

## **TEACHING RESEARCH ETHICS THROUGH REALITY TV**

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### **Big Brother Season 9 (Channel 4): Episode summary**

The housemates are set a task, and if they complete it they will be given a 'luxury budget' of £5 each for food. If they fail, they will remain on 'rations' of £1 each.

Housemates Dennis and Rachel have been selected by BB to perform the task. They must work together to pass a metal loop along the length of a coiled wire without allowing it to touch the wire. The other housemates must wear shiny suits containing muscle stimulant pads which are triggered by a remote control mechanism.

Every time the loop touches the wire, a buzzer will sound and all the other housemates will receive what was described as a 'mild electric shock'. Each time this happens, Dennis and Rachel must start the task again. The housemates are told that all Big Brother tasks are subject to strict health and safety regulations, and that this task has been passed as 'safe'.

If any housemate withdraws from the task by taking off their suit, this counts as one 'fail'. After three fails, the housemates will be deemed to have failed the task and they will not get their luxury food budget. They have two hours in which to complete the task.

After Dennis has read out these instructions, the housemates comment on the task. There is at least some ambiguity as to whether the task has been understood by everyone, because Alex remarks that it is "only three shocks"- apparently misunderstanding that a 'fail' is incurred each time the buzzer is set off. Several of the housemates appear anxious, especially Kat.

As the task progresses Dennis and Rachel make numerous errors, setting off the buzzer and delivering electric shocks to the others. Although some of the housemates appear to find it amusing, others clearly become upset. Alex comments that she didn't know it would be that painful. Steph enters the diary room and says that she disagrees with the task and complains about the pain. Kat starts to cry. Jen approaches Dennis and Rachel on behalf of the other housemates and tells them that they cannot go on with it as people are crying. However, they continue with the task, Rex having disputed that the pain is anything more than 'just a funny feeling'.

After eight unsuccessful attempts, several of the housemates argue that they don't feel able to continue. Alex says she doesn't think it is 'humane' and that she would be prepared to do without the luxury budget. She calls for a vote, but Rex takes over and pressurises others to continue. The vote is taken rather cursorily and Rex declares a majority to continue. Dennis and Rachel go back to the task, but again set off the buzzer repeatedly. Rachel observes that 'people are crying and hating us for it'. The debate about whether to continue starts up again; Rex argues forcefully that the pain is worth suffering for the pleasure of the food. However, Sylvia decides she has had enough and quietly takes off her suit, while Alex declares that she can't take the pain and is going to remove her suit too. This sparks a row between Rex and Alex during which he calls her 'a baby' and 'a failure', and she shouts and swears at Rex. Alex now removes her suit and sits with Sylvia away from the rest of the group.

Kat goes into the diary room crying and Big Brother reminds her that she does not have to continue with the task, but she tearfully says that she does not want to let the others down. They continue with the task, but don't complete it within the two hours and therefore do not get their luxury budget.