

SUPPORTING PGR WELLBEING: A GUIDE FOR SUPERVISORS AND DIRECTORS OF PGR STUDIES

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1. Introduction

There has been a growing concern across UK Universities and associated bodies over the last few years

about PGR student wellbeing. Wellbeing issues are seen as being on the increase in all student and staff populations, with PGR students being recognised as particularly vulnerable. In Reading, we are seeing a growing number of requests for suspensions which refer to students suffering from stress and anxiety related problems. Supervisors and Directors of PGR Studies are often at the front line of dealing with such cases. The purpose of this brief guide is to help supervisors and directors to recognise when their students might be suffering from mental wellbeing related issues, to provide appropriate support, and to refer them on to other services when appropriate.

2. 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 all students 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 leaving home or the end of a close relationship, and can impact significantly on how students feel about themselves as well as their ability to cope with their studies. Evidence suggests that doctoral researchers are potentially at higher risk of developing a mental health condition than undergraduates, due to the inherently stressful nature of doctoral degrees. Personal difficulties can occur at any point in a student's programme but may have a more negative impact when students are also struggling with study-related issues.

In some cases, a student'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 student might start their programme with a registered mental health difficulty. In both cases, the student 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. Such students would normally be registered with the University's Disability Advisory Service, and receive additional support from them.

3. Key factors affecting PGR well-being

A recent study by Vitae and partners¹ identified the following as the main study-related factors that lead to, or exacerbate, mental health difficulties in PGR students.

3.1 Pressures of doctoral research

PGRs consistently describe the doctoral degree as a stressful experience at some stage. There is often a lack of clarity in expectations, coupled with little positive feedback on their progress. Students feel stressed about whether or not they are 'measuring up' and often feel that other students are more talented and making better progress than they are. Anxiety and stress levels are typically exacerbated when students are coming up to significant assessments such as confirmation of registration and / or viva, in addition to the pressure of having to submit within their maximum registration period. Many feel reluctant to admit to experiencing any difficulties as they do not want staff in their School or Department to feel that they are a weak student.

3.2 Supervisory relationship

Evidence shows that the quality of the supervisory relationship is central to the PGR experience and hence to student wellbeing. Lack of supervisor availability, inadequate and / or excessively delayed feedback on written work, and lack of interest in students' lives are reported as leading to heightened levels of stress and anxiety in some students. The situation is often exacerbated by students being reluctant to admit that they are experiencing difficulties, particularly to their supervisors and other staff in their School. Even when they report concerns to staff in the Graduate School or other central support services, they often refuse to give permission for those staff to approach supervisors or other staff in the School in order to help resolve the issues. Students, particularly those from overseas, fear that there will be some 'come back' if they raise any form of complaint about their supervisor.

3.3 Financial concerns

Many students experience financial problems, particularly where they are self-funded. Several have to work long hours in addition to studying for their doctorate, which adds to their stress and reduces their opportunity to engage in healthy behaviours (see section 5 below). Even where students have received scholarship funding this rarely covers the final stages of their programme when they are writing up, which adds to their stress and anxiety during an already stressful period.

3.4 Other factors

Other commonly reported factors include a lack of boundary between study and home life, with students feeling that they are expected to 'work all hours', including during evenings and weekends, concerns about finding future employment when in the final stages of their studies, and being subject to harassment from other students or staff.

4. PGRs who are potentially more at risk of developing poor mental health

¹ Vitae. Exploring wellbeing and mental health and associated support services for postgraduate researchers. May 2018.

International students are typically seen as being the most vulnerable to developing mental health difficulties. Those who come from very different cultural backgrounds are particularly at risk, given the difficulty of adapting to a new culture, in addition to being separated from family and friends and not being fluent in English. They may also be less used to self-directed study and / or to giving and receiving constructive criticism. Slow progress with their studies due to English language issues can often trigger significant stress and mental health problems. It is helpful if supervisors and directors 'normalise' the challenges of conducting research in a second language, and signpost students to the English language support courses run by the Graduate School and ISLI

<http://www.reading.ac.uk/graduateschool/training-and-development/gs-thesiswriting.aspx>

Students coming from countries where there are high levels of civil unrest or war are often most vulnerable as it is not unusual for them to experience family bereavements and / or withdrawal of funding. A further exacerbating factor is that international PGRs from some countries associate disclosure of mental health issues with stigma, weakness or shame, and often refuse to take recommended periods of suspension or seek professional help.

'Isolated' PGRs are also seen as being particularly vulnerable. Those working as sole researchers on individual topics, or in isolated locations, are typically more at risk than those working in research groups with supportive cultures. This includes PhD by Distance students, as well as those on long study visits / field trips, and part-time students who live some distance from the University. Part-time students often experience other risk factors, such as financial issues, an inappropriate work-life balance, less frequent supervisory contact and assessments, and lack of clear milestones. Failure to initiate and respond to communications may be warning signal that students might be suffering.

5. Encouraging 'healthy behaviours'

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.

5.1 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. Students should be encouraged to take breaks from their studies so that they eat regular meals. If they seem sluggish and overly tired it is worth checking that they are eating properly, encouraging them to eat more fresh fruit and vegetables if you suspect that they are relying on processed foods. It is very easy for students to 'keep going' by drinking excessive amounts of caffeine. Again, encouragement to reduce caffeine levels and drink plenty of water might be helpful.

5.2 Drinking sensibly

Some students 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 studies the following day, which may then lead to a further decline in mood. If you suspect a student 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.

5.3 Keeping active

Regular exercise is known to boost self-esteem and help concentration and sleep. Students 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.

5.4 Taking a break

A change in scene or pace is seen as being good for mental wellbeing. Encourage students to take regular breaks when studying, stopping to eat or take a short walk, or meet with friends. Ask about how they spend their weekends, trying to discourage those who feel they need to study long hours seven days a week.

5.5 Avoiding isolation

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

5.6 Talking about feelings

Talking about feelings can help students 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. Encourage students to talk about how they feel about their studies and wider aspects of their life.

6. Possible indicators of mental health problems

Supervisors and other staff who support PGRs may be able to detect potential mental health difficulties from changes in student behaviour patterns. You should look out for the following signs in your students:

- 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 submit work by requested deadline
- Submitting unusually poor quality work.

7. How to help

If issues are suspected, it is important not to leave students to flounder. Supervisors should inform PGR directors and administrators as soon as they suspect that a student is avoiding contact. If it is agreed that the director should contact the student, it is important that any concerns are expressed in a non-judgemental way. Students should be encouraged to call in for an informal chat about their progress. They are more likely to come in for a routine discussion about their studies than about their mental health. Alternatively, students could be encouraged to meet with staff in the Graduate School, if you suspect that they would prefer to talk to someone outside of their School. Whoever meets with the student needs to listen in a sensitive and supportive way. 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 student
- 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 student, then make sure that the student is 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 student 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 student yourself.

Once a student 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 the student 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 taking an appropriate course run by the Graduate School (such as Working with your Supervisor, Overcoming Writers' Block, or Managing Academic Pressure), or joining one of the PGR group discussion sessions run by the University's wellbeing consultant on Tuesday mornings (11am – 12 noon) in the Graduate School. The Life Tools programme, run by Student and Applicant Services, also offers a large number of talks during the year to support student wellbeing. If your student is from overseas and in the early stages of their programme, you might recommend that they ask for a STaR International Mentor to help them to adjust to living and studying in the UK.

8. More serious problems

In some instances, it might be clear that the student would benefit from receiving some professional help, for example from the Welfare Team or the Counselling and Wellbeing service. When raising this with the student, it is important to be positive and affirming about the benefits of seeking support. It is often helpful to try to normalise the process by pointing out that many students need to seek support in order to learn strategies to help them to cope more effectively with their studies. You should encourage them to visit the Welfare Team help desk in the Carrington building, which is normally the first point of contact when seeking support. It is helpful to find out who is the named contact for your School but, if you do not know this, then whoever is on the help desk will advise them. Alternately you could offer to contact the Welfare Team on their behalf by phoning ext. 4777 or emailing

studentwelfare@reading.ac.uk. If you have reason to believe that the student is not going to follow your advice and seek help, and you are worried about their wellbeing, then you should complete and submit a 'Notification of Concern' form which is available from the Welfare Team office or from the Head of the Doctoral Research Office in the Graduate School. On receipt of the form, the team member with responsibility for your School will contact the student directly.

Very occasionally it might become obvious by the way a student is behaving that a more urgent form of intervention is needed. You should never meet with a student without another staff member present if you have any concerns that a student's behaviour might become threatening in some way. First and foremost, you should take precautions for your personal safety; if a student 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 (including taking the student to their GP or the hospital). You should never try to prevent a student from leaving the meeting, even if you are concerned about their safety. Once the student has left you should contact the Security staff and advise them of your concerns.

Dealing with these 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 students suffering from mental health difficulties, these extreme cases are very rare.

Useful numbers and web pages

Student welfare team

studentwelfare@reading.ac.uk

Ext. 4777

Counselling & Wellbeing Service

counselling@reading.ac.uk

Ext. 4216 or 4218

Big White Wall – Access free mental health support online, available 24/7

<https://www.bigwhitewall.com>

A-Z online guides and Local services

http://student.reading.ac.uk/essentials/_support-and-wellbeing/counselling-and-wellbeing/useful-resources.aspx

Life Tools programme

www.reading.ac.uk/life-tools

Graduate School: Keeping fit for your doctoral studies

gradschoolwellness@reading.ac.uk

<https://blogs.reading.ac.uk/keep-it-for-your-doctoral-studies>

RUSU welfare and financial advice

<https://www.rusu.co.uk/advice/welfare/>

Head of Doctoral Research Office

Ext 4162 or 7348

Security services

Ext. 6300