

MENTAL HEALTH DURING YOUR PhD

47%

A study by the University of California, Berkeley, found nearly half of postgraduate students met criteria to classify them as depressed.¹

AN OPINION PIECE BASED ON SOME RESEARCH I DID IN MY LUNCH HOURS AND MY ENTIRELY UNQUALIFIED EXPERIENCE*

WHAT YOU MAY BE EXPERIENCING/FEELING (YOU ARE NOT ALONE, I PROMISE)

IMPOSTER SYNDROME



Someone is going to figure out you don't belong here soon. You look good on paper, but passing that exam was a fluke. I don't have what it takes to [do these experiments, write a thesis, succeed in academia]. These are all classic signs of imposter syndrome. **Tip: reframe your thinking. Aim for progress not perfection.**

NO MORE TICK BOXES



You got pretty good at doing essay and lab reports - they were all short term tasks. You also got good at figuring out what questions might be asked in exams. Now you have an open ended project, with the end no where in sight. You no longer have grades to tell you if you are doing a good job. Transitioning from this undergraduate mentality can be particularly tough. **Tip: break down your research into small, manageable goals.**

FIRST TIME FAILING

You've always been the best student at school, and you did pretty well at university too. Now your science isn't working and everyone around you seems to be getting on just fine. These feelings can come about as at undergraduate level, experiments (believe it or not) are designed to work. **Tip: remember, you are at the forefront of scientific research - if it was easy it would already have been done!**



ISOLATION / GUILT

Writing your thesis can be a particularly lonely, isolating task. This can also be coupled with feelings of guilt when going about your daily life as "you should be writing". Tips to manage this include still attending research group meetings/departmental seminars whilst writing. This can also be coupled with 'writer's block'. **Tip: when writing, start by making figures - it is far easier to write about what a figure means.**



COMPETITIVE LANDSCAPE



Unfortunately, academia often fosters competition over collaboration, when it should be the other way around. This is made worse by the fact that often the only way to gauge how well you are doing is to compare yourself against others. **Tip: no two PhD projects are the same. so avoid comparing them.**

THE WORK | LIFE STRUGGLE

55% of PhD students are concerned about work-life balance³



There is an inherent culture of acceptance in academia of long work hours. In fact, 40% of academics report working more than 50 hours a week.⁴ This is a fault with the system. Presenteeism is a common trait observed in academia, where people work long hours due to anxiety/stress, but are not being efficient in these long hours. **Tip: aim to be efficient inside normal working hours then focus on "you" time.**

A hard truth is only 7 in 200 PhD graduates become full professors.⁵ During your PhD, make sure to work on other "soft skills" as well as doing your research. Like making a poster for an online Twitter competition for example...

ARE THOSE AROUND YOU STRUGGLING? HERE ARE SOME POSSIBLE WARNING SIGNS



INCREASED DRINKING



INCREASED EATING



DECREASED EATING



WORKING LONG HOURS



BEING ABSENT



JOKING ABOUT SUICIDE



LOOKING DISHEVELLED

SELF-HARMING? SUICIDAL THOUGHTS?

CALL FOR HELP NOW

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SOME WAYS TO HELP MANAGE YOUR MENTAL HEALTH AND WELLBEING



SEEK MEDICAL ADVICE

Speak to a medical professional about how you are feeling. This may lead to intervention such as medication or counselling to help you manage your mental health.



TAKE SOME TIME OUT

Taking a break can actually improve efficiency when you return to work. If you cannot justify taking a couple of weeks off, take a series of long weekends to get some time away.



FOCUS ON YOU

It is a proven fact that lack of sleep can add to feelings of stress. Exercise can also work to alleviate stress. It may feel like you don't have time, but going for a walk at lunchtime (for example) may be a positive change you can make.



REQUEST COUNSELLING

Universities have counselling services that are available for you to use. This can be useful to help talk through your problems and also make sure appropriate coping strategies are in place.

TALK TO YOUR SUPERVISOR



It is not always possible, but if you feel you can approach your supervisor, discuss your mental health concerns with them. Other options include discussions to reduce workload temporarily or take time out.

TALK TO YOUR PEERS / POSTDOCS



It is highly likely that people around you have also experienced the stressful nature of a PhD. Reach out, if you feel able. Remember, postdocs have survived their PhD so may have some useful tips / coping strategies.

CREATE MANAGEABLE CHUNKS



If everything is overwhelming, try to break down your research into manageable tasks. It may help to do this in consultation with your supervisor. A good tip is to aim to get into the lab first thing in your day, before looking at other tasks like emails.



READ LITERATURE

There are a large amount of online resources available to help manage mental health and wellbeing. For example, the charity Mind, have a range of booklets available, from how to manage stress, to how to support others with mental health problems.

As a final note, if your PhD is heavily affecting your mental health and wellbeing, there is absolutely no shame in quitting and starting a new chapter in your life. There are plenty of successful people that quit their PhD! Put it this way - you might put up with an ill-fitting t-shirt for a while, but you wouldn't wear it for 4 years!!

REFERENCES

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4. Guthrie, Susan, et.al. Understanding mental health in the research environment: A Rapid Evidence Assessment. Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2017.
5. The Scientific Century: Securing our future prosperity, The Royal Society, 2010.

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#RSCPOSTER