Transcript of Mental Health During Your PhD poster by Dr Zoe Ayres for Accessibility

Mental Health During your PHD. An opinion piece based on some research I did in my lunch break and my entirely unqualified experience. But I did survive a PhD.

A study by the University of California, Berkeley, found nearly half of postgraduate students met criteria to classify them as depressed (47%).

What you might be experiencing/feeling. You are not alone I promise.

Number 1: Imposter Syndrome

7 in 10 people experience impostor syndrome throughout their careers. 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.

Number 2: 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 nowhere 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.

Number 3: 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!

Number 4: 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.

Number 5: 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.

Number 6: The work/Life Struggle

55% of PhD students are concerned about work/life balance. 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. This is a fault with the system. Presenteeism is a common trait observed in academia, where peole 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.

Are those around you struggling? Here are some possible warning signs: increased drinking, increased eating, decreased eating, working long work hours, being absent, joking about suicide, looking dishevelled.

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

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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.

Self-harming? Suicidal thoughts? Call Samaritans now on 116-123. Or email [jo@samaritans.org](mailto:jo@samaritans.org)

References

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