

Identifying and Overcoming the Psychological Challenges of Academic Research

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in Leading Researchers

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- Increased concern about mental health in the HE sector from media and campaign groups
- Greater awareness of mental health and fitness
- Increase in numbers of students and staff seeking help

Setting The Scene

- 57% of full time UK students completed their PhD after five years. 71% completed after 7 years (HEFCE 2005).
- 40%-60% in USA (results vary widely)
- After 7 years 53% students in Australia completed.

Completion Rates for PhD Research

- studies worldwide show science students have higher and speedier rates of doctoral completion than those students in social sciences and arts / humanities subjects
- UK HEFCE study(2005) showed 81% science students complete after 7yrs, compared with 61% social science and 62% humanities students.

Academic Discipline

- Structure
- Stability of Funding
- Context / Place of work
- Team work versus lone working
- Relationship with supervisor
- Relationship with fellow students / post docs
- Sense of community versus sense of isolation

Academic Discipline: Key Factors

- conditions of isolation, lack of external structures and realistic work targets can increase rumination, seriously impact on individual qualities and psychological factors which can have a negative impact on work efficiency. This can create or exacerbate mental health problems.

External Structure and Psychological Factors

- **Over-committing:** study, family, friends, teaching..... still take on more?
- **Procrastination:** Functioning or Non-Functioning?
- **Perfectionism:** unrealistic and impossible expectations. Aiming for perfection is not the same as aiming for excellence.
- **Busyness:** look and feel very busy, but is it what really needs to be done? Do you prioritise?
- **Disorganisation:** No routine or system to help manage your work, time, making life easier.

Typical Academic Self Sabotaging Behaviours

- **Be aware:** review your thoughts and behaviours to identify unhelpful patterns, such as being perfectionist or over-committing.
- **Challenge your thinking:** Thinking determines our behaviour, so challenge your assumptions, beliefs and thoughts that aren't working.
- **Take Action:** set achievable deadlines (procrastination), realistic goals (perfectionist) get rid of extra demands (over-committing)

Defeating Self Sabotage

- Imposter Syndrome
- Capacity to tolerate uncertainty and 'not knowing'
- Capacity to tolerate things going wrong

Other Common Academic Anxieties

- **Confidence/Self-efficacy**
 - Having a strong sense of self-worth, being self-reliant and having confidence in your ability to solve problems
 - Knowing what your strengths and weaknesses are and that you can rely on your strengths to cope when things get difficult
- **Adaptability**
 - People who can deal with ambiguity, think flexibly, recognize thinking errors and 'reframe' unhelpful, negative or inaccurate thoughts are more resilient. As are those who face challenge reflectively rather than reactively

Strategies to Improve Emotional Resilience

■ Purposefulness

- Research shows that having a sense of meaning and purpose in what we do, having healthy expectations and motivation provides us with a foundation that allows us to be more resilient in the face of stress and adversity and a sense of hopefulness.
- It is associated with higher levels of happiness and satisfaction and lower rates of depressive symptoms.

Strategies to Improve Emotional Resilience

Social support

- People with high emotional awareness who understand their own emotions tend also to be high on empathy - the ability to read and understand the emotions of others
- **This is important for resilience as it helps us to build relationships with others - creating social support**
- High levels of social support are associated with good health and foster adaptive coping strategies. Practise asking for help and be receptive when it is offered
- Maintain high-quality relationships by telling people how much you value their support
- Return favors and thoughtfulness—the principle of reciprocity

Strategies to Improve Emotional Resilience

- **Perspective**
- All or nothing thinking
 - *Undermining satisfaction and self esteem*
- Management of work / life balance
- Self Agency
 - *Need to take some degree of control*
- Perspective of time

Strategies to Improve Emotional Resilience

- **Individual**
 - Self Help Resources
 - Peer Support
 - Counselling Services
 - Disability Support
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- **Structural / Institutional**
 - Creating Healthy Structure / Patterns of work
 - Accountability and Feedback
 - Information and Education

Don't Suffer
In Silence:
Seek Help