Themes

Proposed Researcher-Led Mental Health and Wellbeing Initiatives should fall within one of the broad themes outlined below. These themes reflect the suggestions for interventions made by University of Sussex doctoral researchers attending focus groups as part of the [Understanding the mental health of doctoral researchers](#) project in May 2018.

Theme 1: Creating and maintaining community belonging

"And then you're not isolated, you know someone who knows what you're going through"

Doctoral researchers emphasised the importance of community in terms of obtaining and providing support and experiencing a sense of belonging and mattering. Community could include immediate (for example lab or School) and broader university-level communities. Doctoral researchers suggested that initiatives to create community can often have mainly temporary effects. Some groups were thought to be potentially more vulnerable to isolation (for example, part-time researchers, researchers with extensive fieldwork or without dedicated offices and working spaces, parents and carers, and international students) but all doctoral researchers identified a risk of feeling isolated and a desire for an increased sense of community belonging.

Theme 2: Cultivating time to breathe

"Actually take a breather and have it as a routine", "having a kind of rhythm to your work day that everybody is participating in"

Doctoral researchers wanted initiatives that would help them cultivate and maintain wellbeing within the working day, emphasising the need to prioritise regularly 'taking a breather' but also the struggle to find the time and motivation to do so. Examples of 'take-a-breather' activities included creative, sport and physical activities, being in nature, walking and running around campus and surrounding parkland, and interacting with others. Doctoral researchers also mentioned the value of perceiving a sense of having a shared rhythm to the work day with other doctoral researchers - something that engaging in collective 'take-a-breather' activities provide.

Theme 3: Celebrating self and successes

"There needs to be a focus on that, enjoying the process", "you can kind of trick yourself into thinking that it was really all down to chance, any person could have done it"

Doctoral researchers talked about finding it challenging to recognise, own and celebrate their own successes - sometimes feeling that researchers have a tendency to undermine, ignore or write-off their successes as chance. There was an interest in developing an increased sense of self-confidence and self-efficacy and helping other doctoral researchers to do the same. Doctoral researchers also spoke of the desire to have increased positive conversations with colleagues more generally; sharing hopefulness, optimism and positive aspects of the doctoral process and academia more broadly.

Theme 4: Constructing "*other groups, other routes, other ways to be free*"

Doctoral researchers emphasised the power of 'outside' interests to create a feeling of 'headspace', giving a sense of separation from the PhD and of a healthy work-life balance. Researchers also emphasised the potential to feel constrained - mentally and physically- during the PhD process and their interest in finding ways to experience an increased sense of freedom. 'Other groups, other routes, other ways to be free' included, therefore, finding

activities and groups which were either actually separate to the university or provided a sense of separation from the doctoral research and process.

Theme 5: Curating experiences of research process - seminars and events *"with more of a focus on the people rather than the publications"* **and that** *"allow people to express how their time is going, structured in a more focused way to build healthy working practices"*

Doctoral researchers emphasised a desire to share their own and learn about others' experiences of the research process - contrasting this to resources and training packages which may focus on more specific research skills, software, or techniques. The desire to share and learn included wanting to engage in discussing shared experiences of the PhD process with other doctoral researchers including sharing experiences around managing the PhD and personal lives. Researchers also emphasised an interest in hearing PhD completers and researchers that are more senior talk about their experiences of the research process - including the journey, struggles, successes, and tips and tricks for managing the experience.