

- Expect and/or request that clinical mental health support is costed into grant proposals
- Evaluate within bids the approach to researcher wellbeing, and provide budget and/or resources to support this

Supervisors:

- Carry out risk assessments with staff and students
- Model good practices and open conversations about these topics

Institutions:

- Provide training for supervisors to support emotional wellbeing of students
- Integrate researcher wellbeing as part of ethical approval processes and institutional risk assessments
- Invest in mental health first aid training
- Provide access to counselling and/or specialised mental health support
- Provide opportunities for professional development on these topics

Foster a healthy work environment – note that staff turnover might indicate poor work satisfaction:

- Ensure clear communication and connected approaches by leadership
- Consider the impacts of broader organisational behaviours e.g., associations with certain organisations

Be aware of power dynamics:

- ECRs can feel the need to prove themselves. Asking if they mind looking at certain content is not good enough, as they will likely say yes without understanding the risks

DON'T

Wait for students and staff to ask for help:

- Instead, proactively discuss it, and make it a regular agenda item
- Be proactive in recognising your duty of care, and providing training and support

Just ask ECRs and researchers what they need from you:

- As established researchers, you will be more aware of the types of risks ECRs may face. For new researchers, the possibilities of harm may be unknown.

Let staff and students research alone:

- Instead, wherever possible ensure staff and students work together on tasks relating to distressing content (in person or online), and avoid lone working

Resources

Impact of research related trauma:

- Research study: Potential violence, trauma and all the feels: Towards collaborative, reflexive and self-aware methodologies for researching the far right
- University of Bath's Researcher Wellbeing Project, examining the impacts of researching emotionally challenging topics
- Research study: Burn after reading: Research-related trauma, burnout, and resilience in right-wing studies
- NCITE seminars:
  - Building resilience in the counterterrorism workforce
  - Protecting the protectors
- Research study: Researcher safety and vicarious trauma: A literature review and recommendations for universities, supervisors, and researchers
- Online extremism and terrorism research ethics: Researcher safety, informed consent, and the need for tailored guidelines
- Understanding the trauma-related effects of terrorist propaganda on researchers
- NABS+ report: Wellbeing challenges when working in difficult contexts

How researchers protect themselves:

- VOX-Pol resources
  - REASSURE report: especially the Getting through it: how researchers cope section
- Research study: Being prepared for emotionally demanding research

Practical guides

- Assessment tool for burnout in CSAM practitioners, but questions are useful
- Research study: The development of the Framework for Research Ethics in Terrorism Studies (FRETS)
- University of Liverpool practical toolkit: Researching forms of mixed, unclear and fluid extremism: Risks, challenges and best practices
- Moonshot resources
- Global Network on Extremism and Technology resources:
  - Can't stand the heat? Best practices and institutional responsibilities to safeguard extremism researchers
  - Strategies for researchers analysing terrorist and violent extremist content (TVEC)
- University of Birmingham course: Protecting wellbeing when working with distressing subjects and content (DToC) online
- UCL toolkit to support researcher wellbeing

Specifically for institutions:

- How can institutions better support researchers? The case of extremism and terrorism research

Generic but accessible mental health support:

- Your university or institution's support service: often found on webpages relating to student or staff information, or assistance programmes – if your institution/organisation has mental health first aiders, these are great people to help direct you to relevant resources and support
- MIND's guide to accessing support and services
- Samaritans for free, 24/7 support: phone 116 123
- If you feel you may be suffering from trauma, Soul Medicine has a free online course on recovering from trauma

ECR or other relevant networks active in this space (relevant throughout this guide):

- NABS+, including monthly informal ECR discussion sessions
- IAPSS and NABS+ communities of interest
- St Andrews CSTPV NextGen network
- CANSES

PHYSICAL AND DIGITAL OPERATIONAL SECURITY WHEN CONDUCTING RESEARCH

Advice from Dr Ashton Kingdon

Dr Ashton Kingdon is a Lecturer in Criminology at the University of Southampton, with many other affiliations including VOX-Pol, RUSI, the British Society of Criminology, and the Extremism and Gaming Research Network. She has conducted research into various online harms including related to the climate, AI and far right riots, extremist propaganda and imagery, and gaming aesthetics.

DO

Be aware, and ensure staff and students are aware, of repercussions or considerations of public-facing outputs (e.g., media, publications, documentaries, podcasts, opinion pieces)

- Work with staff/student to negotiate a suitable risk appetite

Be proactive:

- Ensure all staff & students know threat assessment and security team contacts – have a conversation to ensure everyone knows the plan in an emergency
- Establish clear protocols for emergencies and/or doxxing – ensure they know who to contact if threatened or their identity is exposed
- Ensure staff and students have a trusted colleague or supervisor to be a point of contact in a crisis

Provide staff and students with resources they need:

- Provide research devices and funding for burner phones
- Provide reputable, paid for VPNs and other software

Protect staff and students' physical safety:

- Remove office addresses from university directories/websites if requested
- Remove other details (phone numbers, email addresses) if requested
- Revise or consider 'open door' policies where individuals can drop-in to staff offices without prior notice
- Warn colleagues not to direct unknown people to staff and students
- Have plans in place for unknown/malicious actors showing up in person

DON'T

Let crisis be the first point that you discuss safety and security with staff and students:

- Instead, recognise that threats can be scary and destabilising, making it hard to think clearly in the moment
- It's important to have proactive measures in place in advance

Advice & Suggestions from the Research Community

DO

Funders:

- Evaluate operational security in proposals, and provide budget/resources to support this

Institutions:

- Consider operational security in ethics applications and institutional risk assessments
- Provide training/workshops on how to conduct online research while maintaining safety protocols – concern for safety dissuades people from carrying out research, without clear OSINT/safety training/advice

Supervisors:

- Pass on advice and proactively discuss risks

Be proactive and understanding about requirements for events:

- Ask speakers if they would prefer not to be livestreamed/photographed
- Provide name tags/lanyards so researchers are not approached by strangers

Ask for consent before sharing information online:

- Ensure online researcher profiles are opt in, or include options that allow for pseudonyms or limited information

Fund security measures:

- The bare minimum for operational security (e.g., VPN, separate devices, cybersecurity tools) can be expensive. If staff/students cannot afford it, this necessitates them continuing the research using their personal devices and/or suboptimal cybersecurity measures
- Digital security is important for researcher safety, and for data protection
- Other protective measures can be expensive, e.g., online information removal services

DON'T

Give your ECRs documents like this or the accompanying ECR-directed output, and think that will suffice:

- Instead, be proactive in recognising your duty of care, and providing training and support

Resources

Practical tools:

- Resources and operational security training for open source intelligence/journalism e.g., OSINT companies and blogs
  - E.g., Bellingcat – Online Investigative Toolkit
- Hunchly OSINT tool
- "OSINT Techniques: Resources for Uncovering Online Information" by Michael Bazzell
- Pinpoint secure
- Digital literacy: Tacticaltech.org, DIY Guide to Feminist Cyber Security
- VOX-Pol collection of tools and guides
- Ten Day Security guide to cybersecurity

Advice and best practice:

- University of Liverpool practical toolkit: Researching forms of mixed, unclear and fluid extremism: Risks, challenges and best practices
- VOX-Pol resources:
  - REASSURE report
- Research study: Researcher safety and vicarious trauma: A literature review and recommendations for universities, supervisors, and researchers
- CREST report: Staying Safe: Protecting You and Your Research
- Online extremism and terrorism research ethics: Researcher safety, informed consent, and the need for tailored guidelines
- Global Network on Extremism and Technology resources
- Moonshot resources

Experiences of researchers:

- Research study: Success and Harm When Researching the Far Right: Researcher Safety as Epistemic Exclusion
- VOX-Pol report: Researching the far right safely in academia: Current practices and constraints

Official advice

- National Protective Security Authority on recognising suspicious job adverts and recruiting activity
- National Protective Security Authority 'Think before you link' campaign

Institutional responsibilities:

- Does the institution have a plan for that? Researcher safety and the ethics of institutional responsibility
- For institutions: How can institutions better support researchers? The case of extremism and terrorism research

Data resources, to avoid trawling online:

- The Repository of Extremist Aligned Documents (READ)

SAFETY AND WELLBEING WHEN DISSEMINATING SENSITIVE OR CONTROVERSIAL RESEARCH

Advice from Dr Antonia Vaughan

Dr Antonia Vaughan's previous academic research focused on the far right. She has published many outputs related to ethics and wellbeing when researching the far right, including the incentives that encourage dangerous work. Antonia recently authored the VOX-Pol report Researching the Far Right Safely in Academia – Current Practices and Constraints.

DO

Recognise and act on your duty of care in the face of diverse risks:

- Improve institutional policies and procedures – ensure they are comprehensive, effective, consistent, widely understood, and implemented
- Stand up for and defend the validity of researchers and their research, especially where ECRs do not have the capital or reputation to do so
- Put mechanisms in place to enable ECRs to better leverage reputational capital and connections, to build personal and career resilience against bad faith activity against them

Be proactive:

- Establish clear pathways for if/when researchers encounter harm
- Provide relevant training on handling these issues
- Inform researchers of the risks and available support before encouraging them to conduct potentially harmful or sensitive research
- Discuss, plan, and anticipate risks, and the support that might be necessary to minimise risk, support wellbeing, and enable project success

Join up the relevant teams involved to leverage expertise and avoid duplicated conversations in emergencies – including supervisors, HR, PR, IT security, physical security, ethics boards etc.

Provide training for other staff members:

- Target supervisors, doctoral schools, and faculties with training on risks and protection measures, to allow knowledge to trickle down to researchers
- Ensure other staff members are trained and recognise their role in mitigating risk to researchers – e.g., ethics committees, IT, security, HR

Create an environment and working relationship where researchers can talk to you and ask for help:

- Encourage ECRs to share problems and seek support
- Emphasise that flagging harassment will not have negative repercussions for researchers
- Ensure senior management take researchers' concerns seriously

Allow researchers to have ownership over their public profile:

- Gain informed consent before publicising their research – relevant to all information, including text content, graphics, and framing
- Allow researchers control over their information that is made public – e.g., headshots, location of offices, email addresses

DON'T

Leave risk mitigations up to individual researchers at the individual level:

- Instead, take proactive and reactive action to protect them

Ask ECRs and researchers what they need from you:

- Instead, be proactive in offering what you can do, and what you are willing to do

Leave it to individual researchers to educate institutions on harassment at the point of crisis:

- This can be unnecessary additional emotional labour

Mandate or automate detailed public-facing researcher profiles:

- Instead, gain informed consent for all information that is made public (see 'Do's')

Pressure researchers to publish to generate impact without understanding, communicating, and mitigating the risks involved

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Advice & Suggestions from the Research Community

DO

Act as supportive mentors:

- Speak to staff/students if they are worried about responses from the public, malicious actors, or other academics
- Call out unacceptable behaviour or unjust criticisms directed against your staff and students, or anyone
- Provide institutional support/backing in writing before staff and students start research and/or before any dissemination
- Create a research community where feedback is constructive, rather than ad hominem attacks

Have (crisis) protocols in place for threats and harassment towards researchers (both online and offline):

- Leverage protocols already in place to manage institutional reputation

Seek consent before naming students and staff publicly:

- Brief the team members named on publications that may put them at risk

Consider how these risks are changing the research world:

- When making hiring decisions, keep in mind that researchers are starting to prioritise personal safety over self-promotion
- Recognise that ECRs may not be able to publicly present research, which has impacts on integration within departments/wider research communities, and limits opportunities for exposure/recruitment/skills development
- Provide training on how to balance navigating privacy on social media and maintaining a research profile

Provide institutional accounts where research can be shared:

- Researchers should not be forced to maintain a personal social media account, particularly if used for disseminating controversial research

Support ECRs with framing findings sensitively

Institutions:

- Ensure it is accessible to approach media teams and press offices for advice ahead of disseminating research or engaging with the media

Consider providing or funding media training for researchers

Resources

Practical advice:

- Advice for journalists, and OSINT blogs
- Data and Society's Best practices for conducting risky research and protecting yourself from online harassment
- IntelTechniques: includes guides for VPNs, data requests etc.

Researcher experiences:

- VOX-Pol report: Researching the far right safely in academia: Current practices and constraints

Advice for institutions:

- How can institutions better support researchers? The case of extremism and terrorism research

Guidance for dealing with harassment

- Online harassment manual
- Universities UK manual for online harassment
- Some universities have specific advice, e.g., University of Michigan
- HeartMob: community dedicated to offering support to people experiencing online harassment
- Guidance for dealing with doxxing