

Managing Your Mental Health During Your PhD

— THE DISCUSSION GUIDE —

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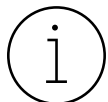
INTRODUCTION

This discussion guide is a resource designed to accompany reading “Managing Your Mental Health During Your PhD: A Survival Guide” written by Zoë J. Ayres, and published by Springer in 2022. You may be reading the book as an individual, or you may have decided to run a book club at your institution. This discussion guide is to help you consolidate your thoughts on the book, and (optionally) connect with others, and drive for change within your own institution and/or sphere of influence.

As discussed in detail in the book, I am not a psychologist, or trained mental health professional: it is important to be aware of this, and understand that this book and Discussion Guide is no substitute for professional assistance.

The book was written to provide hope for anyone studying for a PhD, who might be struggling with their mental health, as well as prepare individuals for their PhD program. The book is split into four parts: Defining the problem; Mindset Matters; Environmental Stressors; and Seeking Help. As such, the questions in this Discussion Guide are also divided this way.

Incorporated into Discussion Guide are several areas of possible expansion, to be incorporated into your Book Club or discussion session you are running depending on the time you have and depth you intend to go into. These expansion areas are designed to make you reflect about your workplace and resources available, encourage further reading, and help you feel empowered to make change. These are indicated by symbols throughout the Discussion Guide:



Recommended reading to further understanding



A question to ask yourself or others



A moment to reflect on your own situation

BEFORE YOU START

If you are planning on running a book club based on “Managing Your Mental Health During Your PhD: A Survival Guide”, please remember that discussing mental health in a public forum can be challenging for some, due to both stigma and fear of retaliation. Consideration on how you can make your Book Club a “safe space” for discussions to happen is necessary. You may want to:

- Determine where people can access institutional mental health support at your university, as well as provide contact information to the group.
- Consider having a participant agreement, which discusses dignity and respect and not sharing what is discussed outside of the Book Club session.
- Let people know that if they disclose they are in crisis, you may not be able to keep this confidential if you fear for their safety.
- Set a schedule to stick to, to ensure you are meeting routinely and can get the most of your discussions.
- Ensure people know they do not have to answer questions if they feel uncomfortable.



Participant agreements are not only useful for Equality, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI) work like this discussion guide. They can also be used to great effect at conferences and during other meetings (often as a reminder at the start of the day) to ensure people consider their impact and actions. An example participant agreement might be to:

- I. Treat others fairly.
- II. Display courtesy in every interaction appreciating that individuals have different styles and expectations.
- III. Value differences in others and the contribution they make.
- IV. Work and study within the University on a co-operative basis.
- V. Demonstrate a commitment to upholding the Institutional policies on Equality, Diversity & Inclusion.
- VI. Speak up if you observe poor behaviour if possible.

PART I: DEFINING THE PROBLEM

Covering Chapters 1-3



If you do not already know each other personally before discussing the book, take a moment to get to know each other. Why did you decide to join in with this discussion?

1. The author talks about her own privileges, biases and experiences at the start of the book. Why is it important to acknowledge these?
2. What is the difference between mental health and mental illness?
3. Why might disclosing mental illness to be a challenge? How can the disclosure process be made easier?
4. What are some signs of mental illness?
5. On page 32 (First Edition) there is a diagram of the different mental health journeys PhD students. What does yours look like? (Please use the space below to draw your own if you choose).

Mental Health 



6. Have there been specific stressors that have added strain during your PhD? What support might have/has helped?
7. How did you feel when you learned that approximately 1 in 2 PhD students have experienced mental health concerns during their PhD?



The “1 in 2” statistic comes from the [2014 UC Berkley Report](#) finding approximately 47% of PhD students met the threshold for having depression. The report notices different incidences of mental health concerns depending on area of study.

PART II: MINDSET MATTERS

Covering Chapters 4-7

1. What does “self-care” mean to you?
2. What activities rejuvenate you? How might you incorporate into your routine?
3. What different challenges might part-time students face?



What mental health resources are available at your workplace/institution? Are they tailored to PhD students?

4. If you have attended a wellbeing session, talk or workshop that was useful, why? What made it work well?
5. If you are part way through your PhD, what were some misconceptions about the PhD process you had that have now changed?
6. Have you tried some productivity tools? If so, what has worked for you?
7. Have you ever felt like an imposter and that you don't belong?
8. Why is it important that we do not just focus on “mindset” for improving PhD student mental health, but also reflect and address working environments?



The “[Dark Side of Resilience](#)” by Mahdiani and Ungar (2021) explores when resilience is misused.

PART III: ENVIRONMENTAL STRESSORS

Covering Chapters 8-11

1. What does the “Ivory Tower” refer to?
2. Which of the systematic issues mentioned in this section are you aware of at your institution?



Think about your own identity. Where does your experience intersect with the experiences of others? Are there areas where you might improve your allyship by reading and learning about?

3. Have you ever witnessed bullying during your career/education to date?



What bullying/harassment policies are in place at your university/institution? Where can they be found?

4. What are ways in which your supervisor or PI has/has not made it safe to talk about mental health?
5. Do you meet with your PhD Supervisor regularly? Do you leave the meetings feeling enthused or deflated (or somewhere in-between). Why?
6. What can/do you contribute to your institution beyond your research? Are there more ways you might get involved with the local research community?

7. Are non-academic careers a normalised career path at our institution? Have you considered jobs outside of academia?
8. Did you hold any of the myths on page 178 to be true about leaving academia before reading about them? Have you changed your mind about them at all?



The Royal Society of Chemistry have a range of resources and reports available looking at discrimination and bias in the chemical sciences, which are well worth reading.

PART IV: SEEKING HELP

Covering Chapter 12

1. Reflect on your own mental health. Are you thriving?
2. What mental health/mental illness support is available at your university or institution?
3. Are there any online communities that you currently benefit from, or that you might benefit from in the future?
4. Do you feel comfortable talking to your PhD Supervisor about your mental health? If not, who else in your institution might you be able to speak to?
5. Look at the “conversation starters” on page 187. Which of these do you feel comfortable using to talk to someone about your mental health with?
6. Have you ever thought about quitting your PhD? What motivates you to stay?
7. Having read the book, are you motivated to drive for change and improve mental health resources for PhD students at your university or institution?



Final Reflection: Who do you know that could benefit from reading this resource?

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