**Graduate School**

supporting research staff wellbeing: a guide for managers of researchers

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## Introduction

There is clear evidence that work issues, such as pressure at work and an inappropriate work-life balance, can impact detrimentally on staff wellbeing. Such issues have been recognised in recent years as being on the increase in University staff and student populations. Research staff have been noted to be one of the particularly vulnerable groups, due to increased stress and anxiety, often caused by the insecure nature of their employment.

PIs, and other managers of research staff, are often at the front line of dealing with such cases. The purpose of this brief guide is to help PIs and other managers to recognise when their research staff might be suffering from mental wellbeing related issues, to provide appropriate support, and to refer them on to other services when appropriate.

## What is mental health?

The term ‘mental health’ describes a sense of wellbeing – the capacity to live in a resourceful and fulfilling manner. It involves having a sense of purpose, as well as the energy and resilience to deal with the challenges and obstacles which life presents. Mental health is not fixed or static, and can best be thought of as falling on a spectrum, as shown below.

Mental wellbeing <<>> Mental health difficulties <<>> Mental illness

Virtually everyone will have times when they feel down or stressed. Most of the time these feelings pass, but they can sometimes develop into mental health difficulties such as anxiety and depression. Mental health difficulties often follow major life events like moving to a job or place, or the end of a close relationship, and can impact significantly on how people feel about themselves as well as their ability to cope with their work. Evidence suggests that research staff are potentially at higher risk of developing a mental health condition due the inherently stressful and precarious nature of their employment.

In some cases, a researcher’s condition might deteriorate to the extent that they have clinically recognised levels of mental health difficulties, which would require the support of NHS services. In addition, a researcher might start their employment with a registered mental health difficulty. In both cases, the researcher would normally be recognised as having a disability, which is a protected characteristic under the UK Equality Act. This means that they may not be treated less favourably than other students as a result of their disability.

## Key factors affecting research staff well-being

* 1. ***Pressures from their research project***

Research projects do not always go as planned, sometimes leading to disappointing findings, and an unclear way forward. This can cause feelings of stress, as research staff are keen to carry out research that will lead to publications, etc. This is particularly the case when the project is in its later stages, and the researcher is concerned about the impact on their CV when looking for their next position.

Problems can also arise if the researcher does not have the right skills and abilities, or has had insufficient training, to carry out the research effectively. Similarly, poor job design and a lack of workload management can lead to significant stress.

* 1. ***Relationship with their line manger***

The quality of the relationship between the researcher and line manager is central to the researcher’s working experience and hence to their wellbeing. It is important that PIs and other managers of research staff are available and open to listen to the concerns of their research staff. Raised concerns should be treated with respect, even if disagreed with, and discussed in an open and understanding way. It is also important that managers do not place unrealistic demands on their research staff, expecting them to work outside of standard hours, or are unreceptive to requests for changes in working hours. Researchers also need recognition and credit for their contributions to research projects. Some words of praise and thanks can go a long way. It is also important that research staff are given the necessary time for professional development activities and to develop their own research identity, in line with the obligations set out in the 2019 Researcher Development Concordat, <https://www.vitae.ac.uk/policy/concordat>

* 1. ***Bullying and / or harassment in the work environment***

It is important for research staff to work in a healthy and supportive research environment, which often extends beyond the relationship with their PI or other manager. Research staff wellbeing may be detrimentally affected by how they are treated by other members of the research group or department. It is important for line mangers to be vigilant and aware of any such issues, and to address them promptly, in line with university guidance, if they do become aware of any perceived harassment or bullying.

* 1. ***Precarity of employment***

Most research staff are employed on fixed-term contracts, typically three years or less. This means that they often start worrying about their next position when they are only a year or so into a current project. This can lead to considerable stress, which can mount up the nearer they are to their project end-date. This can be exacerbated by unsuccessful interviews, and insufficient publications and other outcomes from their current project. This stress is likely to be greatest for those with mortgages, dependants, etc.

* 1. ***Financial concerns***

Living in Reading is expensive compared with many parts of the UK, and this may be felt particularly by research staff who have moved from a less expensive part of the country to a take up their current position. In addition, some research staff may still be paying off financial debts due to student loans, etc. Reduced finances can lead to research staff living in relatively poor accommodation, and to pressures in their personal relationships. Such financial and related concerns can impact detrimentally on researchers’ work progress, as well as their mood.

## Managing stress and other wellbeing concerns

Stress is the adverse reaction people have to excessive pressures, or other types of demand, placed upon them. It arises when they perceive (for whatever reason) that they are unable to cope with these demands. It can be caused by a number of factors, including a lack of control over their workload and working pattern, inadequate resources to get the work done effectively, insufficient training, and a lack of encouragement from line managers and others in the work environment.

There is a considerable amount of helpful information on the HR wellbeing webpages, including fact sheets on issues such as bullying and harassment, building resilience, preventing burnout, balancing workload, coping with uncertainty. The information includes specific guidance for managers who need to support staff experiencing stress, as well as procedures for handling requests for flexible working. At the time of writing this guide, there is also some very good information on supporting COVID-related stress. Research staff should also be made aware of the Well-being peer support network, and the Employee Assistance Programme. Again, there is information about both of these on the HR webpages.

## Encouraging ‘healthy behaviours’

More generally, evidence shows that it is possible to build resilience so that individuals are more able to cope with the ups and downs of life. The following are commonly cited ‘healthy behaviours’ that help to protect or improve mental wellbeing.

* 1. ***Eating well***

What we eat can affect how we feel, both immediately and in the longer term. A diet that is good for physical health tends to be good for mental health. Research staff should be encouraged to take breaks from their research so that they eat regular meals. It is also very easy for research staff to ‘keep going’ by drinking excessive amounts of caffeine. Again, encouragement to reduce caffeine levels and drink plenty of water might be helpful.

* 1. ***Drinking sensibly***

Some researchers might be tempted to drink excessive amounts of alcohol in order to improve their mood state. This is then likely to have a negative impact on their work progress the following day, which may then lead to a further decline in mood. If you suspect that one of your researchers is drinking to excess, you should try to find a way to raise this with them. However, you will need to be cautious in how you approach the matter.

* 1. ***Keeping active***

Regular exercise is known to boost self-esteem and help concentration and sleep. Research staff may not want to engage in sporting activities or go to a gym, but encouraging them to take a walk round the campus at lunchtime might well be beneficial.

* 1. ***Avoiding isolation***

Positive relationships are key to our mental health. Research staff who work as ‘lone researchers’ should be encouraged to meet up with friends at lunchtimes and evenings. Inappropriate work-life balance can lead staff to reduce their contact with friends and family, taking away an important form of support. Line managers do not need to be ‘friends’ with their research staff, but it is important that you take an interest in wider aspects of their life and find time to engage in conversations about non-work matters.

* 1. ***Talking about feelings***

Talking about feelings can help research staff to maintain their mental health and deal with anxiety-raising situations. Talking about feelings should not be seen as a sign of weakness – rather it is a sign of managing wellbeing.

## Possible indicators of mental health problems

Potential mental health difficulties can sometimes be detected from changes in behaviour patterns. It is helpful to be aware of, and look out for, the following signs:

* Unexpected mood swings
* Excessive tiredness
* Excessive agitation and / or poor concentration
* Withdrawal and avoiding social interactions
* Noticeable decline in personal hygiene
* Not responding to communications
* Repeatedly failing to produce work by requested deadline
* Producing unusually poor quality work.

## How to help

If issues are suspected, it is important not to leave your research staff to flounder. Line mangers should contact HR for information on how best to approach the issue and support the researcher concerned. You might want to encourage the researcher to come to see you to have an informal chat about the project. They are more likely to be open to a discussion about project progress than about their mental wellbeing. The following might be helpful things to consider:

* Set sufficient uninterrupted time aside for the discussion
* Try to engage in eye contact and direct your attention to the researcher
* Acknowledge what they are saying with appropriate nods and gestures
* Express empathy, concern and willingness to help
* Ask appropriate questions but don’t probe for details where they seem reluctant to say more
* Be cautious when promising to respect confidentiality. If you need to speak with one or more others in order to support the researcher, then make sure that they are aware of this and try to seek their approval.
* Respect their concerns even when they may seem relatively trivial
* Where appropriate, suggest some positive ways forward
* At the end of the conversation, summarise any agreed actions for both the researcher and you, and arrange a follow-up discussion to check how things are progressing.
* If, at any point, you start to feel out of your depth, then try to move the discussion on to suggesting they might benefit from professional help (see section 8). You should not try to ‘counsel’ the researcher yourself’.

Once the researcher has started to talk, they will often open up so that you get some insight into what is at the root of their concerns. Sometimes, a supportive and reassuring conversation is all that is needed to get them to a position where they can see a positive way forward. During the discussion, you might suggest a change in work habits or other lifestyle patterns. You might recommend them contacting People Development to find out appropriate courses, or to look at the University’s wellbeing webpages for other resources.

In more serious cases, you might recommend that the researcher is referred to Occupational Health for some profession help. Before doing this, you might want to talk to your School’s HR Advisor who can support you through the process.

Very occasionally it might become obvious by the way the researcher is behaving that a more urgent form of intervention is needed. You should never meet with a member of your research staff without another staff member present if you have any concerns that their behaviour might become threatening in some way. First and foremost, you should take precautions for your personal safety; if a researcher starts to behave in a threatening manner during a meeting, then you should call Security staff (ext. 6300), who are trained to deal with such situations You should never try to prevent a researcher from leaving the meeting, even if you are concerned about their safety. Once the researcher has left you should contact the Security staff and advise them of your concerns.

Dealing with such extreme instances can be very upsetting and it is important that you seek support once the immediate crisis situation has passed. You should not take the outcome personally, nor blame yourself in any way for ‘not handling the situation better’. Talk the situation through with your line manager or a close colleague, as this will help you to gain a fresh perspective on the events. Fortunately, although we are seeing an increase in staff suffering from mental health difficulties, these extreme cases are very rare.