

# MODERATING SENSITIVE TOPICS

Permitting the discussion of sensitive topics on your server can allow users to feel more at home and engage with their trusted peers on topics they may not feel comfortable discussing with others. This can encompass subjects like politics, mental health, or maybe even their own personal struggles. Having dedicated channels can keep these topics as opt-in and in a dedicated space so that people who do not want to see this content can avoid it. This can also allow you to role gate the channel, making it opt-in, level gated, activity gated, by request only, or some other requirement to keep trolls or irresponsible users out.

## **Allowing Sensitive Topics in Your Community**

Establishing channels dedicated to sensitive topics can also be an exhausting drain on your moderation team and can invite unwanted content into your server. These channels can quickly get out of hand if they are not set up mindfully and moderated carefully and will often require their own sets of rules and permissions to be run effectively and safely. Whether you want these discussions to occur in your space at all is up to you and your team. Having channels for these topics takes a lot of work and special consideration for you to determine if it's the right fit for your server.

In short: This document will serve to educate you on how best to discern if you want these different channels, whether it be a channel on venting, serious-topics, or a real world event. Keep in mind- no matter what topics (if any) that you decide

to include in your server, remember that all content needs to be within Discord's Terms of Service and Community Guidelines.

## **Determining What is a Sensitive Topic**

The first step to determining whether to have sensitive topics channels in your server is to define what is considered a sensitive topic for your community. If you are running a server for people from a specific country, a discussion of that country's conflicts with other countries may be a sensitive topic. Conversely, if you are running something like a political debate server, that same topic can be relatively non-problematic and not upsetting to the members of the server.

There are two main types of sensitive topics: triggering topics and contentious topics. A triggering topic is a topic or word that can prompt an increase or return of symptoms of a mental illness or mental distress due to trauma. A contentious topic is one that is controversial that has the potential to provoke heated arguments.

While sensitive topics can vary depending on what kind of server you own (e.g. a mental health server vs. a gaming server), keep in mind that there are topics that can be considered triggering and topics that can be considered contentious in most, if not all public spaces.

## **Triggering Topics**

Triggering topics can vary wildly from community to community depending on what the focus of the community is. For instance, in a community for transgender people, in-depth descriptions of a body or the discomfort some people experience because of their body is likely to be a triggering topic. There are some triggers that are very common and should be handled with the assumption that they will cause multiple people in your community to feel uncomfortable or even traumatized regardless of what type of community it is. This would include things like sexual assault, graphic depictions of violence, other traumatic experiences, suicide and self harm, eating disorders, parental abuse or neglect, etc. These more sensitive

topics should likely be separated out from more community specific topics that have the potential to invoke trauma such as transitioning or coming out in a server for LGBTQ+ people.

## Channel Names

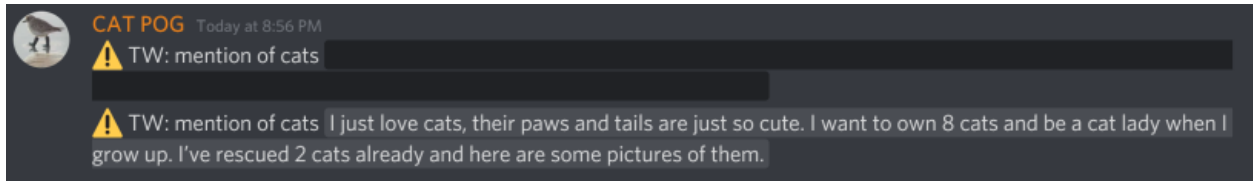
Channel names indicate to users the intended purpose of the channel. Carefully choosing your name can have a large impact on what the channel ends up being used for. For example, #personal-questions-and-advice versus #tw-emotional-support-and-venting give users very different impressions of what the channel is for. If you want a channel where someone can ask “What are some ways to distract myself if I feel like hurting myself” or, “my teacher is being homophobic, what should I do?” but not graphic descriptions of the symptoms of trauma or vice versa, make sure the name of the channel reflects that. Including tw (trigger warning) or cw (content warning) in your channel name will give the impression that the latter is allowed and is what the channel is intended to be used for.

## Channel Rules

Channels that have the potential to bring crisis situations into a server or cause distress to other members of the community should have specific rules to minimize the potential harm. These rules could be pinned in the channel, have their own channel within a category that houses sensitive topics channels, or be included in the servers rules. The example list of rules below includes some harm mitigation strategies, as well as the potential downsides of each.

- Consider asking that anything extremely upsetting utilize a trigger warning (tw) or content warning (cw). A trigger/content warning gives users a heads up that the content they are about to look at has the potential to invoke mental distress or trauma. This allows the user to decide whether to look at it or avoid it. This can be done through adding spacing to messages to

push content off screen so the warning is seen first, or utilizing spoiler tags to hide content from anyone who does not want to see it. Including an emoji with a spoiler tag can also help the message stand out. For example:



- Consider removing permissions for images/link embedding. Sometimes users will post images of self harm or weapons they intend to use on themselves in emotional support channels.
- This can prevent users from uploading advice in the form of screenshots from other online resources.
- Consider banning certain topics. If your moderators and server members aren't professionally qualified to offer sound advice on a topic, it may be worth disallowing discussion of those topics. Saying the wrong thing to a person in crisis can make the situation worse. If a topic arises, the conversation can be ended at "We're not qualified, here are ways to contact people who are."
- This can be seen as callous or upsetting to other server members, or the member in crisis. While putting an end to a discussion related to one of your members in a crisis will be uncomfortable, it may still be an effective and safe way to deal with situations that require expertise beyond that of your mod team or other server members.
- Consider creating a role or using channel permissions to allow you to ban people from the channel entirely if they seem to be incapable of following the channel rules but are otherwise a positive member of the community and follow the server wide rules.
- Adding a role to a user can draw attention to and further punish the user. Other users may see and inquire about the unfamiliar role. Adding channel

permissions allows more privacy but will clutter your permissions and likely not be very scalable if this option is used frequently.

- Keep a list of resources on hand that can be shared if someone mentions that they are in the midst of a crisis situation, this should include abuse hotlines, self harm/suicide hotlines and hotlines for parental abuse. Be sure to seek out hotlines for the country that a majority of your users are from, or international hotlines that anyone can use.

## **Moderation Concerns**

- Emotional burnout from dealing with users in crisis or users asking for advice about upsetting personal issues can be detrimental to moderators. Whether moderators are actively engaging with users in the chat or just reading the chat to ensure it is not getting out of hand, the emotional toll is high. Moderators who engage with and moderate these spaces should understand their limits and how to manage burnout.
- Moderating users who are in a crisis or really going through it is unpleasant and can make the staff team look harsh or uncaring to other users regardless of how egregious their behaviour is.
- The chance for abuse in these channels is higher than the average channel. Users who overuse the channel and are in constant need of support/advice can quickly become a drain on the emotional well being of everyone involved with the channel. Know the red flags for emotional abuse and keep an eye out for users who are constantly in crisis and trying to manipulate users into doing things for them.
- Trolls and malicious attention seekers will target this channel. They will come in with extremely upsetting sob stories and fake mental/physical health crises to make users panic, upset people, or just generally disturb the peace. Allowing them a space to soap box makes these sorts of users more difficult to pick out and remove before they can start doing damage.

- Some users will intentionally seek out content that they know will trigger them as a form of emotional self harm. It can be difficult to know whether this is happening in your server unless someone explicitly mentions that they are doing it.
- If there is a separate team in charge of moderating or overseeing these channels, they will need to closely communicate with the rest of the moderation team about problem users or concerning behavior.

## **Conclusions**

Channels focused on sensitive topics can provide users with a comfortable space to discuss personal issues of varying severity and build closeness and trust between members of your community. These channels also have very specific risks and required mitigation strategies that will vary depending on the nature of the specific channel. If you are running a channel on transition advice for transgender users, your main concern will likely be fake advice about foods that change hormone levels or dangerous advice regarding illegally acquiring hormones. If you run a channel for sexual assault victims, your main concern will likely be victim blaming and ensuring that users reach out to professionals when needed. You have to consider what the specific risks in your channel are and ensure that you are writing policies that are specific to your needs and finding moderators that are knowledgeable and comfortable with those topics.

## **Contentious Topics**

There may be contentious topics for your community in particular, but in general politics, economics, law, current events, and morality are contentious topics for most servers. These topics are likely to cause disagreements as a lot of users will have very varied and very firm opinions on the topics.

## Channel Names

A channel named #discussion-of-current-events and a channel named #political-debates-to-the-death are going to yield very different types of interactions. If you want a channel where people can mention politics and current events and discuss things like the stock market or a new law that was passed, but don't want discussions about whether specific world leaders are good or bad, or what economic model is the best one, make sure your channel name reflects that. Many/most users won't read anything but the channel name, so your channel name needs to set the correct expectation for the content individuals will find inside.

## Channel Rules

Channels that have the potential to get heated and cause arguments that lead to negative feedback loops should have specific rules to minimize the potential harm. These rules could be pinned in the channel, have their own channel within a category that houses contentious topics channels, or be included in the servers rules. The list of rules below includes some harm mitigation strategies, as well as the potential downsides of each.

- Explicitly disallow bigotry and hate speech of any form. Remember that this behavior is also against Discord's Terms of Service and Community Guidelines and shouldn't be allowed in any situation on your server, sensitive topics or not.
- Consider requiring that users provide sources to back up claims. This prevents users from trying to make others argue against complete nonsense that is only supported by fringe conspiracy theorists, or is demonstrably false.
- Users who are acting in bad faith can abuse this and request that every statement ever have a credible source and bog down people who are citing credible sources they do not have on hand at the time.

- Consider banning some topics. Some topics just shouldn't be allowed to be debated. This could include dangerous conspiracy theories, triggering topics, nsfw topics, or topics that are particularly harmful to debate amongst the membership of your type of community.
- Users may complain about free speech or that some of the banned topics shouldn't be banned. They may also ask you to ban other topics that you may not think are really a problem.
- Consider dis-allowing "devils advocate" style statements. If your channel doesn't exist for arguing for the sake of arguing, don't allow people to make arguments that they don't believe in for the sake of stirring up more discussion.
- Users may complain about free speech, or claim that they do believe in arguments. There's no way to confirm whether people believe what they're saying or not.
- Consider setting up permissions to enforce a slower chat. Things like slow mode and temporary channel locks for "cool off" periods can help to keep things calm in the chat.

## **Moderation Concerns**

- Moderation actions can look biased if a moderator is engaging in a conversation, disagrees with a user and then needs to moderate them for behavior in the same channel.
- Moderators can be upset by the content of the channel, or the opinions/conduct of another user even if no rules are being broken and respond inappropriately.
- Trolls and malicious users will target this channel. People will come in to spout stupid or offensive opinions to start arguments. They will also ping pong between extremely contentious topics until someone takes the bait. If the comments they are making and the general behavior of trying to start a



debate about anything are allowed on the server, it will be more difficult to remove them before they get the chance to be disruptive.

- Misinformation can be spread in the channel, moderators must have a good understanding of current events in order to prevent dangerous misinformation or conspiracy theories from being proliferated in their communities.
- If there is a separate team in charge of moderating or overseeing these channels, they will need to closely communicate with the rest of the moderation team about problem users or concerning behavior.

## **Conclusions**

Channels focused around contentious topics can provide users with an engaging space to discuss topics with people from varied backgrounds and explore other perspectives. These channels also have very specific risks and required mitigation strategies that will vary depending on the nature of the specific channel. For example, if you are running a channel on COVID19, your main concern will likely be dangerous misinformation and conspiracy theories. If you run a channel for the 2020 US Presidential Election, your main concern may be things getting too heated or insult-flinging. You have to consider what the specific risks in your channel are and ensure that you are writing policies that are specific to your needs and finding moderators that are knowledgeable and comfortable with the topics.

## **Current Events**

Current event channels are for a single and specific current event, such as COVID-19 or mourning a beloved server member. Depending on the topic of the channel, it may also be a contentious or sensitive topic, but differs because it is a narrowly focused and usually temporary space. These channels can be useful to have if a topic either isn't allowed per your servers rules, or is allowed but is overwhelming conversations in other channels (but is otherwise not something you want to outright ban the discussion of).

## Channel Names

Channel names for specific current events should be as clear as possible. For instance, making a channel for the COVID-19 Pandemic and then naming the channel “Diseases” makes little sense. Instead, you would want to be *specific* and name it something like “COVID-19 Pandemic” or “COVID-19”. This ensures that your users will at-a-glance understand what the channel is for. You should also have a topic for the channel that helps inform users of its purpose. You may also want to have something like “Read The Rules” in the topic, so users know to read any additional rules. These rules could be pinned in the channel, have their own channel within a category that houses contentious topics channels, if you have multiple, or be included in the servers rules. Also keep in mind that users may not always read the channel topic or pinned messages.

## Channel Rules

Channels covering current events should have rules that help promote healthy discussion of these topics. While each real world event may be different, there are some baseline rules / guidelines that we believe these channels should have.

- **Do not spread misinformation.** A rule like this is incredibly important, especially for topics that relate to public safety (such as COVID-19).
- **Keep conversations on-topic.** Making sure that conversations do not go too off-topic will let others jump in and give their own insight. If a conversation becomes too meme-y or off-topic, then it will be harder for others to jump in and it could turn the channel into an off-topic channel.
- **Be respectful and try to keep arguments to a minimum.** Arguments in these kinds of channels will flair up, but it is important as a moderator to ensure they do not devolve into name-calling or personal attacks. If an argument does flare up, try to ensure that users tackle the arguments and ideas presented and not the user that presented them.

- **Encourage others to jump in and give their thoughts.** There are usually many different viewpoints when it comes to real-world events. Especially ones that warrant their own channel. So it is good to encourage those with different viewpoints to chime in with their own points of view.

## Conclusion

Channels like these can be difficult to manage. On one hand, you want things to be contained and on-topic. On the other hand, you may want to allow for other kinds of discussion that relate to the topic at-hand. Ultimately it is up to you to decide how to best implement these channels. Whether the channel is for a global pandemic, a friend passing away, a game releasing, or anything in-between, these channels will require a special finesse that other channels may not. It is our hope that these example rules and channel names can help you create a space that adheres to a specific topic and creates an atmosphere that is both respectful and engaging.