

# New guidance published on how to best support qualitative researchers

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New guidance—devised by a group of twelve researchers from various disciplines and institutions—is published today in the *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*. It provides diverse experiences from the co-authors about their research into sensitive, challenging, and difficult areas, and suggests practical principles to overcome issues to ensure the highest safety and well-being of qualitative researchers in the field.

Lead author Sergio A. Silverio from King's College London says that "as qualitative researchers we have often been encouraged to think about reducing harm to participants throughout the [research process](#), but there has been little written on how to best protect and support researchers. This [guidance](#) changes that."

The authors make a distinction between sensitive, challenging, and difficult topics, with the latter differentiated from the former two. According to the authors sensitive topics are those which delve into the "acutely personal" experiences a participant has had, whilst challenging topics are focused on problems between groups or within systems. Difficult topics, however, are those which would generally be those perceived by the public as taboo, frightening, or morally objectionable.

Drawing on their [personal experiences](#) of conducting research in the field, authors cover a range of topics including sexuality, [mental health](#), abuse, grief, and palliative care, amongst others.

The article concludes with an eight-point set of practical principles on how best to support qualitative researchers at all levels of experience when they go into the field to research sensitive, challenging, or difficult topics. Training and proper induction to the research is recommended first, followed by appropriate scheduling of data collection, employing a 'buddy system', and ensuring effective debriefing is conducted by the study team.

The authors also encourage researchers to use reflective diaries or journals and to engage in individual and team supervision throughout the research process. Finally, they recommend prudent use of charitable input and support, as well as formal psychological support if deemed necessary.

"This guidance provides practical advice for research students and

researchers and also crucially for supervisors and research leaders on how to prepare and support their staff and students working in these areas," says Professor Jane Sandall

This guidance is recommended as a companion guide for research ethics committees and institutional review boards; however the authors advise that it be treated as a "living" document that will require updates as the field of qualitative research continues to grow.

**More information:** Sergio A. Silverio et al, Sensitive, Challenging, and Difficult Topics: Experiences and Practical Considerations for Qualitative Researchers, *International Journal of Qualitative Methods* (2022). [DOI: 10.1177/16094069221124739](https://doi.org/10.1177/16094069221124739)

Provided by King's College London

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