



Description

Did you embark on a PhD with a preconceived notion that it's going to be a stressful journey? If your answer to that was a resounding yes, then you are not alone and definitely not wrong about it either! Sailing through a PhD can be quite daunting. As revealed by a survey conducted by *Nature*, over 36% of the total researchers seek help for anxiety or depression related to their PhD. Although these results come from a small sample of around 6300 PhD students worldwide, the results are significant enough to address the prevalence of mental health issues in academia. Stress management is imperative for a smoother and tension-free research outcome.

With passing years, the stress levels among PhD students is worsening. Much has been spoken and written about how to overhaul the system and help students in their battle of coping with stress. However, in reality, the advice to PhD students is just a concept that's heard and read about.

This article will guide PhD students and will discuss various factors that trigger stress levels at different stages in the life of a researcher. The tips for new PhD students will help them to combat stress and preserve your mental health.

Factors Causing Stress and Depression in PhD Students

[Stress management of next generation researchers needs a systematic approach](#). However, before finding solutions, knowing the root cause is necessary to avoid similar situations in the future.

1. Growing Competition in Your Field

Students often get intimidated by the ongoing research in their field and compare the progress and status of their work with other researchers' work.

2. Work Overload

Excessive work pressure and relentless overtime working induces anxiety and increases stress levels amongst PhD students.

3. Role Ambiguity

It is often seen that a candidate is unaware about their role in the study and what the supervisor or the Principal Investigator (P.I.) expects out of them as a peer.

4. Physiological Factors

While embarking on a PhD., students often take time to adapt to the physiological changes that come along. Dealing with physical health issues diverts your mind from focusing on your research work.

5. Behavioral Approach

Researchers tend to follow a fixed framework to complete their experiments. When unexpected results are derived, finding an alternative solution to obtain conclusions and scheduling a proper action plan encroaches the minds of a PhD student.

6. Performance Pressure

Most Ph.D students also work while pursuing their research. Hence, maintaining regular attendance, achieving goals, keeping the grades high, and completing assignments while adhering to deadlines can take a toll on their mental health.

7. Relationship with Supervisor

Working in isolation will not take you a long way. Not maintaining a healthy work-relationship with your supervisor affects the research outcome and by extension affects your mental health.

Tips for PhD Students to Overcome Anxiety

The solution to the [rising stress levels and mental health issues](#) faced by PhD researchers does not solely lie in the institutions providing on-campus mental-health support. Furthermore, it also does not depend on the institutions providing training for supervisors to deal with their group of students in coping with the stress. It also lies in understanding that stress is a consequence of an excessive focus on measuring performance. In addition, other entities such as the funders, academic institutions, journals, and publishers must also take responsibility of the mental health of researchers in a way that is feasible and within their limits.

The late nights and early mornings spent within four walls while completing your PhD, juggling between work and study, papers to publish, supervisors to please, and perhaps also living up to your family's expectations takes a toll on you. These are some common instances where most Ph.D students are taken aback and left clueless.

The first step in fixing the problem is acknowledging it!

1. Finding an Credible Supervisor

As your supervisor is someone who will guide you throughout your program and help you face challenges, it is imperative to select your supervisor carefully. This process of identifying an incredible supervisor could get difficult and leave you confused. But a trick to deal with this is identifying a supervisor who is supportive, actively working in your field, has a strong publication record, and can give you sufficient time for mentoring.

2. Find the Right Research Funding Body

High rates of stress and depression arises at this stage of your PhD Strategizing your path into [choosing the right funding body for your research](#) is very important. Focus on maximizing the value of your research rather than just looking for monetary support.

3. Time Management

As a researcher, the key to a [stress-free research workflow is effective time management](#). Prioritize your tasks and plan your day based on the same. Set realistic and achievable goals. Do not overwhelm yourself with too many tasks to be done on a single day. Online project management tools such as Asana, Trello, ProofHub, etc. will help you to be on the top of your tasks.

4. Maintain a Healthy and Professional Supervisor?Student Relationship

Finding yourself alone is quite normal for most people. Try building new connections with your colleagues and be affable to everyone. Maintaining a healthy and professional supervisor-student relationship is critical for the success of any research work. Good communication will give you and the supervisor a clearer picture of your work. Share your honest concerns with your colleagues and supervisor in the most respectful way. If there is minimal response, reach out to the mental health team of your institution to resolve any conflicts amicably.

5. Presenting Negative or In-conclusive Results

There's nothing to be ashamed of if your experiment does not deliver the expected results. Honest presentation of results is what makes you an ethical and respected researcher in the community, [irrespective of the results being positive, negative, or mixed](#). Compare your results and review them using tables or charts for effective presentation.

6. Writing Your Thesis

Here's when you are one step closer to completing your PhD! The journey from here on is only uphill. So don't push yourself back now. Start with planning your writing activities with a fresh mind. Furthermore, define sections of your thesis and focus on one section at a time. Don't bother yourself with editing and formatting of the thesis. Complete the writing part first. Work on editing and finally [proofreading](#) your article to refurbish it in the next stage.

7. Select the Right Journal

Now that the writing process is completed, there's no looking back from here. But the threat of falling prey to predatory journals cannot be unseen. Make this process easier by finding a journal that is related to your discipline. Consider the impact factor of the journal. Use [journal finder](#) tools such as [Enago's Open Access Journal Finder](#), Elsevier [Journal Finder](#), Springer Journal Suggester, Manuscript Matcher Tool in Web of Science Master List, etc. Once you have a list of journals, check their aims and scope to ensure your article fits their criteria.

Stress Management Tips for PhD Students and Early Career Researchers

Researchers must understand that completing their PhD is a part of their life and that it will come to an end someday. Whilst pursuing PhD [neglecting your mental health will eventually affect your research outcomes](#) in future. Therefore, stress management is very crucial to preserve your mental health and lead a peaceful life.

Follow these tips to maintain a work-life balance and preserve your mental health:

1. Acknowledging the Problem

We often deny that our mental health is affected by an external factor. It is important to understand what is bothering you and keeping you from achieving your goals. Therefore, once you are aware of the cause, accept it and work in a way to combat it.

2. Talk About the Problem

Being negligent and keeping those bothersome thoughts to yourself will only worsen the situation. Talk about your concerns with people who would care about it and help you deal with your anxiety.

3. Improve Your Organizational Skills

Your [key to successfully completing your PhD](#) is by managing your tasks efficiently without over-committing. Hence, maintaining a balance between professional and personal work is crucial.

4. Social Involvement

Engage yourself in social activities to keep your mind from spiraling in the pool of negative thoughts. Additionally, join groups that are not related to your domain. Learn to make connections with new people and get to know them better.

5. Rekindle Long Lost Hobbies

Get that old sketch book you left in the groove! Reembrace hobbies you haven't been able to catch up with for a really long time. In addition, engage in fun activities or games that make you happy.

6. Practice Mindfulness

Try the 2-step exercise called "[The Mindful Pause](#)". In this, you pause before or during a stressor and attentively breathe for 15 seconds, followed by one question for yourself — how might I use one of my character strengths right now? Take positive action with any character strength that pops up.

7. Meditate as a Relaxation Response

Spare 10-20 minutes a day, preferably in the morning to meditate. This involves silent repetition of a word, sound, or phrase while sitting quietly with a good posture and eyes closed.

8. Get Involved in Any Form of Physical Activity

Implement any form of physical activity in your daily routine to improve your cognitive and physical abilities. Consequently, the release of endorphins whilst exercising acts as a catalyst in keeping your spirits high.

9. Be Grateful

Acknowledge and appreciate the gift of life. Unleash your gratitude for being able to fulfil your dreams. Furthermore, remember every positive thing that has ever happened to you and express gratitude for having made things possible.

How often have you been stressed out while pursuing your PhD? Have you ever followed any stress management tricks? What are your thoughts on these advices to PhD students? What was your move in coping with stress associated to your research? Has maintaining proper work-life balance been easy for you? Let us know about your and your colleagues' experiences in combating stress in the comments section below!

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