

Charlie Waller

Jonathan's Voice
Speaking out for mental health

Protecting your mental health

A practical guide for postgraduate research students in STEM

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Foreword

Postgraduate research within the Science, Technology, Engineering and Maths (STEM) disciplines can be a stimulating and rewarding career path. However, in recent years the higher education sector has become more aware of the complexities of the specific challenges that exist for postgraduate research (PGR) students. Whilst institutions have paid increasing attention to the wellbeing and mental health of students in higher education, this has tended to focus on undergraduates and it is evident more needs to be done to address the mental health and wellbeing of PGR students in STEM. The purpose of this guide is to address this need. A diverse, thriving research culture, capable of tackling the key challenges of tomorrow, requires the mental health of postgraduate researchers to be prioritised and supported.

From 1983 to 2017, I was immensely privileged to supervise some forty or so PGR students in the materials science and engineering discipline and witnessed, at first-hand, how the demands and challenges on these students have increased over the years. For researchers in STEM subjects, there can be particular challenges; for example, working in industrial or other settings, the demands of research sponsors and the growing need to adapt to team working and interdisciplinary research.

As a trustee of Jonathan's Voice, I am very pleased that we have collaborated with the Charlie Waller Trust to produce this guide which has a clear focus on helping PGR students in STEM to look after themselves and others, to feel empowered to speak out about mental health issues and to manage some of the challenges specific to postgraduate research. Finally, whilst there may be times when things goes less well, I encourage you to embrace the opportunities offered by PGR study.



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Jonathan's Voice
Speaking out for mental health

Charlie Waller

Introduction

PGR students report concerns about anxiety at a significantly higher level than in undergraduates. Nature's 2019 PhD Survey[1] found over a third of respondents had sought help for anxiety or depression related to their studies, with individuals from minority groups more likely to experience mental ill-health. There is a wide range of factors that can impact postgraduate mental wellbeing in STEM. These can be systemic and may include a highly competitive and pressured working environment,[2] lack of representation,[3] racism, bullying and harrassment.[4, 5]

Mental health concerns vary from person to person and depend on our personal experiences, including genetic factors, our environment and access to support. The COVID-19 pandemic has made it clear that mental health support and provision have never been more important, with the 2020 report by SMaRTeN and Vitae[5] reporting that approximately four in five doctoral researchers and early career research staff in the UK have experienced some level of mental distress during the pandemic.

Despite the prevalence of these issues, there is still significant stigma around mental health within academia. It is only by talking about mental health, and changing the culture so that there is more opportunity for open dialogue about mental health, that we can start to build a more inclusive and supportive environment, and equip PGR students with the tools to thrive within academia.

The guide is designed to help you develop the skills to protect your mental wellbeing as you navigate your journey as a research student.

We also hope to reduce the stigma associated with speaking up and seeking help, offer practical guidance on how you can access support, and empower you to make positive changes to help you succeed.

It is only by talking about mental health... that we can start to build a more inclusive and supportive environment.

Part one: Preventative measures

Studying for a PhD is exciting, stimulating, hard work and rewarding. It can also be demanding. Putting in place preventative measures to help maintain good mental and physical health will give you a good foundation to deal with potential stressors and pressures.

"... My advice for everyone who is starting their PhD is: your mental and physical health always come first because they are irreplaceable."

PGR student, Nanotechnology



Put support systems in place

It is vital to ensure that you have adequate support systems in place both external and internal to the university. This is especially important if you are studying far away from home or doing your work in a workplace setting. Your university will have a wide range of systems and activities in place to help give you that support.

> *"Nothing – even early warning and recommendations from the university – could've prepared me for the mental toll of my PhD. However, I've learnt to trust my head, accept myself, and prioritise my wellbeing.* ***On days when the rain hits the hardest (because it still does from time to time), I learnt to reach out and ask for help – because help is available, I just have to ask for it."*** PGR student, Chemistry

The people (or activities) who can help you on your journey may be:

- **Friends and family**
- **Other students/peers/colleagues**
- **Your academic supervisor(s);** having a positive working relationship with your supervisor(s) is important for your mental health and for the progress of your work. If you feel this is not going well, address it sooner rather than later.
- **Faith leaders/university chaplaincy;** most university chaplaincies are multi-faith.
- **University support systems;** it can be very helpful to find out what mental health support is available at your university.
- **Student Union societies and activities;** especially useful if you want to make friends or widen your social circle.
- **Hobbies/interests;** it is important to try and keep these going to give you down time and use a different part of your brain.

It is worth taking a few moments to review your support systems. Are they adequate or do you need to make any changes or put more in place? Remember you can get support from all sorts of avenues.

"As an underrepresented student, you must seek people who help you thrive."

PGR student, Chemistry & Polymer Science



Ensure a good life/work balance

Doing a research degree can be all-consuming. It may feel hard to juggle all the demands of your research, friends and family as well as find important down time. However, it is essential for your physical and mental health, as well as your effectiveness and productivity to maintain a healthy life/work balance.

When we start becoming stressed, anxious or depressed we often neglect to do the things we know are good for us. Attending to these is especially important during times of high pressure.

"During my PhD I found it very difficult to separate my self-worth from my research output... Developing hobbies outside of my research helped to break this association."

PGR student, Chemistry



Take breaks; rest, relax and disconnect from work

- Taking regular breaks, including during the working day, is essential for maintaining our mental wellbeing. It also makes us work more effectively. Working flat out when we are tired can be counter-productive. Breaks are not a luxury.
- Make sure you maintain proper boundaries between your work and home life so you can switch off at the end of your working day, at weekends and when you are on holiday. This is particularly important when working from home where the boundaries can be very blurred – and this especially applies to emails and social media. If you can't resist looking at emails, see if you can pause your inbox.
- Notice when you start neglecting to take breaks and address this. Feeling you are too busy to take a break is probably a sure sign that you really need one.
- It can sometimes be hard to disconnect from work when your friends are also your fellow PGR students. Make sure you switch off together and avoid talking about your research.
- Challenge **presenteeism** (where you continue to work when you are not well enough physically or mentally) and **leaveism** (where you continue to work whilst on holiday) in yourself and others. If this is part of the culture – which it can be in academia – work with others to change it. It is not helpful for you or anyone else and paradoxically ends up 'costing' more than taking time off when you are unwell.[6]

Make sure you get enough sleep

Getting enough sleep is vital for us to function effectively and efficiently. Lack of sleep (ie consistently getting less than seven to eight hours a night) will have a detrimental impact on your immune system, your mental and physical health, your ability to make good decisions and your creativity. If you are not getting enough sleep because of bad habits try to address these.

Often sleep is a casualty when you are stressed, anxious or depressed. Lack of sleep can actually increase anxiety and so it becomes a vicious circle.[7] If you are having trouble sleeping:

- Respect your circadian rhythms and make sure you are awake during the day and sleep at night; disrupted sleep patterns can severely impact on our physical and mental health. Conversely, for example, novel solutions to complex problems are enhanced three-fold after a good night's sleep.[8]
- Try to increase exposure to natural sunlight or bright lights during the day. High intensity lights are available for people who experience seasonal affective disorder (SAD), which may help with mood if you work in a gloomy office or have no natural light. Going for a brisk walk (or any other activity that suits you) outside, even if only for 10 – 15 minutes, within two hours of waking up can help you feel more alert during the day and sleep better at night.
- Reduce blue light exposure (from electronic devices and screens) in the evening, especially in the hour before you plan to go to sleep.
- A hot bath[9] within two hours of going to bed can help.
- Avoid looking at screens in bed, even mobile phones, as this will wake your brain up and make it harder to switch off. Put your devices into sleep mode and/or in another room so you are not disturbed by alerts and use an alarm clock rather than your phone.
- Avoid checking the time if you wake up in the night.





Set realistic expectations for yourself

As PGR students, you will probably have very high expectations of yourselves and feel that other people have high expectations of you – your family, friends and supervisors.

Acknowledge your limits

- Manage expectations; think about whether a particular expectation you have of yourself, or others have of you, is realistic and if not, try to change it to something more reasonable.
- If you have an unrealistically heavy workload or set of external demands, admitting to yourself and appropriate others where possible that you can't do it all is the first step towards getting the situation back under control.
- Sometimes you have to accept that you can't take on any more at this time and need to say 'no' to extra demands or tasks, even if you really want to do them and they seem relevant to your research. This can be necessary to protect both your mental health and the quality of the work you produce.
- Safeguarding your wellbeing and your effectiveness by being assertive about what you can and cannot realistically do will get easier with practice. If it is not part of the culture (or your nature) to do this, it might be time to start gently challenging this.

> " ...setting firm boundaries with both peers and faculty is healthy and I shouldn't feel guilty for putting my health and needs first."
>
> PGR student, Biological Anthropology and Environmental Dynamics

Practise self-compassion

Self-compassion (and there is a strong evidence base for its effectiveness[10]) encourages us to treat ourselves with kindness and compassion and to be aware of when we are unduly self-critical, hard or punitive. It teaches us to notice when our bullying inner voice kicks in and, through compassionate self-talk, helps us lower the stress arousal and changes in brain chemistry[10] that self-criticism causes. This enables us to deal more effectively with distressing events and feelings.

- Notice when you use harsh and critical self-talk when you are not feeling good about something or have made a mistake.
- Change those internal messages to something gentler and more accepting; treat yourself as you would a friend.
- Remember this is not about pretending that the situation isn't difficult but accepting that this is a time of suffering, that suffering is part of life and affects us all but that it will pass. That you can be good to yourself during this difficult time.



Time management

For a PGR student, managing time can be a daunting task. Often it will feel that there are just not enough hours in the day to get everything done. Or you may find that it is hard to structure the time, especially when you are doing individual research and need to be entirely self-motivating.

Here are some tips on how to manage this:

a) Do one thing at a time

- When you have a lot on, it is easy to feel overwhelmed (or go into adrenaline- overdrive) and try to do everything at once. If you have an important piece of work to get done, do it first, when you are fresh. Our brains, as well as our bodies, get tired. If you spend time responding to non-urgent emails and tackling easy, possibly more appealing tasks, your brain is tired before you get down to the work which needs more concentration.[11] Don't check emails. Turn off alerts etc until you have made good headway. However, sometimes prioritising easier tasks on your 'to do' list and getting them done, gives a morale boost which is enough to get you going again.
- Use the Franklin-Covey[12] method of prioritising. This involves marking each task as one of the following:
    1. Urgent and important
    2. Important but not urgent
    3. Urgent but not important
    4. Neither urgent nor important
- Try the Pomodoro technique[13] which breaks tasks down into units of 25 minutes, separated by a short break.
- Take breaks away from your computer/desk to refresh yourself. There is a lot of evidence that the more we struggle away at things, the less effective we become. Going for a short walk, doing some stretches or even spending a few moments day-dreaming can help us be more productive – then return to the task in hand.
- Taking a few deep breaths is another highly effective way of calming down and recharging our systems.

b) Manage your deadlines

- Plan well ahead: as soon as you know about a deadline, schedule in time to do the necessary research and preparation, so that it doesn't all have to be done at the last minute.
- Work with your supervisor to manage expectations and help them recognise when deadlines are unrealistic. If this is not possible, acknowledge the problem and consider what resources you need to help you meet it.
- Focus on one deadline at a time. Try not to worry about all the other forthcoming deadlines. There will always be deadlines. Remind yourself of the times you have managed to meet them in the end.
- If the deadline applies to a particularly difficult task, talk it through with someone else; this often helps you get your own thoughts together and tackle the task with more confidence.
- Delegate sub-tasks if you can, for instance communicating and planning with other researchers or departments or doing specific parts of the research work.
- Make sure you have some recovery time after you have gone all out to complete a very tight deadlinee.

c) Non-work activities

Don't forget to factor in time for the really important things in life such as maintaining relationships with your partner, family and friends as well as shopping, laundry, eating, exercise, relaxation and, of course, sleeping. These are all vital but also take time. Using a daily 24hr planner can help with this and give you a realistic sense of how many hours there are in a day, especially when you factor in seven or eight hours sleep.



Combat unhelpful behaviours or thinking patterns

Many PGR students will tend to procrastinate and/or lose motivation. They might also lean towards unhelpful perfectionism and imposter syndrome. By being proactive in addressing these you can help avoid the build-up of stress which could lead to anxiety or depression.



Procrastination

Procrastination is where you put off doing something that you need to do. It can feel quite illogical. You know it needs doing, you know you will feel better when it is done but somehow you just can't get down to it. It can be fuelled by a lack of motivation but it is often more complex than that. For example, shame, perfectionism, fear of failure, ambivalence or wanting to avoid something difficult or challenging can all fuel procrastination. It can lead to intense anxiety, especially as leaving things to the last minute may have worked for you earlier in your academic career but is probably not very helpful at this stage, even though it is extremely common.

Whatever is driving your procrastination, the techniques for managing it will be the same as for keeping motivated. You might also find the time management tips helpful.

Motivation is the drive that enables you to accomplish things. Some motivation is intrinsic: the drive comes from within you. You want to fulfil a personal goal or achieve a particular status for your own satisfaction. Some of the motivating factors are external, driven either by reward (including approval from others) or a penalty.

The basics of keeping motivated

1. Identify your current goal. Whatever stage you are at in your research journey, e.g. working towards your upgrade, conducting field work, writing up etc, identifying a specific goal will give you a focus.
2. Be clear about why you want to achieve this goal. It needs to be attractive if you are to stay motivated and determined to succeed.
3. Visualise reaching your goal – what will it be like? What impact will it have on your life and wellbeing? If it is not worth having, then why are you pursuing it? You need to feel positive about the outcome you are aiming for.
4. Construct a plan for achieving your goal. This will provide a framework for you to follow.
5. Break it down into small manageable steps so you have a series of mini goals to aim for. Make sure they are SMART goals:

   - **Specific**
   - **Measurable**
   - **Achievable and attractive**
   - **Realistic/resourced**
   - **Time scaled**

Record this plan somewhere, in a medium that suits you, so it is a tangible entity, rather than a vague notion in your head. Sometimes it is helpful to share this with someone else.

Revisit your plan regularly to check on your progress. If you are not on track with the timescales you have set, identify what is getting in the way and make changes.

"I can usually pick myself up with reinstating good habits, especially stopping comparing myself to others."
PGR student, Astrophysics

Perfectionism

Striving for excellence is useful and, at times, vital, especially in academia where accuracy is essential. When this turns into persecutory perfectionism, however, it can be very unhelpful. Perfectionism is where you feel that whatever you do is never good enough, where you feel that unless you are perfect (which is impossible), you are useless or unacceptable and where you judge everything you do super-critically, blind to the good bits and only focussing on the (often imagined or unimportant) errors.

Do you recognise any of yourself in this? It's probably been going on for a long time and it is pernicious as it deprives you of ever having a real sense of achievement or feeling good about yourself or what you have done. It also can lead to extreme anxiety and low self-esteem as you are constantly driven by the fear of not being good enough, when the reality is probably that everyone else sees you as absolutely fine and often excellent.

Perfectionism is a hard habit to get out of but it can be done:

- Notice when you are doing it and gently challenge yourself; is this rational or reasonable?
- Writing a mediocre first draft, before coming back to it later to edit, may help some students who are finding difficulty getting started.
- Be aware of all or nothing thinking; there are lots of grey areas between totally perfect and completely imperfect.
- Focus on the successes, the good bits, the positives in what you do – there will be many more of them! Allow yourself to accept and believe praise if it is offered. Allow yourself to enjoy your achievements.
- Recognise when it is important for something to be faultless (and there will be times when this is the case, although probably fewer than most of us think) and when it is being driven by your inner perfectionism.
- Don't forget about the impact of your perfectionism on other people, especially when you extend your unrealistically high expectations of yourself to other people.
- Notice when you are reluctant to delegate as you feel only you can be trusted to get something done to your impossibly high standards, which ends up giving you extra work – and making those around you feel deskilled.



Imposter syndrome

"Coming from a working class background, imposter syndrome is tough to move past in academia."
PGR student, Synthetic Biology

Typically, PGR students are high achievers and have already experienced academic success. Imposter syndrome is a psychological pattern in which someone doubts their accomplishments and has a persistent internalized fear of being exposed as a fraud. "What if I get found out and am not as able as everybody thinks I am?" It can affect anyone from any country and any walk of life at any time. One of the key things about it is, because you are so ashamed and afraid of being found out, you never talk about it. This perpetuates imposter syndrome and also keeps it hidden, so we don't realise how common it is. As with perfectionism, it is important to:

- Recognise the bullying inner voice that is feeding you these beliefs and find one to combat it; aim to be a better, kinder friend to yourself.
- Talk about it: shame keeps a lot of people from talking about their feelings of being a fraud. Finding out that others you admire and respect feel the same can be really liberating.
- Reality check: would you really be in this role, undertaking this research if you weren't good enough? Separate feelings from fact; just because you feel something doesn't mean it's true.

> *"**Returning to science after a non-science professional break of six years put me face to face with imposter syndrome**."*
> Senior Research Fellow, Life Sciences

Managing criticism and feedback

There will be times when you get feedback which you experience as negative. This can feel upsetting, bruising or unfair, especially if you have put a lot of work into what you do or tend towards perfectionism. If you have invested a lot of yourself into your work, it is only too easy to see 'negative' feedback as a judgement on your whole self rather than one specific piece of work or action.

- It is quite normal to feel upset. Give yourself some time to process those feelings and then revisit the feedback. Try and see it as something helpful that will enable you to do better rather than a criticism of you and your work.
- If you are feeling upset or angry, use the suggestions for dealing with disappointment and managing perfectionism.
- Try to reframe how you see the feedback and avoid thinking about it in terms such as 'negative'. Feedback is designed to help you perform better. You can't be perfect or brilliant all the time.
- If you feel the feedback is unfair or unjust can you query or challenge this?



Identifying your crunch points

There may be times that you can anticipate will be more stressful than others. These may be points in the research cycle or important deadlines. They may be personal to you eg a meeting with your supervisor or may be related to your personal life. If you are aware of how these might impact you, you can then think ahead and be proactive in putting in extra support or self-care strategies. Doing a wellbeing action plan (see resources) can help with this.

For example, if you feel that the relationship with your supervisor is affecting your mental health then you should seek support with this at the earliest opportunity, if matters cannot be resolved by discussion.

Part two: When self-care is not enough

You may be trying your best to look after yourself, doing all the right things and practising the self-care strategies but still find you are struggling.

If you are experiencing one of the common mental health difficulties such as anxiety or depression, this can lead to altered thinking and different energy and motivation levels which all make it harder to do what you need to do to keep well or function effectively.

Taking steps sooner rather than later can stop things becoming a bigger problem.

"I have always tended towards anxiety and depression, but had developed pretty healthy habits. [Then] my lab moved to a new institute that was much less supportive and communal."
PGR student, Biochemistry and Plant Biology





Recognising when you are starting to struggle with your mental health

The most common mental health difficulties are anxiety and depression. Everybody gets worried, anxious, down or low from time to time. This is part of being human and usually in response to a specific situation. It is important to recognise when 'ordinary' anxiety or low mood starts to develop into an anxiety disorder or clinical depression and then take steps to deal with this sooner rather than later. Sadly, it is frequently not until things reach crisis point that it is recognised that someone has been struggling with their mental health.

> *"Throughout my PhD program, but particularly in the final year, the symptoms of what I eventually learned was obsessive compulsive disorder spiralled out of my control.* ***I was able to complete my thesis thanks to support from university counselling and an honest, collaborative dialogue with my adviser about my mental health*** *and how to manage its effects on my work."* Post doctoral research assistant, Pharmacology

Anxiety

A certain amount of worry or anxiety is inevitable. It is an appropriate human response to certain situations, in particular a real or perceived threat. Some people are more prone to worry than others. This becomes a disorder when the symptoms are prolonged, are very difficult to contain, spiral out of proportion or get in the way of everyday functioning.

Depression

Most of us will have periods of low mood or sadness at some time. Usually, we can recognise where these sad, negative or pessimistic thoughts and feelings are coming from and know they pass eventually. When they are long-lasting and persistent or when they keep returning for no particular reason, that may be a sign that we are experiencing depression. Sometimes depression is hard to spot, especially in men[14], as it can manifest as anger, irritability and/or an increase of risk-taking or self-harming behaviour.

Stress

How might you notice when the impact of your research is starting to cause you stress?

The stress response is very useful to get you through a short-lived emergency situation. For example, it can help you rise to the occasion if you have a tight deadline to meet. It becomes problematic when the stress you are under is prolonged and long-lasting. This can have a detrimental effect on both your physical and mental health.

Remember that everyone's tolerance of stress (ie when demand outweighs your ability to cope) is different. It can also be affected by what else is going on in your life. For example, if you have young children, a close relative who is unwell or are moving house you might find it harder to deal with all the conflicting demands of doing your research.

It is important to recognise when your stress levels are becoming unmanageably high and take steps to address this, either by reviewing and reducing the stressors where possible or by paying extra attention to your self-care.

Burn out

The World Health Organisation (WHO) has recently recognised that ***'burn-out is a syndrome conceptualized as resulting from chronic workplace stress that has not been successfully managed'***.

It is a state of emotional, physical and mental exhaustion that leaves us feeling helpless, disillusioned, overwhelmed, emotionally drained and unable to meet the constant demands. It is exacerbated by not feeling aligned to the values of your workplace. Burn-out reduces productivity and saps your energy, leaving you feeling increasingly helpless, hopeless, cynical and resentful. Eventually, you may like you have nothing more to give.

If you are experiencing burn-out, it is really important to reach out and talk to people (but not other negative, burnt-out colleagues). You might need to take a break from your research to recharge your batteries. This is the responsible thing to do and should not be seen as having failed in some way, although sadly there can still be a lot of shame around needing time out to take care of your mental health.

If you are experiencing burn-out, it is really important to reach out and talk to people.

Talking about your mental health

If you are struggling with your mental health, it is good to talk about this with someone in your department or faculty, ideally your supervisor. It might feel hard but if you make your supervisor aware you are having difficulties, they should be able to help. They can also put measures in place to support you now and in the future. If talking to your supervisor or someone in your department feels too hard or uncomfortable, try a university counsellor, mental health advisor or someone from the student support team first. Occasionally, you may feel that the problem is the relationship with your supervisor. It is not unusual for individuals to struggle with their supervisors for different reasons and sometimes switching supervisors might be the best solution. There will be measures in place to help you with this.

If your mental health difficulty is long-lasting and interferes with your ability to perform normal daily activities you will be protected by the Equality Act 2010. The Act also requires appropriate reasonable adjustments to be put in place. Your university disability service can advise you on this.

Even if you are struggling temporarily with your mental health, it is still important to talk about it with your supervisor. Early intervention measures such as taking a few days off or reviewing the pressures on you (eg workload) are far better than letting things escalate.

Raising the issue

- **Arranging a meeting**
  Identify someone you trust and who is approachable. This will usually be your supervisor. If you prefer, you could speak to someone else (eg someone from the Disability or Mental Health Service). Plan a meeting in advance so that you both have time to talk. Do not leave it until it becomes a crisis.

- **Preparing for your meeting**
  Think about what you would like to achieve from the meeting. This may be to ask for time off or to explain why you need time off. You might want to explain why you have been unable to complete tasks or ask for adjustments at work. Writing things down in advance will help. Are you seeing a doctor or other health professional for your mental health difficulties? It can be useful to bring a letter from them to help explain things.

- **During your meeting**
  Try to focus on how your difficulties are impacting your research. Think about what your supervisor can do to support you. You need only disclose what you feel comfortable with.



- **Confidentiality and consent**
  For you to feel safe, it is important to discuss confidentiality and consent with the person you are talking to. They will need to keep a brief record of the conversation, but you are entitled to see what has been written and know where and how it will be stored or used. You will need to trust that what you are talking about is confidential except when you give permission for it to be shared. However, there will be limits to confidentiality. This is where there is a serious threat of harm to yourself or others. Ensure that who you are talking to is transparent about confidentiality, consent and record-keeping from the start.

- **Afterwards**
  Write down what was discussed. It is a good idea, if you feel able, to send a brief email saying what the outcome of the meeting was, so that it is confirmed in writing. You might also like to have someone to support you after the meeting.

Early intervention measures such as taking a few days off or reviewing the pressures on you...are far better than letting things escalate.



Managing a mental health crisis, including feeling suicidal

A mental health crisis is where you feel that things have become so bad that you need help NOW.

- This might mean that your depression or anxiety has completely become unbearable and is stopping you doing what you need to do or that you are behaving in a way that is scaring you and/or those around you.
- You may be suddenly having disturbing thoughts, feelings or hearing voices which may indicate the onset of psychosis.
- You may have done something or something has happened to you that makes you realise that urgent action needs to be taken to address your mental health. Often, other people will be the ones to point this out.
- If you are having thoughts of suicide and you do not feel that you are able to keep yourself safe, this is a crisis. If you are feeling desperate and hopeless, it's hard to believe that things can get better. It's crucial to get support immediately – particularly if you have made any plans to harm yourself. Talk to someone now. This could be a friend you trust, a family member, or someone from student support at your university. You might initially find it easier to talk to someone you don't know, the Samaritans can be there for you if this is the case. Suicide is a permanent solution to what is usually a temporary problem. There are people who want to support you through this – talk to them.

If you are experiencing a mental health crisis:

- Seek help at once. Talk to someone.
- Phone 111. You may need help to do this.
- Go to A & E. They are there to deal with mental health emergencies as well as physical health emergencies.

If you have made a suicide attempt, or find someone who has just made an attempt, such as taking pills, seek urgent medical help at once. Dial 999 or go straight to A & E.

Part three: Managing challenges you may experience

Dealing with disappointment and rejection

There may be many times when you experience difficult feelings such as disappointment and frustration, for example when an experiment you have been nurturing for months goes wrong or when a crucial piece of equipment fails or doesn't materialise on time. There will also be times when you experience rejection, for example your first paper submission is not well received by the reviewers.

Disappointment is a complex emotion which can be hard to process. It can contain a wide range of unpleasant feelings – loss, grief, shame, embarrassment, anger, frustration, fear – all at once.

One of the things about disappointment or rejection is that it often feels intensely personal. It can seem like a big deal to you but other people may not understand why it matters so much. This will make it even harder to process.

- **Manage the emotions.** Sit with the feelings, no matter how unpleasant, and try to process and tolerate them. This can help them start to calm down. Talk about your feelings to someone or write them down. Go for a walk or listen to some music. Practise self-compassion or mindfulness. Resist making important decisions or acting on these feelings until you are in a calmer frame of mind. Be patient, this can take time depending on the nature of the disappointment, rejection or frustration.
- **Try not to take it personally.** All too often we take disappointment and rejection personally. They can crush your self-esteem and confidence. They can trigger shame and embarrassment. Try and see the disappointment and/or rejection as just one small part of your life or your research. Not taking things personally can eventually help you gain a broader understanding of yourself, others and how life works.

"Being a minority in your field (female physicist) ... when you may be the only one in a room and no one wants to listen to you, it can be difficult."

PGR student, Physics

- **Think about your expectations.** Are your expectations reasonable? Setting expectations too high, or too low, can contribute to the nature of your disappointment or frustration.

  You might have set unrealistically high expectations for yourself or life in general. If you have perfectionistic traits, you may need to move away from these and start accepting 'good enough'.

  Or do you set your expectations too low and hold beliefs like 'what's the point, things never work out for me?' Do disappointment or frustration seem inevitable? This expectation is not helpful either. You cannot avoid disappointment, frustration or rejection in life but trying to avoid it or approaching situations expecting it, is not helpful.

- **Look at the bigger picture.** Try and get the disappointment into context. It may feel devastating now. It may feel like it is going to affect your whole life. But there is a lot more to life than this one disappointment. You may think about previous disappointments and frustrations. How did they pan out? Often with the perspective of time you can see that it actually all worked out for the best.

If you find it hard to move on, talk to someone to help re-evaluate and see beyond the current situation. This is especially important if you are experiencing mental health difficulties and the disappointment or rejection is especially hard to cope with.





Feeling isolated and lonely

Many PGR students often report feeling lonely and isolated. You might be working on your own on very specialised projects that not many people understand. If you are doing your research at a university that is a long way from home, in a different country altogether or in a non-university setting, that can also increase the feelings of loneliness.

Loneliness and isolation are also especially prevalent amongst younger people.[15]

Being lonely can make you feel miserable, it may affect your confidence and self-belief and can have a detrimental effect on your mental health. You might also feel that this will go on forever and you'll never meet anyone, either friends or a romantic partner. Or you might be far from home missing your partner, friends and family.

1. Practise self-compassion. It is important to be especially kind to yourself and not lose heart.

2. Reach out and talk to someone. You are probably not the only person experiencing loneliness. Is there a PGR students society or Facebook group you could join?

3. Attending conferences, where possible, is a great way to meet other people interested in your field of research which can help you feel less isolated.

4. Keep up with hobbies, sport or other interests. This might feel impossible when you are so busy but it is a great way to meet people not connected with your research and keep loneliness at bay. Don't forget that university Student Union societies are not just for undergraduates.

5. If you have time, try volunteering. This is a great way of meeting people and giving back to society which has proven benefits for your mental wellbeing.[16]



Culture shock

Culture shock describes the impact of moving from a familiar culture to one which is unfamiliar. Feelings of loss, confusion and stress generated by the challenges of new cultural surroundings and from the loss of a familiar one are common among postgraduate researchers arriving at a new institution. Culture shock is primarily associated with researchers coming from overseas; however, researchers from working-class and ethnic minority backgrounds can also suffer profound culture shock.

Cultures are built on deeply-embedded sets of values, norms, assumptions and beliefs. It can be confusing and sometimes distressing to find that people do not share some of your most deeply held ideas, as most of us take our core values and beliefs for granted and assume they are universally held. When combined with changes in climate, language, food and dress, the effect may be disorientating.

"Being an international student in a foreign country is hard because making new friends as an adult in a country where people already have a social circle is really difficult."
Assistant professor,
Behavioural Sciences

Culture shock is normally a temporary phase, but there are things you can do to help. The first step is to recognise it. Once you acknowledge that you're struggling, you can then take steps to turn it into a learning experience.

- **Have familiar things around you** that have personal meaning, such as photographs or other personal items.
- **Read books and watch videos** about the place you are studying. This can help develop realistic expectations.
- **Keep in touch with friends and family from home,** especially when you first arrive, or if you are finding aspects of your new life challenging.
- **Find a supplier of familiar food** if you can. Your student union may be able to help.
- **In times of instability, a bridge back into your own culture** is always comforting. Finding opportunities to speak your own language, eat typical food and reading news from home can help. Be careful not to overdo these tricks however, because they may increase your isolation.
- **Make friends** with people from your own culture and from others. Friends from your culture will understand what you're feeling, and friends from other cultures will help you learn more about the place you're living.
- **Don't isolate yourself,** or shut yourself away. It is very important to find someone to talk to who can listen without judgement.





Financial difficulties

PGR students can experience financial difficulties for a variety of reasons. If you are struggling to make ends meet, money worries or debt can have a profound impact on your mental health and ability to focus on your work.

- **Seek help.** Your student support services or Student Union should be able to give useful financial advice. You may be eligible for a hardship loan or grant. You may also need help and support for your mental wellbeing at this time.
- **If you are an international student** UKCISA (UK Council for International Student Affairs), has advice on their website (see resource list).
- **Don't neglect your self-care,** including diet and exercise. Staying connected to others, especially if they are experiencing similar difficulties, can help you feel less alone.

"During my entire postgraduate studies I have been an international student and the financial pressures led me to being depressed."
PGR student,
Cereal Genetics

"Anxiety was worsening due to late pay that led to more debt."
PGR researcher,
Atmospheric Chemistry

Bullying and harassment

Bullying and harassment is behaviour that makes someone feel intimidated or offended. Harassment is unlawful under the Equality Act 2010.[17]

The experience of being bullied or harassed can have a profound effect on your mental health, confidence and sense of self. Being bullied can happen to anyone at any time.

If you feel that you are being bullied, possibly by a colleague, peer or one of your supervisors, it is important to recognise this and take action to address it. This, of course, can be very hard as one of the impacts of being bullied is to make you feel powerless and confused. You might also fear recriminations if you address or report it, especially if the person bullying or harassing you is in a position of power or authority.

- **Talk about it to someone.** This can help clarify your feelings and responses and help you validate that what you are experiencing is bullying or harassment.
- **Get help for the impact on your mental health.** Talking to a counsellor may also help you find the courage to deal effectively with the bullying.
- **Refer to your institution's bullying and harassment policy.** This will give you guidelines on how to take action. Make sure you have plenty of support to help you through the process. Your university's Student Union will be able to help with this.
- **Give yourself plenty of praise and encouragement** as well as practising self-compassion. It is hard to stand up to a bully.

28% of all respondents said they would not feel comfortable speaking out about bullying or discrimination due to the risk of negative personal consequences.[2]

Finally

Doing a postgraduate research degree can be a difficult journey. It can also be immensely rewarding and worthwhile. It is essential to look after yourself along the way, take advantage of all the support that is out there, keep your eye on the end goal and recognise and celebrate all your amazing achievements.

Useful resources

Need to talk to someone urgently?

Call the **Samaritans** for free on **116 123** or call **111.**

Mental health information and self-help
- mind.org.uk
- https://www.studentminds.org.uk/
- Online self-help guides on a wide range of topics: cci.health.wa.gov.au/Resources/Overview
- Online mental health guides https://www.helpguide.org/
- web.ntw.nhs.uk/selfhelp/
- nhs.uk/oneyou/every-mind-matters/

Mental health resources and training
- www.charliewaller.org

Imposter syndrome
- youtube.com/watch?v=whyUPLJZljE
- impostorsyndrome.com/10-steps-overcome-impostor/
- youtube.com/watch?v=ZQUxL4Jm1Lo

Burnout
- helpguide.org/articles/stress/burn-out-prevention-and-recovery.htm

Sleep
- sundayrest.com/pages/the-impact-of-sleep-on-daily-life
- ted.com/talks/russell_foster_why_do_we_sleep

Self-compassion and mindfulness
- self-compassion.org/
- mindfulhealth.co.uk/mindfulness-meditation-audio-with-karunavira/
- franticworld.com/

Helping others
- time-to-change.org.uk/about-mental-health/support-someone

Mental health in the workplace
- rcpsych.ac.uk/usefulresources/workandmentalhealth/worker.aspx
- mentalhealth.org.uk/our-work/mental-health-workplace
- publichealthmatters.blog.gov.uk/2018/01/30/is-lack-of-sleep-affecting-your-work/
- wellbeing.bitc.org.uk/tools-impact-stories/toolkits

International students:
- UK Council for International Student Affairs (UKCISA)
- https://www.ukcisa.org.uk/

Bullying and harassment
- https://www.gov.uk/workplace-bullying-and-harassment
- https://www.nationalbullyinghelpline.co.uk/
  RSC Bullying and Harassment helpline on **0800 5200115**.

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13. Francesco Cirillo. The Pomodoro Technique, 2021, https://francescocirillo.com/pages/pomodoro-technique
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17. GOV.UK, Workplace bullying and harassment, 2021, https://www.gov.uk/workplace-bullying-and-harassment

This guide has been created as a collaborative project between Jonathan's Voice and the Charlie Waller Trust and with contributions from Zoë Ayres, Dave Horsfall and Katy Allen. Special thanks go to all the PGR students who allowed us to use their comments.

Jonathan's Voice was established in 2017 in memory of Jonathan McCartney who tragically and unexpectedly took his own life in October of that year at the age of 35. Jonathan was a UK and European patent attorney; a career he loved. The aims of Jonathan's Voice are to reduce the stigma associated with mental health and to empower people to speak up and reach out for help when they need it. We work with professionals in the intellectual property sector, and beyond, to raise awareness, provide guidance for individuals and support organizations to develop mental health and wellbeing practices in the workplace. For further information visit www.jonathansvoice.org.uk

Registered charity number: 1180424

The Charlie Waller Trust was set up in 1997 in memory of Charlie Waller, a young man who took his own life whilst suffering from depression. The Trust raises awareness of depression and other mental health problems, fights stigma, provides education and training to schools, universities, workplaces, GPs and nurses, and encourages those who may be depressed to seek help. Visit www.charliewaller.org for further information.

Registered charity number: 1109984

Charlie Waller

Jonathan's Voice
Speaking out for mental health

10.2021