MENTAL HEALTH DURING YOUR PhD

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

INCREASED WHAT YOU MAY BE EXPERIENCING/FEELING

1. Drinking
2. Eating
3. Working long hours
4. Being absent
5. Joking about suicide
6. Looking dishevelled

WHAT AM I EXPERIENCING/FEELING?

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.

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 an 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!

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.

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 manageable goals.

ISOLATION / GUILT

Writing your thesis can be a particularly lonely, isolating task. This can also be coupled with feelings of guilt when you get your daily life as “you should be writing”. Tips to manage this include still attending research group meetings/departamental 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.

THE WORK / LIFE STRUGGLE

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 you 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 HOURS
BEING ABSENT
JOKING ABOUT SUICIDE
LOOKING DISHEVELLED

SOME WAYS TO HELP MANAGE YOUR MENTAL HEALTH AND WELLBEING

SEEK MEDICAL ADVICE

Take a day off, do something meaningful, go to the gym, meet up with a friend. Tip: you may need to seek professional help at some point in this PhD journey.

TAKE SOME TIME OUT

This is a fault with the system. Presenteeism is a common trait observed in academia, where you 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.

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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SELF-HARMING? SUICIDAL THOUGHTS?

CALL FOR HELP NOW

REFERENCES

1. Graduate Student Happiness & Well-Being Report, 2018, University of California, Berkeley.

As a final note, if your PhD heavily affects your mental health and wellbeing, there is absolutely no shame in leaving. Even if you have just started, you might get an offer at a different lab for a while but you wouldn't want it for years!

#TIMETOTALK
#RSCPOSTER

*ALTHOUGH I DID SURVIVE A PhD*