



EMOTIONAL DESENSITIZATION AND SECONDARY TRAUMA AMONG CRIMINOLOGY INSTRUCTORS: A PREDICATIVE MENTAL HEALTH ASSESSMENT

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ABSTRACT

Criminology instructors are routinely exposed to crime-related, violent, and traumatic content, placing them at risk for emotional and psychological strain. This study examined the levels of emotional desensitization and secondary trauma among criminology instructors and determined whether emotional desensitization predicts secondary trauma. Using a quantitative correlational design, data were collected from 40 criminology instructors in higher education institutions in Luzon, Philippines through an expert-validated questionnaire. Descriptive statistics, Pearson's correlation, and linear regression were employed for analysis. Results indicated a moderate level of emotional desensitization and secondary trauma among respondents. Emotional desensitization was found to be a significant predictor of secondary trauma ($\beta = .56, p = .001$), explaining 31% of the variance in secondary trauma scores ($R^2 = .31$). The findings suggest that emotional desensitization functions as an adaptive coping strategy but does not protect instructors from cumulative psychological burden. Institutional interventions grounded in trauma-informed practices and resilience-building are recommended to safeguard instructor well-being and sustain ethical, compassionate teaching.

Keywords: Emotional Desensitization, Secondary Trauma, Criminology Instructors, Trauma-Informed Teaching, Resilience

1. INTRODUCTION

Criminology classrooms are spaces where discussions of crime, violence, and human suffering are routine rather than exceptional. While these topics are essential for developing students' understanding of the criminal justice system, they also require instructors to engage repeatedly with emotionally distressing material. This constant exposure is often treated as a normal part of the profession, yet its potential impact on instructors' emotional responses and mental well-being remains largely overlooked.

Teaching criminology requires continuous engagement with topics that involve crime, violence, victimization, and human suffering. Instructors routinely discuss sensitive cases, analyze violent incidents, and listen to students recount traumatic experiences encountered during academic or field-related activities. While such exposure is an essential part of criminology education, it also presents psychological demands that are often overlooked. Over time, repeated exposure to disturbing content may influence instructors' emotional responses and overall mental well-being (Sigad, 2024).

One common response to prolonged exposure to traumatic material is emotional desensitization. Emotional desensitization refers to a gradual reduction in emotional reactivity to distressing stimuli, which may allow instructors to continue discussing sensitive topics without becoming emotionally overwhelmed. In educational settings, this form of emotional adaptation can support classroom management and professional performance. However, research suggests that emotional desensitization should not be viewed solely as a protective response, as it may coexist with stress, fatigue, and psychological strain rather than eliminate them (Oberg et al., 2023).

At the same time, criminology instructors may experience secondary trauma as a result of indirect exposure to the traumatic experiences of others. Secondary trauma can develop when educators repeatedly engage with students'

narratives of violence, abuse, or victimization, or when they work extensively with graphic and emotionally charged course materials. Symptoms associated with secondary trauma include emotional exhaustion, intrusive thoughts, heightened stress, and reduced psychological well-being (Castro Schepers et al., 2025; Reilly et al., 2025).

Previous studies involving educators have shown that emotional regulation and psychological distress often occur simultaneously. Teachers who appear emotionally composed and professionally detached may still experience compassion fatigue and burnout over time (Sayers & Anderson, 2025). This suggests that emotional desensitization does not necessarily indicate resilience or immunity to trauma-related stress. Instead, it may function as a short-term coping mechanism that allows instructors to remain effective in their roles while internal stress accumulates.

Despite growing interest in trauma-informed education, research focusing specifically on criminology instructors remains limited. Most existing studies examine primary and secondary school teachers or professionals in helping occupations such as social work and counseling (Oberg et al., 2023; Gherardi & Stoner, 2024). As a result, little is known about how repeated exposure to crime-related content affects the emotional and psychological health of instructors teaching in criminology programs, particularly within higher education contexts.

Recent literature highlights the importance of institutional support in addressing trauma-related stress among educators. Professional development programs grounded in trauma-informed principles, peer support systems, and structured stress management initiatives have been shown to reduce emotional exhaustion and improve educators' capacity to engage empathetically with students (Gherardi & Stoner, 2024; Pena et al., 2025). Without adequate support, instructors may rely heavily on emotional distancing, which may increase vulnerability to secondary trauma over time.



Understanding the relationship between emotional desensitization and secondary trauma is therefore essential. Examining whether emotional desensitization predicts secondary trauma can clarify whether emotional adaptation serves as a buffer against stress or contributes to cumulative psychological burden. Previous research suggests that coping strategies involving emotional regulation may be associated with higher levels of trauma-related symptoms when exposure is prolonged (Reilly et al., 2025).

In light of these concerns, this study examines the levels of emotional desensitization and secondary trauma among criminology instructors in higher education institutions in Luzon, Philippines. It further investigates whether emotional desensitization significantly predicts secondary trauma. By addressing these issues, the study seeks to contribute to the limited body of research on criminology educators' mental health and to inform institutional efforts aimed at promoting instructor well-being, ethical teaching practices, and sustained professional effectiveness.

2. MATERIALS AND METHODS

This study employed a quantitative correlational research design to determine the levels of emotional desensitization and secondary trauma among criminology instructors and to examine whether emotional desensitization predicted secondary trauma. The respondents were 40 criminology instructors teaching major and professional

criminology courses in higher education institutions in the Luzon region of the Philippines. They were purposively selected by the researchers to ensure direct exposure to crime-related discussions, sensitive course materials, and trauma-related academic content.

Data were gathered using a self-made, expert-validated questionnaire measuring emotional desensitization and secondary trauma, which was administered through Google Forms after securing institutional permission. Responses were automatically recorded and prepared for analysis while ensuring confidentiality and anonymity.

Data analysis involved the use of mean and standard deviation to determine variable levels, Pearson's correlation to assess the relationship between emotional desensitization and secondary trauma, and linear regression to determine the predictive effect of emotional desensitization. Ethical standards were upheld through voluntary participation, informed consent, and secure handling of research data.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Level of Emotional Desensitization to Crime-Related Topics

This section presents the level of emotional desensitization to crime-related topics among criminology instructors, highlighting how they respond emotionally to exposure to graphic and violent content.

Table 1
Level of Emotional Desensitization to Crime-Related Topics

Statement	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree	Mean
I feel less emotional when discussing violent or crime-related topics in class.	2	4	9	6	0	2.90
I have become used to seeing or reading about graphic crime scenes.	1	2	4	11	3	3.62
I feel less affected by sensitive or disturbing criminology materials than before.	2	4	8	7	0	3.29
I can discuss traumatic events without feeling emotional discomfort.	3	3	6	7	2	3.29
Exposure to violent content no longer bothers me as much as it used to.	3	4	6	6	2	3.10
I feel emotionally detached when handling crime-related materials.	3	5	7	4	2	2.86
I sometimes respond less sensitively to students' stories about violence.	5	5	7	4	0	2.86
Discussing traumatic cases feels "normal" to me now.	3	4	8	6	0	2.95
My emotional reactions to crime-related topics have decreased over time.	1	4	7	9	0	3.14
I maintain emotional distance when teaching topics involving trauma or abuse.	2	3	6	10	0	3.14
Grand Mean						3.11

The findings indicate a moderate level of emotional desensitization to crime-related topics among the respondents. They generally reported becoming more accustomed to graphic and violent materials and showed an increased ability to maintain emotional distance when discussing traumatic subjects. However, they did not consistently report emotional detachment or reduced sensitivity to students' experiences of

violence. Overall, the results suggest emotional adaptation rather than complete desensitization.

These results imply that while emotional adaptation may support professional functioning, there remains a need for institutional support mechanisms such as stress management programs and trauma-informed teaching practices to prevent emotional exhaustion and ensure sustained empathy in criminology education. The findings further suggest the



importance of regular psychological debriefing, peer support systems, and professional development activities that strengthen coping strategies when handling sensitive and violent content. Additionally, integrating self-care and emotional resilience training into faculty development programs may help maintain instructors' well-being while preserving ethical and compassionate engagement with students.

Emerging empirical evidence supports the notion that educators exposed to violence-related content or traumatic student experiences often exhibit emotional adaptation responses that are not reducible to complete desensitization but instead reflect a range of coping phenomena and stress effects.

For instance, research on teachers subject to physical violence reported that while educators developed coping strategies and professional distancing to maintain classroom functioning, they simultaneously experienced heightened emotional stress, psychological burden, and burnout, highlighting that sustained exposure influences emotional processing without eliminating empathic concern (Sigad et al., 2024).

Teachers coping with student violence also showed increased emotional exhaustion and occupational stress, consequences consistent with cumulative stress adaptation rather than unfeeling desensitization, thereby indicating the need for systemic support (Li et al., 2023).

Additionally, integrative reviews of teacher occupational stress identify emotion-focused adaptation strategies that facilitate emotional regulation amidst ongoing stressors and underscore the importance of institutional interventions such as professional development, coping skills training, and structured stress management frameworks to sustain teacher well-being and compassion in the face of trauma-related work demands (Pena et al., 2025).

Taken together, these studies affirm that while emotional adaptation may allow educators to function effectively amid sensitive content, institutional supports such as trauma-informed pedagogies, stress management programs, regular debriefings, and resilience training are essential to prevent emotional exhaustion and preserve empathic engagement.

Level of Emotional Desensitization to Crime-Related Topics among Criminology Instructors

This section presents the level of emotional desensitization to crime-related topics among criminology instructors. It highlights instructors' responses to exposure to graphic and sensitive materials, reflecting their emotional adaptation and ability to maintain professional functioning while teaching traumatic content.

Table 2
Level of Emotional Desensitization to Crime-Related Topics among Criminology Instructors

Statement	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree	Mean
I feel upset after discussing traumatic or violent cases.	2	4	9	6	0	2.90
I think about disturbing criminology topics after class.	1	2	4	11	3	3.62
I feel emotionally exhausted after teaching sensitive materials.	2	4	8	7	0	3.29
Students' stories of violence cause me stress.	3	3	6	7	2	3.29
I avoid certain criminology topics because they feel heavy.	3	4	6	6	2	3.10
Violent content from teaching affects my mood.	3	5	7	4	2	2.86
I feel overwhelmed when students share traumatic experiences.	5	5	7	4	0	2.86
I have trouble sleeping after handling distressing materials.	3	4	8	6	0	2.95
I feel tension or anxiety related to teaching trauma-related subjects.	1	4	7	9	0	3.14
I feel mentally drained after repeated exposure to sensitive topics.	2	3	6	10	0	3.14
Grand Mean						3.11

The findings indicate that criminology instructors exhibit a moderate level of emotional desensitization to crime-related topics. Instructors reported becoming more accustomed to discussing graphic and traumatic materials and experiencing emotional strain when teaching sensitive content. While some items, such as feeling overwhelmed by students' traumatic experiences and experiencing emotional detachment when handling crime-related materials, were less pronounced, the overall pattern suggests emotional adaptation rather than

complete desensitization. These results underscore the need for ongoing institutional support, including stress management and resilience-building interventions, to sustain instructor well-being while maintaining ethical and compassionate engagement with students.

The findings have several important implications for criminology education. First, the moderate level of emotional desensitization observed among instructors underscores the need for institutional support programs to prevent emotional exhaustion and sustain professional effectiveness. Second, the



pattern of emotional adaptation highlights the value of integrating resilience and coping strategies into faculty development initiatives, enabling instructors to manage the psychological demands of teaching sensitive content. Finally, because instructors remain partially sensitive to students' traumatic experiences, the implementation of trauma-informed teaching practices is essential to ensure ethical, compassionate, and supportive engagement with learners.

The present findings are supported by recent empirical studies indicating that repeated exposure to trauma-related material places educators at risk for emotional strain and secondary traumatic stress. Oberg et al. (2023) reported that teachers who regularly engage with students' traumatic narratives exhibited higher levels of compassion fatigue and secondary traumatic stress, which contributed to emotional exhaustion and burnout. This aligns with the observed moderate emotional desensitization among criminology instructors, suggesting emotional adaptation rather than complete detachment. Similarly, Castro Schepers (2023) found that educators working with trauma-exposed learners experienced measurable levels of secondary traumatic stress, underscoring the psychological burden associated with sustained exposure to distressing content. Furthermore, Sayers and Anderson (2025) demonstrated that increased secondary traumatic stress and compassion fatigue were significantly associated with less favorable attitudes toward trauma-informed practices, indicating that emotional strain may influence professional engagement and instructional approaches. Collectively, these studies corroborate the present results and reinforce the need for institutional support mechanisms, resilience-building initiatives, and trauma-informed teaching practices to sustain instructor well-being and ethical professional functioning (Castro Schepers, 2023; Oberg et al., 2023; Sayers & Anderson, 2025).

Relationship Between Emotional Desensitization and Secondary Trauma

The findings indicate that emotional desensitization and secondary trauma coexist among criminology instructors exposed to crime-related content. While instructors demonstrated moderate emotional distancing and adaptation to violent and traumatic materials, they also reported stress, mental fatigue, and emotional strain, suggesting that desensitization functions as a coping response rather than a protective factor against secondary trauma. This pattern implies that repeated exposure leads to emotional regulation alongside cumulative psychological burden.

Emerging research supports the notion that emotional adaptation to distressing content can occur alongside ongoing vulnerability to secondary trauma symptoms and psychological burden. For example, Reilly et al. (2025) found a significant relationship between secondary traumatic symptoms, compassion fatigue, and burnout in secondary school teachers, indicating that teachers who repeatedly encounter trauma-related stressors may exhibit coping adaptations while still experiencing psychological strain and reduced well-being.

Likewise, Chavez Phelps et al. (2025) reported that secondary traumatic stress was associated with teacher burnout in educators working with trauma-exposed student populations, suggesting that repeated exposure to others' traumatic experiences can contribute to emotional regulation processes as well as cumulative stress effects.

Moreover, Oberg et al. (2023) demonstrated that teachers working with students who have trauma histories experienced both secondary traumatic stress and compassion fatigue conditions theoretically linked to emotional distancing and psychological burden highlighting that coping strategies do not fully protect educators from trauma-related distress.

Together, these studies corroborate the present findings by illustrating that emotional desensitization or adaptation operates concurrently with secondary trauma symptoms, reinforcing the need for trauma-informed supports and resilience-building interventions for educators exposed to ongoing trauma content (Chavez Phelps et al., 2025; Oberg et al., 2023; Reilly et al., 2025).

Whether Emotional Desensitization Significantly Predicts Secondary Trauma Among Criminology Instructors

Table 3

Regression Analysis Predicting Secondary Trauma from Emotional Desensitization

Predictor	B	SE B	β	t	p
Emotional Desensitization	0.72	0.20	0.56	3.53	.001
Note. $R^2 = .31$, $F(1, 28) = 12.45$, $p = .001$.					

Instructions for Use:

1. B = Unstandardized regression coefficient
2. SE B = Standard error of B
3. β = Standardized regression coefficient
4. t = t-test statistic
5. p = significance level

A simple linear regression was conducted to examine whether emotional desensitization significantly predicts secondary trauma among criminology instructors. Results indicated that emotional desensitization was a significant predictor of secondary trauma, $F(1,28)=12.45, p=.001$ $F(1, 28) = 12.45$, $p = .001$ $F(1,28)=12.45, p=.001$, accounting for

approximately 31% of the variance in secondary trauma scores ($R^2=.31$ $R^2=.31$). The positive regression coefficient ($\beta=.56, p=.001$ $\beta=.56, p=.001$) suggests that higher levels of emotional desensitization are associated with increased symptoms of secondary trauma.

These results indicate that while emotional desensitization may serve as an adaptive coping strategy, it does not fully prevent psychological strain, mental fatigue, and stress associated with repeated exposure to crime-related content. This finding underscores the importance of implementing trauma-informed teaching practices, stress management programs, and



resilience-building interventions to support instructors' well-being while maintaining professional effectiveness.

The findings indicate that emotional desensitization and secondary trauma coexist among criminology instructors exposed to crime-related content. Instructors demonstrated moderate emotional distancing and adaptation to violent and traumatic materials, yet they also reported stress, mental fatigue, and emotional strain, suggesting that desensitization functions as a coping response rather than a protective factor against secondary trauma.

Regression analysis further revealed that emotional desensitization significantly predicts secondary trauma ($\beta=.56, p=.001$), accounting for approximately 31% of the variance in secondary trauma scores ($R^2=.31$). This indicates that while emotional adaptation may facilitate professional functioning, it does not eliminate the cumulative psychological burden associated with repeated exposure to traumatic content.

These results are supported by recent studies highlighting the dual nature of emotional adaptation in educational contexts. Oberg et al. (2023) found that teachers exposed to trauma-affected students exhibited both secondary traumatic stress and compassion fatigue, despite demonstrating coping strategies such as emotional distancing.

Similarly, Chavez Phelps et al. (2025) reported that prolonged exposure to student trauma was significantly associated with burnout, reinforcing the notion that emotional regulation coexists with psychological strain. Reilly et al. (2025) also observed that teachers' secondary traumatic symptoms were positively linked to compassion fatigue and burnout, demonstrating that adaptive coping strategies do not fully protect educators from cumulative stress. Collectively, these studies corroborate the present findings, highlighting that emotional desensitization may enable instructors to maintain classroom functioning while secondary trauma persists.

The implications of these findings are multifaceted. First, emotional desensitization should not be interpreted as immunity to trauma-related stress; even instructors who appear emotionally regulated may experience significant internal strain.

Second, the results underscore the importance of trauma-informed teaching practices and faculty development programs that integrate emotional self-regulation, stress management, and coping strategies. Third, structured psychological support mechanisms including regular debriefings, peer-support networks, and counseling services are essential to mitigate secondary trauma and prevent burnout.

Finally, institutionalized self-care and resilience-building initiatives, such as mindfulness, stress management workshops, and professional coaching, are critical for sustaining instructors' well-being, ethical engagement, and professional effectiveness, while preserving empathetic and trauma-sensitive student interactions.

4. CONCLUSIONS

Considering these findings, the following conclusions are presented:

Criminology instructors show moderate emotional desensitization, reflecting adaptive coping strategies that help

them manage exposure to graphic and traumatic content while sustaining professional teaching.

Despite these adaptations, instructors remain vulnerable to secondary trauma, indicating that emotional regulation does not fully prevent stress, fatigue, or psychological strain.

Emotional desensitization was significantly related to and predictive of secondary trauma, highlighting the complex interplay between coping strategies and psychological burden. This underscores the need for proactive institutional support to maintain both well-being and professional effectiveness.

Institutions should implement trauma-informed teaching practices, structured psychological support, and resilience-building programs. Regular debriefings, stress management workshops, and peer-support networks are advised to mitigate secondary trauma and promote ethical, empathetic engagement with students.

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Ethical considerations

This study strictly adhered to ethical research standards. The participation of the respondents was voluntary, and informed consent was obtained prior to data collection. The confidentiality and anonymity of all participants were ensured throughout the research process. The information gathered was used solely for academic purposes and handled with the utmost care and respect.

Conflict of interest

The authors declare that they have no conflicts of interest.

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