

Identifying Signs of Stress in Postgraduate Researchers

Research ([Metcalf et al, 2018](#)) indicates that PGRs at some stage of their programme will describe it as a stressful experience. PGRs have reported that the expectations of high achievement and high workloads associated with doctoral degrees can create an environment triggering imposter syndrome in individuals already likely to experience self-doubt. Research has also noted that PGRs are likely to take the culture within their department or research group as more indicative of the institutional attitude to wellbeing than any institutional messages they receive. As a supervisor it's therefore important to be able to respond effectively to PGRs experiencing challenges to their wellbeing and mental health.

Key to this is being able to take recognise signs that a PGR may be struggling. Below is a list of some of the common signs though it is by no means exhaustive:

- Ongoing delays in getting started on papers and other projects.
- Expressing a lack of confidence in the quality of their work or feeling discouraged about their academic process, often despite evidence to the contrary.
- Worrying about their progress, and voicing these same concerns repeatedly.
- Lack of response to emails, and missing appointments and meetings.
- Repeated absence on campus when it is required: failure to attend lab or training sessions.
- A clear lack of motivation or energy.
- Appearing withdrawn in participation-oriented activities.
- Alternatively monopolising participation-oriented activities e.g. continually stating how much work they have done.
- A noticeable deterioration in physical appearance.
- Self-blame for things that are not their fault.
- Evidence of working excessively long hours, or expressing their desire to work longer hours.
- Abuse of food or alcohol.
- Emotional signs e.g. weepiness, irritability, anger.

Bear the following in mind when attempting to respond to these signs:

Call it when you spot it: let them know you've noticed that something seems wrong and you would like to help.

Choose your timing carefully: don't tag it on to the end of a meeting when they could feel there is no time to talk the issue out properly, and don't bring it up in front of other colleagues.

A good way to begin to respond to these signs are to bear LEAP in mind:

L – Listen

E- Empathise

A – Agree

P - Partner

Listen and Empathise: listen to understand, not to reply. People often need to vocalise an issue to help them to process it properly themselves, so don't interrupt them in this process by trying to share your views on what they are saying. Don't feel you need to provide immediate solutions to problems, and resist the urge to talk about yourself by comparing their experiences to your own.

Agree and Partner: agree on a way forward and collaborate with them to make a plan, in a way that works best for them. Look at ways that you can help them to reduce down what is on their to-do list. Help them to break down their to-do lists and effectively prioritise jobs so that things feel more manageable. Validate their plan, and make sure they feel comfortable in the knowledge that you are OK that they keep sensible working hours and make use of their annual leave.

And most importantly signpost to further help if you feel this is necessary. The [Counselling Service](#) offer one-on-one appointments and workshops, and can refer to NHS where required.

More information on supporting PGR wellbeing and mental health is available in the [PGR Supervisors Toolkit](#).