

Wellbeing at Work

There is growing evidence that researchers experience mental health issues. This is mainly due to work conditions, such as pressure to publish or the struggle for career advancement. It has been acknowledged that these kinds of pressures correspond to instances of misconduct and poor research practices. This section provides data from studies, examples of how researchers can build healthy work environments, and tips to ensure wellbeing.

Data about depression and anxiety in academics

A survey of 2,279 individuals (90% PhD students and 10% Master's students), from 26 countries and 234 institutions found that:

- graduate students are more than six times as likely to experience depression and anxiety as compared to the general population.
- 41% of graduate students scored as having moderate to severe anxiety ... vs 6% of the general population.
- 39% of graduate students scored in the moderate to severe depression range ... vs 6% of the general population.

Evans et al. (2018). [Evidence for a mental health crisis in graduate education](#). *Nature Biotechnology* 36, 282-284.

The results of a questionnaire given to 437 professors found that:

- 54% judge that publication pressure 'has become excessive',
- 39% believe that publication pressure 'affects the credibility of medical research'
- 26% judge that publication pressure has a 'sickening effect on medical science'
- 24% have signs of 'burn out'

Tijdkink, J., Vergouwen, A., Smulders, Y. (2013). [Publication Pressure and Burn Out among Dutch Medical Professors: A Nationwide Survey](#). *PLoS One*

Personal testimony on finding balance

I feel that one of the culprits is our reluctance to openly acknowledge how we find balance. Or openly confront how we create a system that admires and rewards extreme imbalance... So with some humor to balance my fear, here's goes my confession: ... I created a "feelgood" email folder. I work fixed hours and in fixed amounts. I try to be the best "whole" person I can. I found real friends. I have fun "now".

Nagpal, R. (2013). [The awesomest 7-year postdoc or: how I learned to stop worrying and love the tenure-track faculty life](#). *Scientific American*.

Identifying and aligning expectations in a mentoring relationship

Scholars expressed multiple reasons why it is important to align their expectations with those of their mentor early in the course of the relationship. Specifically, scholars noted that [the process of aligning expectations between mentor & mentee] helps to ensure that scholars receive what they need to be successful and provides them with clear guidance in their work... Several scholars commented that [this process] had additional, positive effects on the interpersonal aspects of their relationship (e.g. facilitated mutual trust, professionalism, respect).

Huskins et al. (2011). [*Identifying and Aligning Expectations in a Mentoring Relationship*](#), *Clin Transl Sci*, 4(6), 439-47

PERFORM researcher reflections

“ The academic work place is high-stress and consists of a never-ending series of rejections. Be it your manuscript, talk suggestions, application, or funding bid. Some years into my postdoc life, I developed depression and rejections often trigger a new bout. How do I try to keep the abyss away? Rigorous selfcare! No over-hours, no googling of peers, regular breaks and exercises! I insist that humanity - rather than competition - shall lead my actions. ”

“ It's important to remember that we as academics do have some power to decide what this environment looks like, how it is structured, how we support each other. But first we need to make sure we value and care about each other - value building healthy, resilient communities – and we must value this over academic outputs, grants and publications. ”

Activities

Preparation for activities

This topic is sensitive and may raise personal feelings and emotional responses. It should be carried out within an emotionally supportive environment. If you plan to talk about these issues in a collective setting, as proposed for the first two discussion activities outlines below, here is some advice.

Before the collective discussion:

- Announce the topic at least one week in advance
- Identify someone whom you can turn to if serious psychological issues come out during the meeting. This should be either a professional psychologist, if there is one in the HR service for instance, or a person whom you trust for their skills in counselling or psychology.
- Do not expect easy solutions to issues that might be raised or create the expectation that they will be dealt with in any great depth during the session.

During the collective discussion:

- Make people comfortable: preparing the environment and providing refreshments can help.
- Make it clear that this is a judgement-free zone! Announce this as a rule at the beginning of the conversation.
- Make sure everyone gets a chance to speak. There are various effective ways to ensure this happens, for example, you may consider inviting the most experienced people to talk last, to avoid influencing or deterring less experienced participants.

Reflect on your environment & your experience

Use the following questions to guide a collective discussion:

1. How much suffering and wellbeing is there in your work environment?
 - What do you know about wellbeing and suffering in your institution? What have you observed about wellbeing and suffering in your institution?
 - What questions do you have about the support for wellbeing in your institution and/or the extent of the problem in your institution? How is this different to other places where you may have worked?
 - What kinds of pressures do you feel at work? Which of them are real or perceived? Consider the following quote from Wright et al. (2008): “the trainees seem to have been internalizing the expectations for productivity in the lab or in their institutions”
 - Is the pressure you experience related to any particular aspect of your work (such as recruitment, career advancement, or funding)?

2. How can you improve the situation?

You may rely on *'The awesomest 7-year postdoc'* above, and also explore the 'Perspectives/ Opinions' resources below.

- What can you do if you feel bad at work? What can you do when you see someone else feeling bad at work?
- Invite everyone to make a list of what makes them feel good and then share your lists.

continued >>

Activities continued

Tell the story behind your CV

Adapt the activity 'Growing Up in Science' described in Ma (2017) below, by inviting participants to tell the story behind their CV. While your CV may show a linear progression in your studies and career, the reality might be quite different. For example, you may have had started studying other disciplines, you may have interrupted your studies, or you may have faced difficult personal issues that affected your career.

Express your expectations: one-to-one

Annual meetings as 'checkpoints' with your mentor/mentee can be a good opportunity to align your respective expectations. To support this process, you could refer to Huskins et al. (2011), quoted above (while acknowledging that this process of aligning expectations needs to be adapted according to cultures, personalities and situations).

1. Present the excerpt to your colleague / mentor / mentee and explain why you would like to share your expectations with them. Then, propose the following process.
2. Before the meeting, each of you writes down 5 expectations relating to your own needs (related to mentoring, scientific project, career and so on) and then 5 expectations you perceive/imagine to relate to your colleague's/mentor's/mentee's.
3. Meet, and read your expectations to each other. Discuss:
 - Do you understand your respective expectations?
 - Are there any expectations that surprised you or that you had previously misunderstood?
 - Are any expectations contradictory?
 - Are some expectations more of a priority than others?

References and additional resources

Surveys, Studies:

- Evans et al. (2018). Evidence for a mental health crisis in graduate education. *Nature Biotechnology* 36, 282–284. DOI: [10.1038/nbt.4089](https://doi.org/10.1038/nbt.4089)
- Leveque et al. (2017). Work organization and mental health problems in PhD students. *Research Policy*, 46, 868 – 879. <https://goo.gl/C5oXYn>
- Tijdink, J., Vergouwen, A., Smulders, Y. (2013). Publication Pressure and Burn Out among Dutch Medical Professors: A Nationwide Survey. *PLoS One*. <https://goo.gl/1qs3Bj>
- Wright, D.E., Titus, S.L., Cornelison, J.B. (2008). Mentoring and Research Misconduct: An Analysis of Research Mentoring in Closed ORI Cases. *Science and Engineering Ethics*, 14(3), 323–36. DOI: [10.1007/s11948-008-9074-5](https://doi.org/10.1007/s11948-008-9074-5)

Perspectives/Opinions:

- Alon, U. (2013). We have to change the culture of science to do better research. *TEDxLausanne*. <https://goo.gl/DHLj9G>
- Halffman, W. & Radder, H. (2015). The academic manifesto: From an occupied to a public university. *Minerva*, 53(2), 165–187. DOI: [10.1007/s11024-015-9270-9](https://doi.org/10.1007/s11024-015-9270-9)
- Ma, W. J. (2017). The stories behind a CV. *Science*, 357(6354), 942. DOI: [10.1126/science.357.6354.942](https://doi.org/10.1126/science.357.6354.942)
- Nagpal, R. (2013). The Awesomest 7-year Postdoc. *Scientific American*. <https://goo.gl/W7ZuRc>
- Ryan-Flood, R., & Gill, R. (2010). Breaking the silence: The hidden injuries of neo-liberal academia. In R. Ryan-Flood, & R. Gill (Eds.), *Secrecy and silence in the research process: feminist reflections* (pp. 228–244). Abingdon, Oxon; New York, NY: Routledge.

Review:

- Huskins et al. (2011). Identifying and Aligning Expectations in a Mentoring Relationship, *Clin Transl Sci*, 4(6), 439–47. DOI: [10.1111/j.1752-8062.2011.00356.x](https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1752-8062.2011.00356.x)



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