

Looking After Yourself during the Covid-19 Lockdown

Dr Sophie Valeix – May 2020

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About me

- Burn out during PhD = long intermission
- Experience thinking about PhD MH and working alongside experts
- I have told my manager I couldn't work properly 3 times since the lockdown
- Inviting any question about my experience of MH difficulties

About you

- Please let me know your school and the stage of your PhD (1st, 2nd, 3rd, 4th, 5th year, intermission, fieldwork, pre-submission..)
- If you have attended one of the new PHD mental health workshops, please indicate which : Looking After Yourself (LAY) – Looking Out for One Another (LOFO)

What we will cover

- PhD challenges and mental health
- PhD mental health and Covid19
- Understanding your own mental health
- Unpacking self-care strategies
- Getting support

PART 1: PHD CHALLENGES & MENTAL HEALTH

Why is this important?



PROFESSIONAL JOB

Psychological health of doctoral candidates, study-related challenges and perceived performance

K. M. Barry, M. Woods, E. Warnecke, C. Stirling & A. Martin

Ph.D. students face significant mental health challenges

By Elisabeth Pain | Apr. 4, 2017, 3:15 PM

News & Comment Research

News Opinion Research Analysis Careers Books & Culture

EDITORIAL · 29 MARCH 2018

Time to talk about why so many postgrads have poor mental health

An outpouring on Twitter highlights the acute pressures on young scientists.

Smart people problems: we need to talk about PhD mental health

The stressful postgraduate environment often leads not to solidarity but to the impoverishment of research, says Alfredo Cumerma

January 20, 2018

By Alfredo Cumerma



News & Comment Research

News Opinion Research Analysis Careers Books & Culture

CAREER BRIEF · 26 MARCH 2018

More than one-third of graduate students report being depressed

Rates of anxiety and depression among PhD and master's students exceed those in general public.



PROFESSIONAL JOBS SUMMITS RANKINGS STL

Universities urged to tackle PhD mental health crisis

Institutions told they have a 'culture of excluding postgraduates' in wake of damning study



Research Policy

Volume 46, Issue 4, May 2017, Pages 868-879

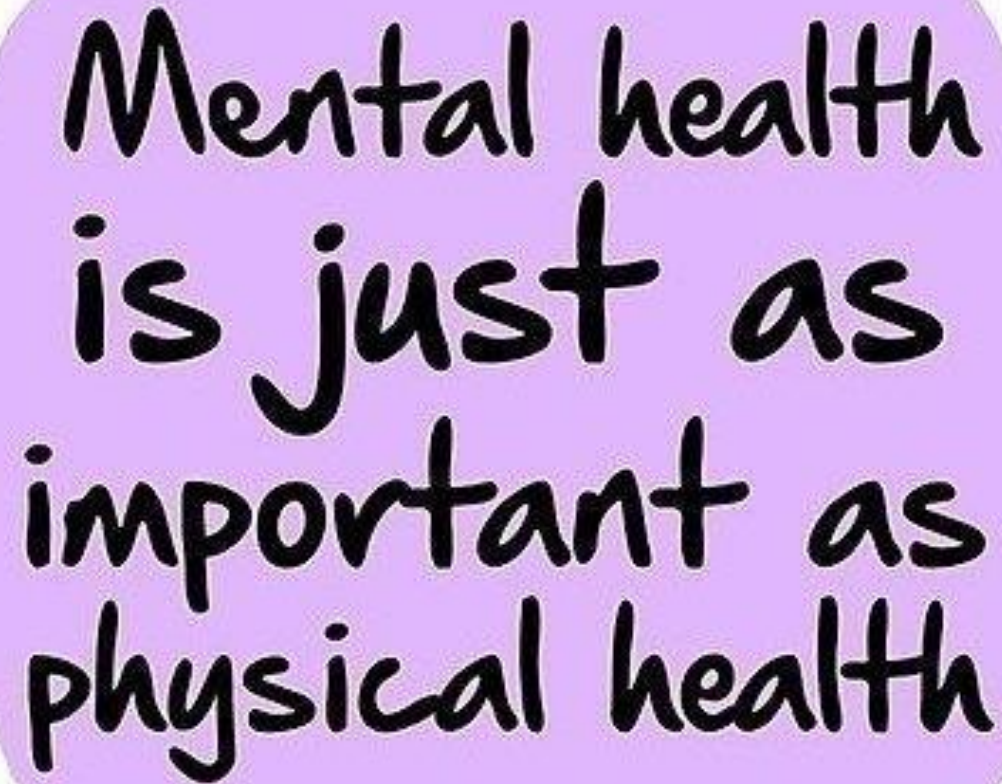


Work organization and mental health problems in PhD students

Katia Leveque ^{a, b}, Frederik Anseel ^{a, b, c}, Alain De Beuckelaer ^{d, e, g}, Johan Van der Heyden ^{f, g}

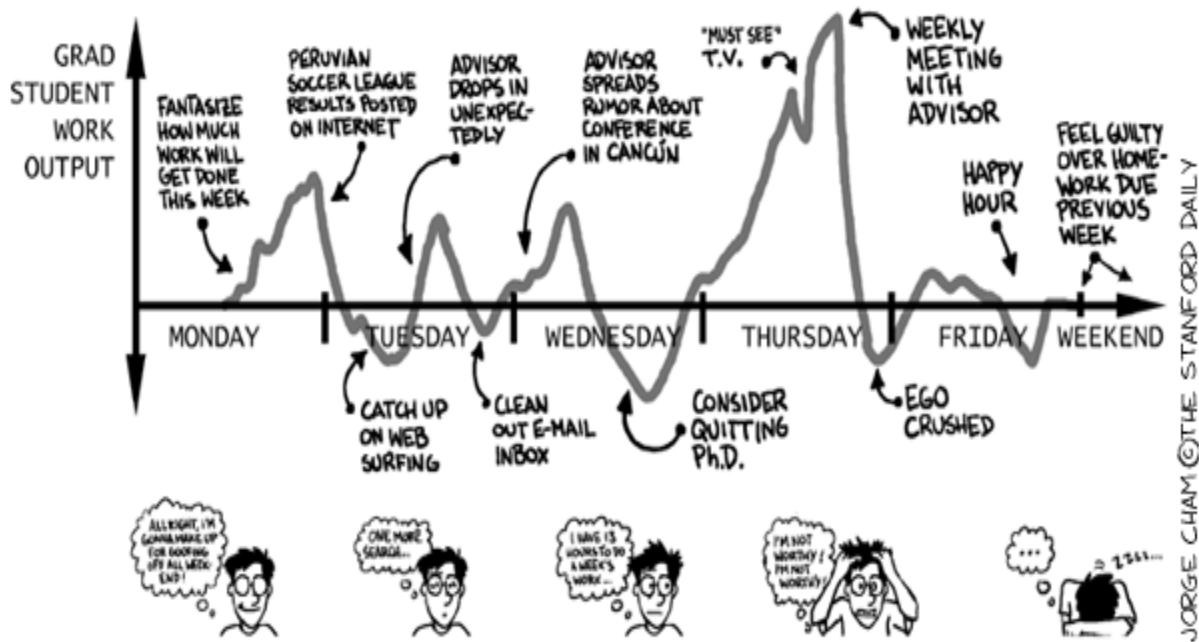
Lydja Gisle ^f

Why is this important?



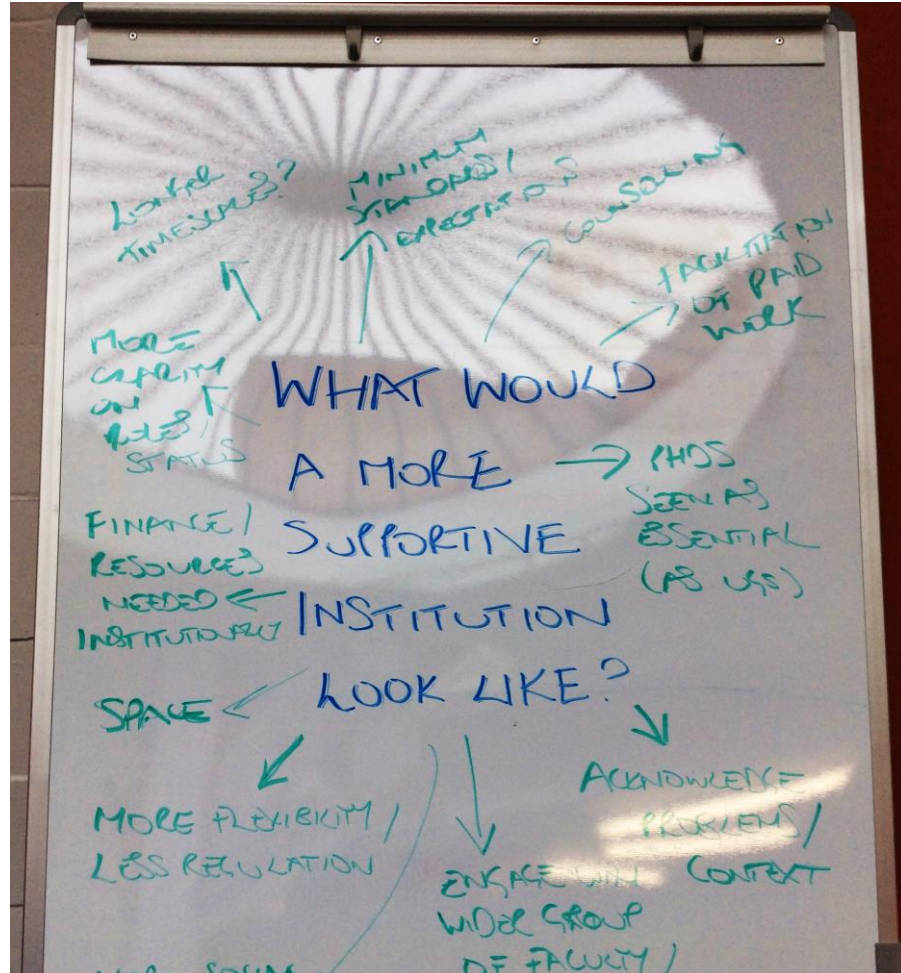
Mental health
is just as
important as
physical health

Short term



Find my vlog here: https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCGKFrH-d8YXCXLJMS06-wVg?view_as=subscriber

Institutional and systemic factors





Some disabilities look like this



Many look like this

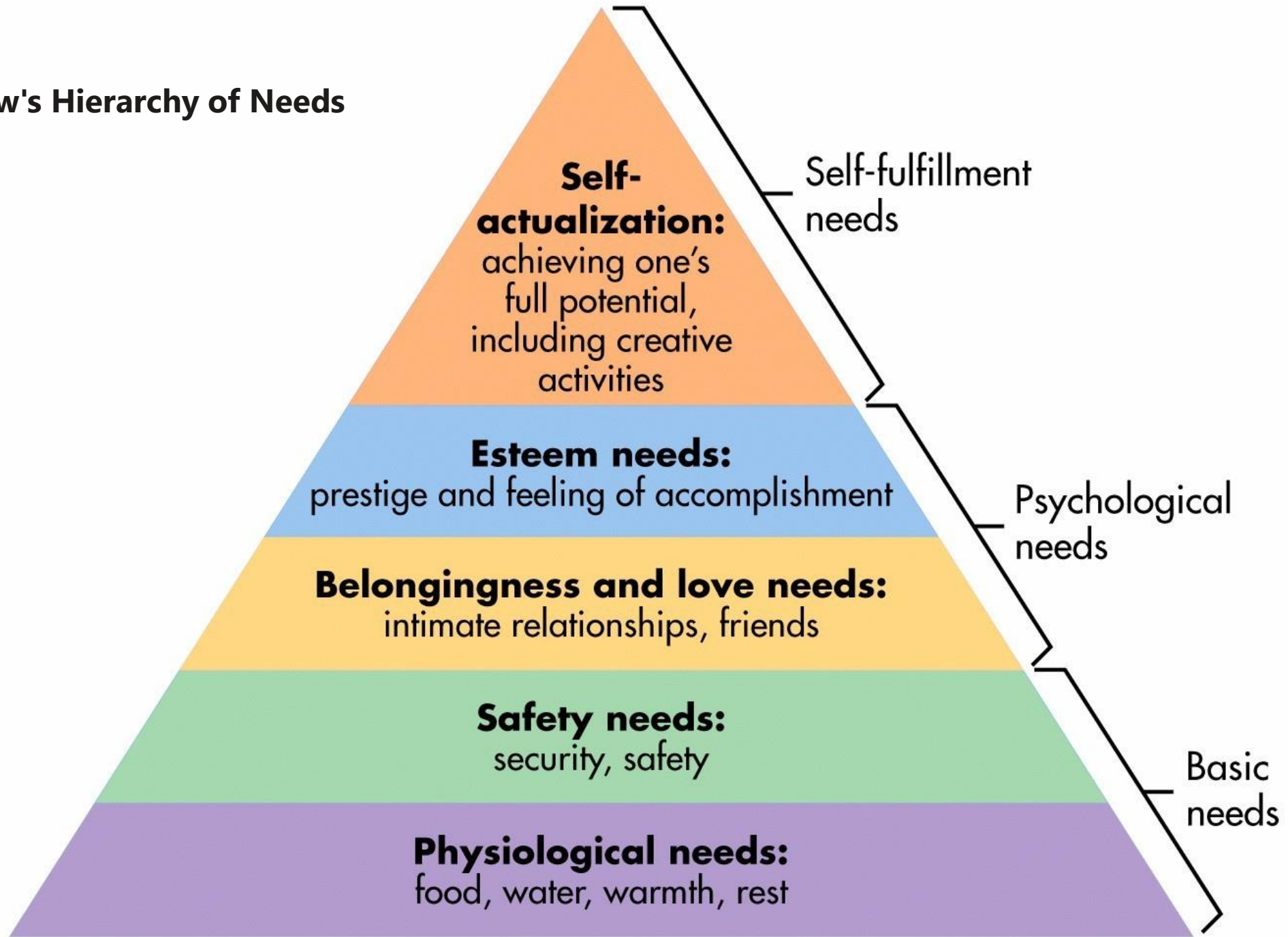


From Dr Michelle Morgan, Jan 2020.

Discussion - 10 min

PART 2: PhD MENTAL HEALTH & Covid19MH

Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs



www.mind.org.uk

Emergency Appeal

The coronavirus pandemic is having a huge impact on our mental health. Help us protect, support, and save lives.



IMPORTANT FACTORS

- Stress → anxiety
- Uncertainty
- Isolation
- Academic culture: 'narrative of optimum suffering'
- Perfectionism - Imposter Syndrome

Stress/Anxiety

- Doctoral researchers report significantly greater perceived stress compared to the general population (UDOC study, 2019)
- Greater perceived stress associated with reduced perceived social support (UDOC study, 2019)
- Disorder: a matter of duration, intensity and/or frequency
- For more info on anxiety and anxiety disorders:

‘Overcoming anxiety’ H. Kennerley

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=T4E2Jzmlraw>



Uncertainty

"Uncertainty lurks in all corners of doctoral study, including the research itself such as grappling with theory and data collection and analysis, as well as the supervision relationships. There's also uncertainty in what comes after – what kind of career will my PhD lead to. There's no way to avoid uncertainty, but there is a phrase my supervisor introduced to me at our very first supervision meeting that may help manage it – 'ambiguity tolerance'."

Sherrie Lee teachersherrie.wordpress.com

With [Covid19], [comes] unbounded uncertainty across all domains and from multiple sources: professional and personal; emotional and financial.... Our natural discomfort with uncertainty is a legacy of our survival instincts—we are more comfortable with what is familiar and certain, than the unknown, which could be dangerous. Embracing uncertainty is counter to our evolutionary instincts.

Arabella L Simpkin, assistant professor in medicine at Harvard Medical School

Isolation

“When I worked at home a lot I was getting completely de-socialised”

“The thing is with PhDs, as I'm starting to see, is that it can be quite isolating....but if there was something that bound people together more strongly just intrinsically, then my feeling is that I think people would be less stressed about their position and feel like they're less imposters and stuff like that.”

From UDOC focus groups, 2018.

Mental Health and Wellbeing Researcher-Led Initiatives (2018-19)

- MFM School PhD **peer support** meetings
- Global Studies and IDS **Wellbeing Workshops**
- **Online support group guide** for doctoral researchers
- **Support group** for those dealing with difficult/sensitive data
- PhD Game Nights

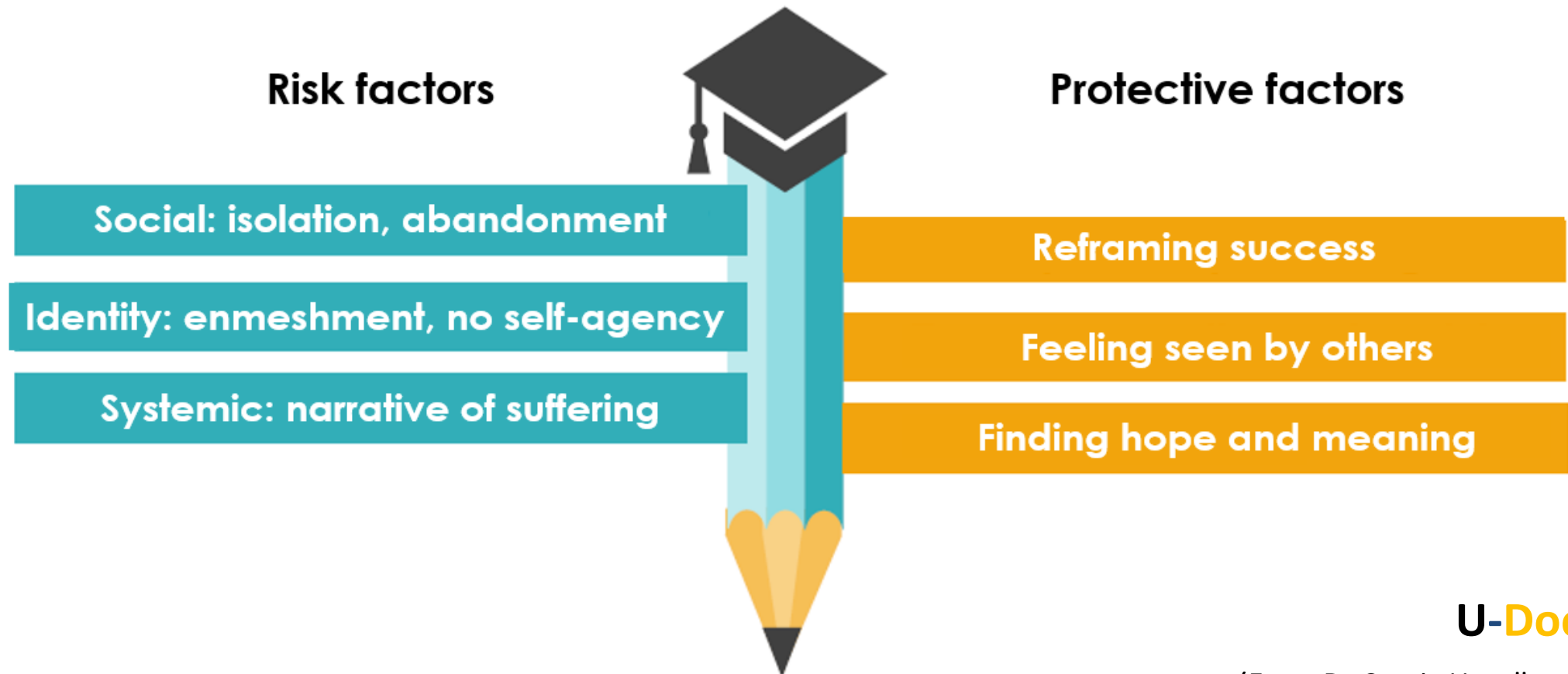


Isolation – physical distancing

- Not having access to things that make us feel good (gym, social hobbies, particular food/drinks..)
- Sense of belonging affected by less social interactions
- Boredom, loneliness → rumination, worry/anxiety

Optimum suffering

Literature:



Optimum suffering

Sussex Focus Groups (2018)



U-Doc Project

(From Dr Cassie Hazell and Dr Clio Berry)

Common assumptions worsen

It is inevitable that PGR students become very stressed \ mentally ill

PGR students should work very long hours, sacrificing balance and wellbeing to research

PGR students owe a debt to their supervisor \ lab head and must therefore devote time to the supervisor's projects at the expense of their own research and wellbeing

All PGR students should be publishing all of the time

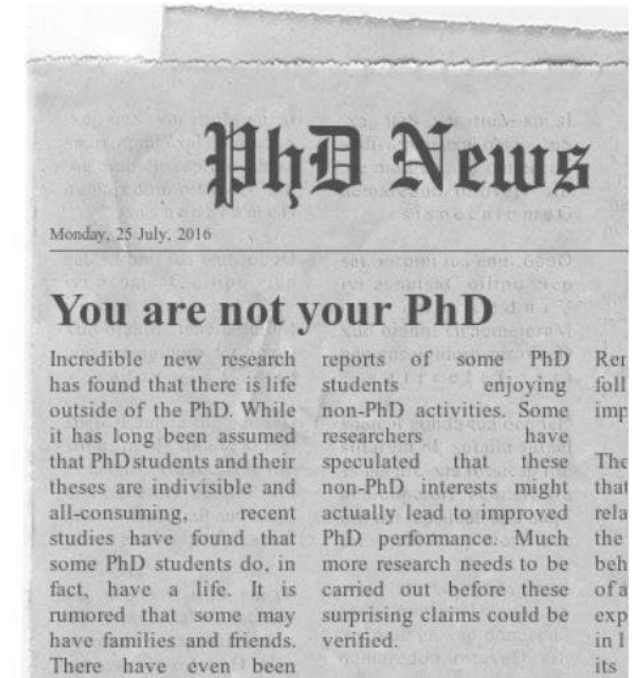
If PGR students don't keep their supervisor happy they will never have a career in academia

If you don't get a lecturing job doing a PhD is pointless

PGR students are invisible and not properly part of their university

You should have better results than this by now...

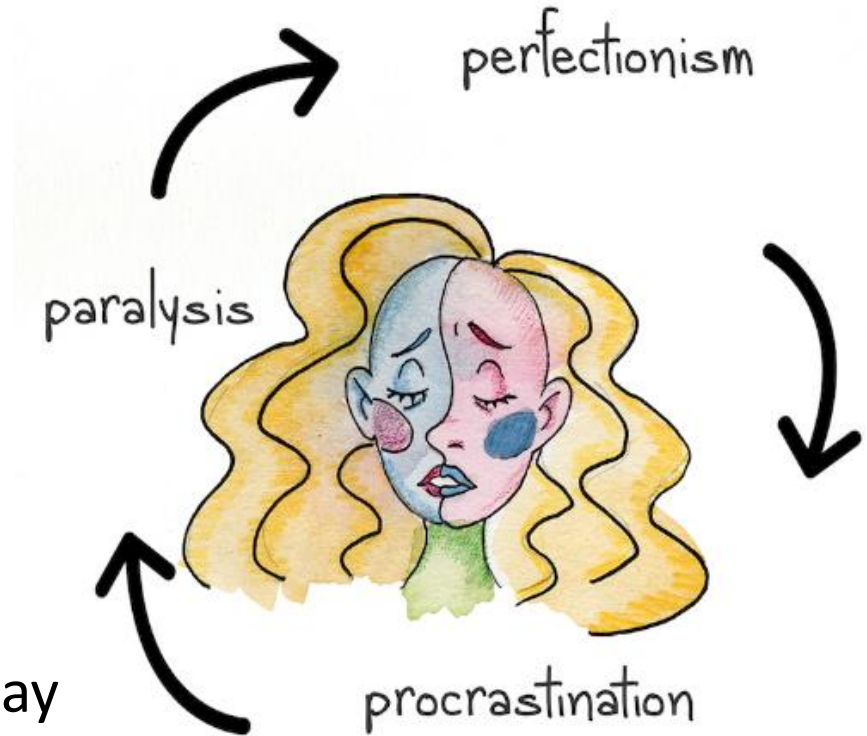
Loss of (non-PhD) self



(Hugh Kearns)

Perfectionism

- I have no free time
- No achievement is ever enough
- I blame myself if things aren't done just right
- I can't stand it when other people don't do things my way
- I don't trust others to do as good a job as I do so I end up doing it all
- I have to go over my work many times until it's acceptable to me
- I have to do more and more in order to feel accepted by others
- I'm so afraid of failing that I never get started



Online meetings

Video chats can require a lot more energy and focus, in-person interactions are a less demanding.

- Separation between work space and living/eating/sleeping spaces

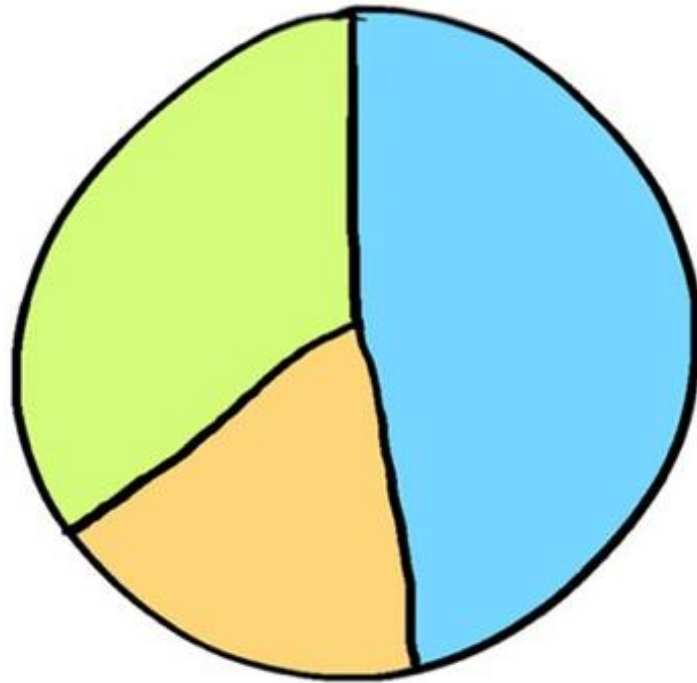
Face-to-face:

- there are helpful physical cues, we feel less performance-oriented,... we're able to gauge the climate and better read the room to know when it's best to jump in and share a diverse or different perspective'
- people rarely engage in long bouts of mutual gaze = looking directly into the eyes of another

Video meetings:

- we don't get to see the 'clues' that body language and facial expressions send as well. A lot of communication lost due to the absence of body language.. we have to be more conscious of the words we choose and when we jump into conversations
- a grid of people stare right at you from the screen.

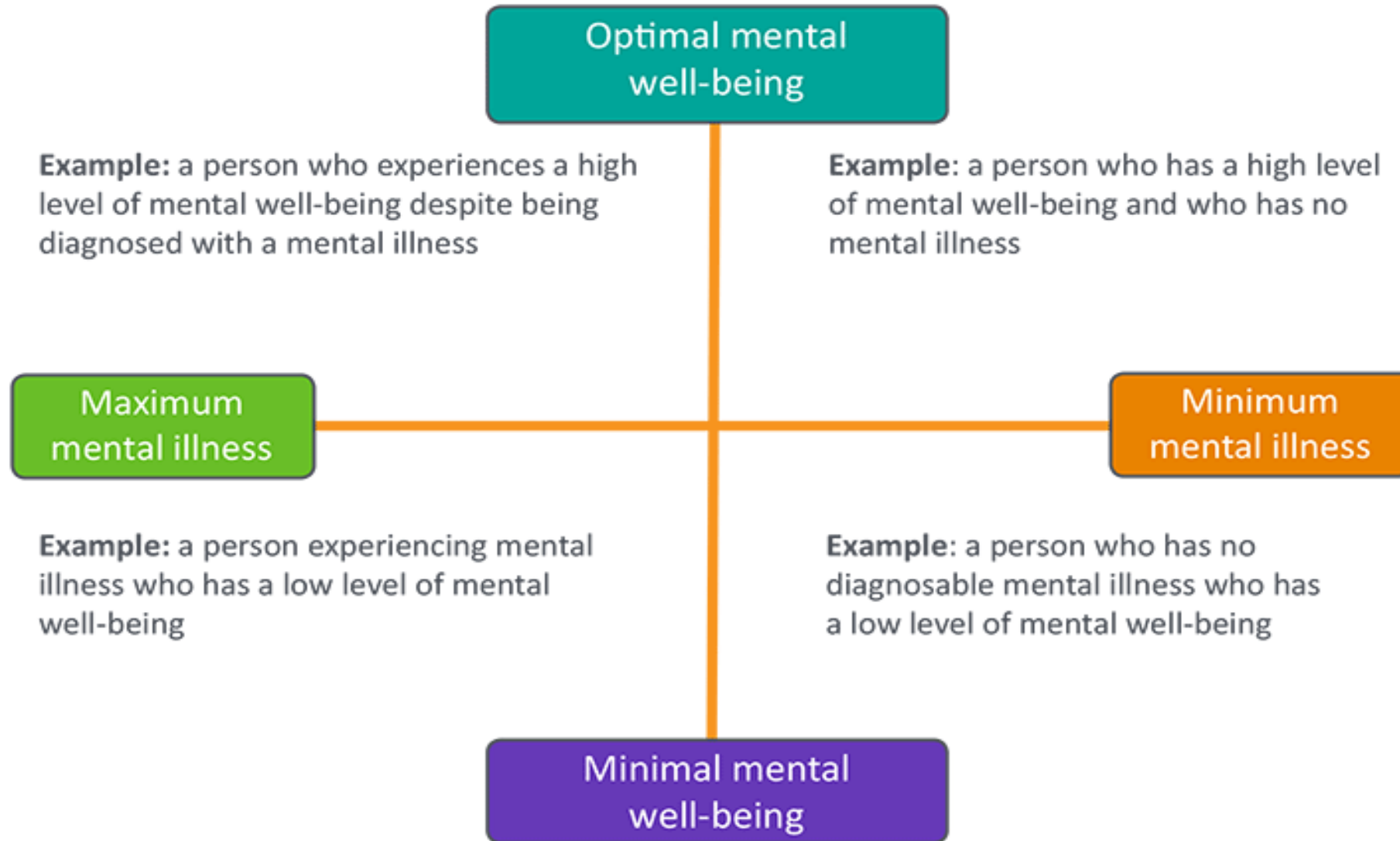
Imposter Syndrome: is it just me?



-  PEOPLE WHO GET IMPOSTER SYNDROME
-  OTHER PEOPLE WHO GET IMPOSTER SYNDROME
-  LITERALLY EVERYONE ELSE (THEY ALSO GET IMPOSTER SYNDROME)

PART 3: YOUR MENTAL HEALTH/WELLBEING?

Mental Health/Wellbeing continuum



Monitoring your wellbeing

Why?

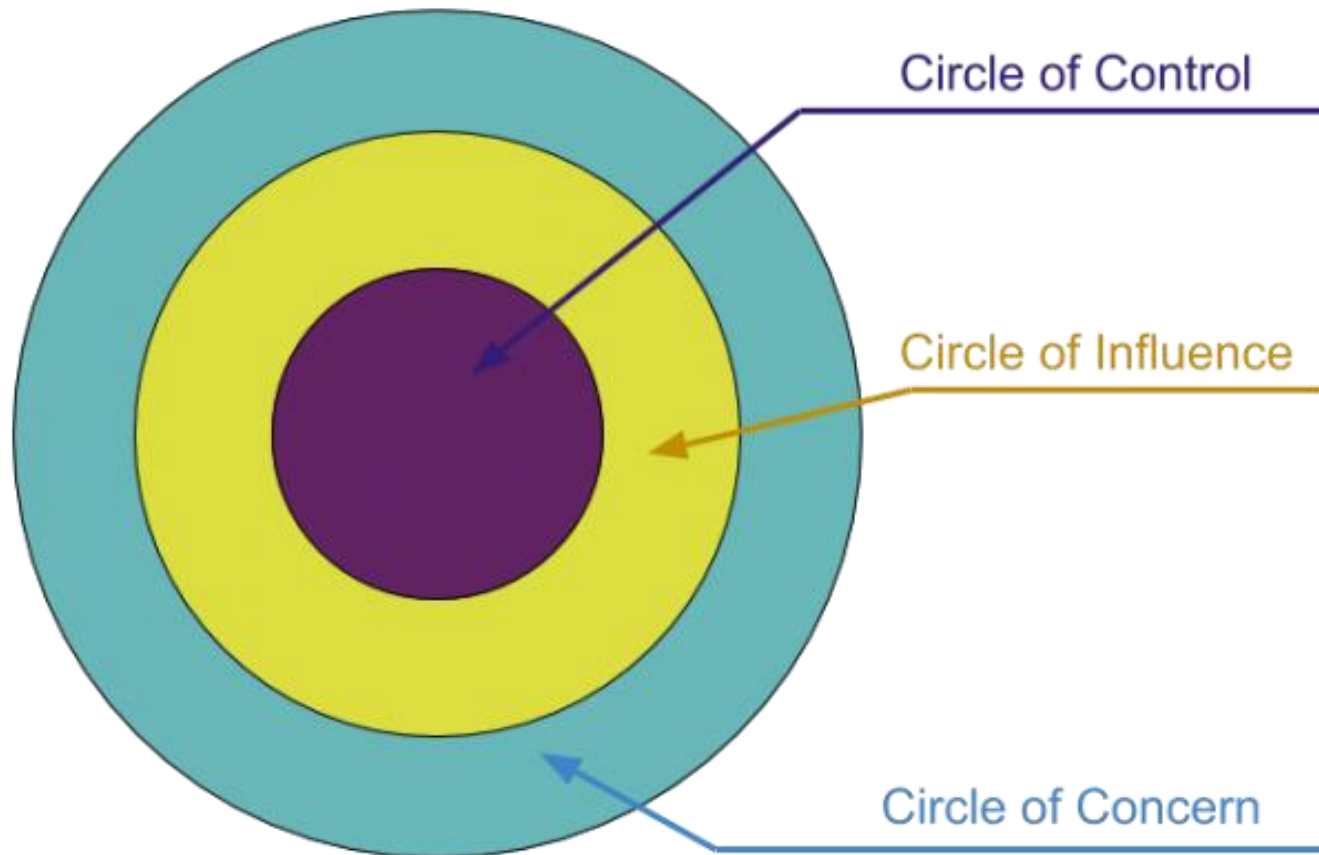
- To find out what you might be worried about – what triggers anxiety/panic/depression
- May make you feel more in control
- To see progress/celebrate strengths
- Feeling of panic: when overwhelmed makes it easier to start thinking rationally (break biased thinking)
- Aid to talk to someone (map of state of mind)
- Play with the data researcher-way

How?

- App
- Paper (mood graph, mood/sleep/stress grading)
- Could be done by looking up questionnaires online, take MH surveys (see [Vitae/Smarten survey](#))
- List of concerns/worries
- Rank listed items from most concerning/pressing to less

Tackling Worry

Covey's Circles of Concern, Influence and Control



- Your PhD topic
- When to write your thesis
- Take a break
- [Where you live, work, what you eat]
- Communication with supervisor
- Workshop attendance
- [Socialising]
- Visa issues
- Health of loved ones
- Political events
- The weather

Discussion - 5 min

(Complex) Solutions to complex problems

- Self-care
- Medication?
- Talking therapies?
- Other therapies?
- Social prescribing?



PART 3: SELF-CARE STRATEGIES

What is self-care?

- The PhD is a marathon and not a sprint – you need to look after yourself in order to have the personal resources to succeed
- Self-care is... *“the practice of taking an active role in protecting one's own well-being and happiness, in particular during periods of stress”*
(Oxford Dictionary)
- Different types of self-care (NAMI scale)
 - Physical*
 - Psychosocial and spiritual*
 - Workplace / professional*



WORKPLACE OR PROFESSIONAL SELF-CARE

- Allow for breaks during the workday
- Plan enjoyable activities for after the workday and at weekends
- Engage with peers and colleagues
- Create a calm environment to complete tasks
- Participate in projects or tasks that are exciting and rewarding
- Practice ability to set limits/boundaries and say “no” to extra responsibilities
- Arrange work space for comfort
- Negotiate academic and non-academic needs
- Participate in peer support groups



PSYCHOSOCIAL AND SPIRITUAL SELF-CARE

- Make time for self-reflection
- Engage in counselling or psychotherapy
- Keep a diary
- Make time for the things that give your life meaning
- Nurture aspects of your identity that are not linked to your PhD
- Do something in which you are not an expert or in charge
- Accept help and support from others
- Allow for contact and quality time with people inside as well as outside of academia whose company you value
- Negotiate academic and non-academic needs
- Participate in peer support groups
- Notice/appreciate yourself and the things you like about yourself
- Engage with literatures that are unrelated to work (including re-reading your favourite books and re-watching your favourite films)
- Identify and engage in comforting activities, objects, people, relationships and places



SUGGESTED SELF-CARE STRATEGIES



PHYSICAL SELF-CARE

- Eat regularly and have a healthy varied diet
- Exercise regularly
- Get regular medical care for prevention and treatment of health problems
- Take time off when sick
- Dance, swim, walk, run, play sports, sing or do some other physical activity that is enjoyable to you
- Take time to be intimate with others
- Regularly get a good night sleep
- Take holidays, day trips or mini-breaks
- Wear clothes you like and enjoy wearing
- Make time away from phones and computers
- Try new activities you always wanted to try

US

UNIVERSITY OF SUSSEX

Some (unhelpful) advice

- 'Pick up a new hobby and get really good at it'
- 'Take time to relax and focus on the present'
- 'Set up a routine'
- 'Do things you enjoy'
- Etc.

BUT

You are capable of thinking critically and for yourself so you can discriminate

Example – Unpacking SCS

One activity may require a wide range of decisions to be made and equipment to be had for the activity to take place

Going out for a bike ride :

find the bike; carry water but light backpack; right clothes, bike gloves;
other equipment i.e. padlock;

where do I go? (not far cause lockdown; somewhere flat etc.),

have good headphones listen to Motown/60s music to feel more relaxed

...

Discussion - 10 min

1. Pick up strategy/particular activity (2 min)
2. What practical steps can you take to incorporate these strategies and activities into your daily life during your PhD?
3. What barriers can you anticipate in putting your self-care plans into action?
4. How are you going to navigate and overcome these barriers?

Self-compassion: the greatest self-care?

- kindness, care and understanding for yourself (as you would for others)
- 3 components (K.Neff):
 1. Self-kindness
 2. Common humanity
 3. Mindfulness
- Positive side of self-esteem
- Self-criticism linked to depression in research (fear-based approach ≠ love-based approach (K.Neff) <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=11U0h0DPu7k>)

PART 4: GETTING SUPPORT

Mental Health care professionals

- Trained to understand MH problems
- Trained to be non-judgemental
- Trained to support you, be an ally

Support services at Sussex

- **Student Life Centre:** General student information, advice and guidance (personal, financial, academic). Open every weekday, with 1:1 appointments and daily drop-ins sussex.ac.uk/studentlifecentre
- **University Counselling Service:** Individual counselling and therapy groups. Also offers access to online self-help and workshops sussex.ac.uk/counselling
- **Student Support Unit:** The Student Support Unit has specialist Mental Health Advisors who will work with you if you require reasonable adjustments for your studies and you have medical evidence of a long-term mental health condition. The Unit also provides specialist advice for students with specific learning difficulties, long-term physical health conditions and disabilities sussex.ac.uk/studentssupport/mentalhealth
- **Employee Assistance Programme** (for doctoral researchers who teach or are employed by the University for any work): There is a 24-hour / 365 days a year telephone help line that can provide counselling and specialist advice on a range of matters sussex.ac.uk/humanresources/reward-and-benefits/employee-assistance-programme
- **Student's Union Support and Advocacy Team:** Independent, confidential information, advice and support on a range of academic and non-academic issues sussexstudent.com/support
- See also: sussex.ac.uk/internal/doctoralschool/wellbeing

Support services beyond Sussex

- Samaritans: 116 123 or jo@samaritans.org
- Sussex Mental Healthline on 0300 5000 101
- Mental Health Rapid Response Service (MHRRS) on 0300 304 0078
- Local mental health services and low-cost counselling
sussex.ac.uk/wellbeing/mentalhealth/resources/local
- National mental health charities and organisations
sussex.ac.uk/wellbeing/mentalhealth/resources/national

ONLINE RESOURCES

- Podcast Mental Health during the PhD (former Sussex PhDs): <https://www.podbean.com/media/share/pb-nixge-af80fb>
- The Wellbeing Thesis: <https://thewellbeingthesis.org.uk/>
- Silvercloud self-help app: <https://sussexuni.silvercloudhealth.com>
- Students Against Depression [website](#)
- Student Minds [website](#)

Takeaway message

- 1) Doing a PhD involves lots of possible challenges at different levels and Covid 19 is a huge one, therefore you deserve some support
- 2) One's mental health and wellbeing is complex (especially during the PhD and Covid-19!)
- 3) Therefore understanding and managing one's mental health and wellbeing is hard (but there are tools and qualified people to help)
- 4) Taking care of oneself also means self-compassion & getting help and support from others

Questions ?

More information? Feed back forms

- Contact us: researcher-development@sussex.ac.uk
- Follow student mental health projects at Sussex on Twitter: @SMHPsussex