Mental Health and Wellbeing for PhD and Early Career Researchers

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Introduction

What is mental health and wellbeing for PhD and early career researchers?

Mental health and wellbeing should be looked at in an overarching way for PhD and early career researchers, and not just specifically for their academic research. Mental health and wellbeing is part of the research piece but more importantly, it's part of their lives as a whole. The issue is that many PhD and early career researchers have such high demands of their time and resources, that mental health and wellbeing can often be one of the first things to be neglected in favour of their work. This can result in significant negative impacts on the researchers themselves, which in turn can impact their work. Relationship issues can arise both within the academic arena and in the personal/family arena, maladaptive coping mechanisms can be resorted to, an increase in a sense of isolation, anxiety and low mood can be prevalent, and general self care can be low on the list of priorities.

By prioritising and incorporating mental health and wellbeing into their lives, PhD and early career researchers can prepare themselves for some of the challenges that might arise during their research period.

The Need for Mental health and wellbeing Training for a Sustainable Researcher Education

As detailed above, the value of good mental health and wellbeing cannot be underestimated and the ripple effect can be quite significant in that it can help researchers foster positive relationships with their colleagues and within themselves, help them recognise when they might need additional support or self care, and in turn impact on their ability to sustain and progress with their research in a positive way.

Goals of the Training

Module 1:How to maintain mental health during research

Learning Objectives

- How to feel empowered in relation to mental wellbeing

- Knowing how and when to implement self care strategies

- Understanding how to manage challenges to mental wellbeing

Course Content

- Self Care

- Compassion

- Dealing with stress

- Time Management

- Lifestyle

- Self management - including mindfulness

Module 2 Establishing good sustainable relationships

Learning Objectives

- Understanding yourself in relationships

- How to set up good working relationships

- How to manage boundaries in relationships

Course Content

● Self reflection

● Communication

● Role play

● Supports and Resources

Module 3 Managing difficulties and challenges in relationships

Learning Objectives

● Identifying and communicating when challenges arise

● Managing distress of both parties

● Resources yourself when there are challenges

● Understanding and initiating a repair process after a rupture

Course Content

● How to approach people involved with the communication difficulties

● Setting up meetings and how to communicate when challenges arise

● Understanding boundaries and how to implement them

- Role play

- Dealing with anger / hostility

Module 4 How to inform and / or change culture of mental health within research environments

Learning Objectives

- How to spearhead and lead within the research field a healthier and more dynamic and human approach to the profession

- How to communicate and initiate this process

- How to self support in this process

Course Content

- Communication, leadership and listening skills

- Developing mental health strategies and know how to integrate them with teams

- Self reflection and knowing how to ask for help

- Role play

- Dealing with resistance

- Psychoeducate and inform people

    - What is mental health and wellbeing

    - Impacts of not looking after it

    - How to have self-compassion

    - Managing challenging relationships that might arise within your research

    - The impact of your research career and stresses on other external factors e.g. family, finances etc

    - Building positive and productive relationships with supervisors/supervisees

- Overarching goal - to support people to have a better and more compassionate understanding of themselves, the challenges that they might face and how they might address them

Enabling the Hack(athon): How supporting and your mental health and wellbeing Helps Designing the Personal Research Environment.

When we think about designing a personal research environment we need to take into account our goals (both personal and professional), and what actions we need to take in order to help us fulfil these goals.

The role of mental health and well being is paramount here as when we are in a calm and steady headspace, we have the ability to look at things from a wider perspective and develop the tools we need to help ourselves sustain both this mental wellbeing AND a positive research environment. If we don't address the mental wellbeing side of things, we can block ourselves from seeing opportunities for development, for positive relationship management and for living our lives in a way that is healthy and sustainable, both for our personal lives and for our professional research careers.

Making mental health and well being a core part of the design of our research environments is vital as without this aspect our relationships with ourselves, our families and our colleagues will suffer, and as a result, so too will our work and our general well being. Mental health and wellbeing should not be an "add on", it must be part of our core approach to our work and our lives.

Our Hackathon day helps people to consider their own research and life environments, how the two may merge and collide, what might support them during these mergers and collisions and how they can sustain themselves throughout their research. Day 5 gives the participants a chance to look at each aspect of the week in a holistic way as opposed to in a silo and design and develop their research environment in accordance with their learning and experiences from throughout the week. Our day provides time and space for participants to flesh out concerns and worries which can then help them to focus on where the gaps are in their research environments and what they need to do to fill these gaps.

Meeting points and Synergies with other Training

Our mental health and wellbeing day focuses on the following aspects:

- Personal well being

- Professional relationships

- Research environment

- Institutional influence

Each of these aspects could easily be applied to the Open Science and Communication elements of the Hackathon.

Our personal wellbeing impacts our ability to focus on our work, our motivation, our engagement with our research. As touched on above, in minding our mental health and

wellbeing, we have the headspace to see opportunities within our research thinking and we have the motivation and focus to drive these through. As with any research or project work we undertake, things don't always go to plan. Part of our training is to help researchers have compassion for themselves and their abilities - to help build resilience so that setbacks can be dealt with, processed and built on. Without a good sense of self, sometimes small setbacks can evolve into huge obstacles that can freeze us and block us from thinking clearly, thereby having a direct impact on our ability to progress with our work.

Professional relationship management and communicating our work into wider spheres is also a core part of any research work - we are dealing with colleagues, supervisors, supervisees, managers, funders, naysayers(!), other external institutions and the wider world audience. Being able to build and develop positive working relationships across the board is an extremely valuable skill and helps us to share and communicate our work in a way that does it and ourselves justice.

Our research environment can have a huge impact on how we are in ourselves and our role. Some research environments can be challenging and so the two aspects detailed above can help us to design an environment that is conducive to both our mental well being and also to productivity and collegiality. These in turn can support us in finding ways to share our research in ways that are accessible, exciting and inviting to others in our field.

Another thing to be mindful of is that the impact of the institutions we are working in cannot be underestimated. We need to be aware of policies, assessment, advancement and funding procedures (to name but a few), within our own institutions, while also being mindful of the same in external institutions we may have strong links with. The culture within our own research environments may be different to others we might be working with and this can influence how we might share and distribute our research. Being able to hold all of these influences in our mind as we work in Open Science, can help us to deliver our work in a way that it will connect with the relevant people.

And finally, none of this can be possible or sustainable if we don't prioritise our own individual needs. We are not simply researchers - we have multiple identities and roles within the different systems in which we interact. If we don't prioritise ourselves, the ripple effects will be into the work and the relationships we have with the people and systems around us. Our module helps individuals to identify their own particular systems and different "hats" and to look at what they might need to do for themselves to ensure they are not only giving as much as they can of themselves, but that they are also gaining and feeling nourishment from their work.

Mental health and wellbeing for PhD and early career researchers

The Training Day Concept

In our experience, any training or workshops on mental health need to have a fluidity and a curiosity present as each individual participant has their own different lived experience. While we have a structure for the day (see below), we are always open to focusing on the issues that come up for the participants as these are what are prevalent for them. To encourage open engagement and conversation, we have ongoing feedback during our presentations and we also use breakout sessions with post-feedback to allow for smaller-group discussions.

Day Schedule

Module II: Mental Wellbeing

Facilitators	Jo Harney, Counselling Psychologist & Deputy Director Alice Kelly, Psychotherapist and Clinical Team Manager Trinity College Dublin
Preparation	Please reflect before this day on what impacts and contributes to your mental wellbeing in relation to: ● Personal well being ● Professional relationships ● Research environment ● Institutional influence This will be very interactive and to get the most out of the day if you have thought about these areas you will benefit more.
9:30 - 10:00	**Introduction and reflective exercise on challenges to mental wellbeing** In this introductory session, you will have an opportunity to self reflect on your current mental state and the challenges you face.
10:00 - 11:00	**Self-Care on a Personal Level** Reflective exercise: Own personal way of Self Care Introduction to Scales/Questionnaires for Burnout, Self-Care & Resilience

Explore Tools: breathing techniques, mindfulness options, self-help resources, 'SilverCloud' information

11:00 - 11:15   **BREAK**

11.15 - 12.15   **Communication and Relationships**

Introduction to communication and how to manage boundaries and challenges that occur both personally and in relation to colleagues and supervisors etc. This will be a break-out room exercise.

Tool: Supervisory Contract – introduction to an information sheet on how to schedule evaluate the supervisory relationship

Exercise: Active listening skills and how to access help and support

12.15 – 13.00   **Systemic Issues**

Your community system - in this segment you will explore and reflect upon the system that exists within your community and the challenges you may have or will encounter within your more personal networks.

Institutional system - this segment explores what issues have arisen within the institutional constructs of your research environment.

Reflective Exercise: Understanding the support and the challenges that come from your community and institute systems.

Tools: How to implement change into systems

13:00 - 14:00   **LUNCH** 🍰

14.00 – 15.15   **Bringing it Together**

In this session, you will explore the different types of mental wellbeing resources available to you as a researcher and a professional. We will also review all the tools provided earlier in the day.

15:15 - 15:30   **BREAK**

| **15.30 – 17.00** | **Group Work** |
| | Within your team, you will reflect on the day's session, brainstorm, and apply the day's learnings into actionable steps on building a more supportive research environment. |

Day Schedule Breakdown

Now in the following, for each session a short description is given about how the sessions are conducted and what needs to be considered in selected scenarios. What tools were used and for what purpose? What are the take-aways from that session?

Session 1: Challenges to Mental Wellbeing

In this session, we open a discussion on the life of a researcher, the challenges involved and the impacts that these challenges can have on our lives as researchers. We acknowledge the different types of challenges that we might experience during the course of the research that may pertain directly to the research itself, or to other external elements including structural, organisational, financial, personal, cultural and relational challenges. We use this space to allow the group to start thinking about their own lives in their research and any particular challenges they notice or reflect on about their own situations.

Figure 1: Many factors are part of your personal wellbeing.

Session 2: Self-Care on a Personal Level

In this session, we take some time to examine what we might do already in regards to self-care, or where might the gaps or needs be in relation to this. We use a Self-Care Inventory (referenced previously) as a tool to help participants explore this and facilitate a group discussion about different ways in which we might implement self-care. We also use this space to explore some tools that people can use such as mindfulness, breathing and grounding exercises, identifying thought patterns and working towards being proactive in addressing the challenges we identified in the first session.

Figure 2: How much control do you have over your personal happiness and what can you influence?

Session 3: Communication and Relationships

In this session, we explore the significance of communication and relationships within the research context, specifically, the value of a good supervisory relationship. We discuss different aspects of effective communication and connection and use roleplays as a way to help demonstrate the impact of certain "active listening" behaviours. We also discuss the value of a good supervision contract and work through the elements that should be included in such a contract.

Figure 3: Communication is more than summing up thoughts.

Session 4: Systemic Issues

This session aims to help researchers look at the wider systems in which they exist, specifically, the institutional system. For each individual researcher, the relationships they have within their system will all be unique to themselves and this session facilitates a discussion and exploration of each of our own systems. We look at the important relationships that are present, identify perhaps weaker relationships and connections that we might need to focus on, and start to build a greater self awareness of the impact or our own selves (our beliefs, behaviours, values etc.) on the wider systems in which we exist.
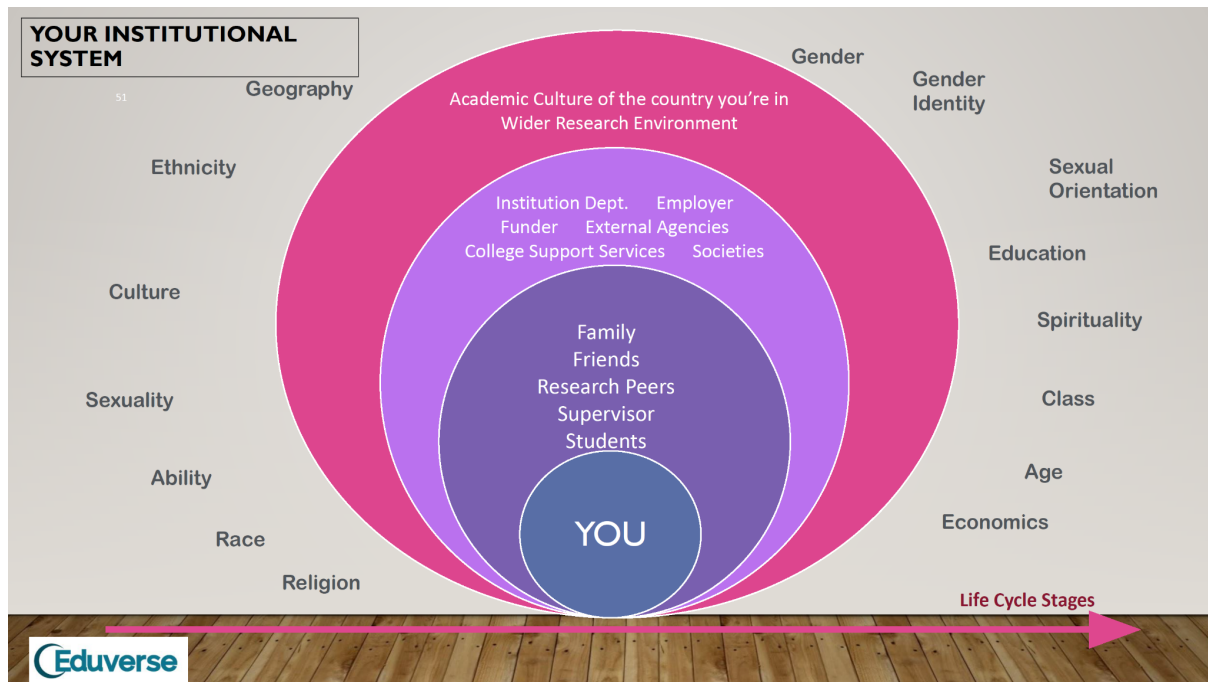

Figure 4: What is your environment being composed of and what systemic factors are part of your life?

And Finally….Bringing it Together

This final session is a space for each researcher to look at all the elements explored in the previous sessions and to allow these to feed into creating their own particular road map for minding their mental health going forward.

Figure 4: Setting your personal goals has the power to create paths for change.

Mental health and wellbeing for PhD and early career researchers Module Hackathon Outputs and Integration

We share the below resources in the annexes to participants for ongoing use beyond the hackathon:

- Self-Care Inventory David Irvine (2016)

- Supervision Learning Agreement Template

Events and Lessons Learned

Feedback from the Hackathons we have run has been very positive. While our goal was to hold the events in person, we found that the participants engaged well over zoom and we were able to adapt our sessions appropriately.

One of the outcomes that sticks out was in relation to building community and connection between researchers across Europe. Many of our participants spoke about the challenges they faced working in a country that may not have been the country of origin. Some of the participants had relocated for their research alone and others and brought their families. Each instance presented significant challenges in integrating both into their locality, the culture, the community and the institutions. There was a strong sense of isolation for many of the participants and this (unsurprisingly) had been magnified by covid and the lack of in-person engagement. A really lovely outcome from our programme was that many of the participants developed connections on the course and made plans to continue these supportive spaces on a longer term basis.

Annex 1 - SELF CARE INVENTORY

How well are you taking care of yourself?

Change is created out of "optimal" anxiety. The purpose of this simple self-care inventory is to do just that — stimulate anxiety, but without immobilizing you. This is not an inventory that assesses every area of your life or who you are as a person. It is a simple inventory that will help you identify your current level of self-care in six key areas. It is meant to help you see any disparity between where you are and where you want to be in relation to self-care. It will help you focus on your needs and identify areas where change is called for. The state of your self-care system varies at different times in your life. Sometimes you need to get lost in the forest in order to find a new path.

Here are a few pointers to help you get the most from the inventory.

• Being honest with yourself is not easy, but to make changes in your life you need a clear inventory of where you are today. In some respects, this inventory will test how rigorously honest you are with yourself. We all lie to ourselves in one way or another as a way to survive. The more rigorously self-honest you are in answering these questions, the more you will gain from the experience. You don't need to "look good" or impress anyone. There is no requirement to share your scores with anyone. It's for you only.

• You may find yourself in conflict or getting anxious as you answer the questions. Remember that anxiety drives the engine of change. Respect the anxiety, and know there are no "right" answers or perfect scores (if you score high in every category maybe it means you need to lighten up and be less obsessive compulsive!) Hopefully the anxiety will inspire you to put yourself in the driver's seat of change.

• Many people say they would answer many of the questions differently, depending on whether it is in relation to their work or in their personal life. If you feel there would be a big difference, you may want to take the test twice — once in the context of your work and once in the context of your personal life. This is okay, but if you see a large disparity between these two, there is an opportunity to reflect on what that means.

• Some of these questions will bring confusion and anxiety. Just as there are no perfect answers, this is not a perfect test. Even if it's not clear, do the best you can.

• As you go through this inventory, you may see many areas in your current self-care system that could use a change. Rather than overhauling too much right now, focus on one or two areas that could use work in the next six to twelve months. Remember, it is better to be successful at one small change, than failing at trying to overhaul too many things!

• For each question, select one of the following:
    Almost Never (1)
    Occasionally (2)
    Half of the Time (3)
    Fairly Often (4)

Almost Always (5)
If you don't know the answers to any of the questions below, count your score a zero on that point.

Physical health
This is where you examine the physical aspects of your life — how you are nurturing your body and taking care of your health.

1. I get seven to eight hours sleep most nights.
2. I consistently exercise at least three times a week, for at least 20 minutes.
3. I am a non-smoker.
4. My body is a weight that is right for me.
5. I have a healthy, well balanced diet.

Mental wellbeing
This area examines how your mind is supporting your self-care system, and some of the choices you make for having a strong mental attitude and firm mind in your life and work.

1. I am optimistic about my life and my future.
2. Joy and gratitude come easily to me, and I do things that bring me joy.
3. I am free of worry about people, places, and things that I have no control over.
4. I am able to move from self criticism to self acceptance easily (i.e., I treat myself with the same respect and compassion I would a best friend.)
5. I am able to deal with fear, guilt, and insecurity in a constructive way.

Managing demands and personal agency
This area deals with how you clarify the most important areas in your life that need attention, and how you manage the demands from others.

1. I am clear about the essential elements that matter most in my life.
2. I attend to my core values on a regular basis.
3. I have clear boundaries, when necessary, around the expectations of others.
4. I am satisfied with the way I handle demands in my life.
5. I have little in my life that needs cleaning up (household clutter, destructive relationships, addictions, unmanageable debts, etc.)

Spiritual health and inner wellbeing
Spiritual wellbeing is about tapping into a power beyond ourselves to give guidance, support, and clarity on the self-care journey. Spiritual health is about finding inner peace, independent of the roles, successes, and failures of life.

1. I get strength from my religious and/or spiritual beliefs, where I find peace in the

midst of chaos.

2. I take quiet time for myself during the day for strength and perspective from within.

3. I have a level of acceptance of my imperfections (self-compassion) and have the strength to let go of my fear and uncertainty.

4. Having the courage and faith to believe in what I cannot see gives me strength in my life.

5. I have a community that supports my spiritual beliefs.

Supportive relationships

This area examines the quality of supportive relationships in your life, people that support you and hold you accountable to take care of yourself, and help guide you to your own truth.

1. I give and receive affection regularly.

2. I have at least one relative within an hour's drive on whom I can rely.

3. I have a network of friends on whom I can — and do — depend.

4. I have at least one friend that I confide in about personal matters, and I meet with them regularly.

5. I am able to speak openly about my feelings when angry or worried.

Meaning

This area speaks to the level of satisfaction and fulfillment you are getting from your life and your work right now that makes the caring in your life meaningful.

1. I enjoy getting out of bed most days, and look forward to the day.

2. I have a sense of purpose in my life.

3. If I suddenly received an inheritance of $1 million, my life wouldn't change much.

4. I stand up for what I believe in.

5. I express my unique talents, strengths, passions, and dreams on a daily basis.

Grand Total (Add Up All Six Categories):

Scores can range from 30 to 150

120+ This score indicates personal wellbeing and serenity at this stage in your life. You have a good self-care system in place. You may identify an area that needs some "fine tuning," but take time to appreciate your current life style, choices, and habits in the area of self-care. You may also want to reflect on areas of self-care that need attention but did not get addressed in this inventory. Note: If you scored in this range, you may also be an obsessive compulsive person who could benefit by lightening up and perhaps putting less emphasis on discipline and structure.

91-119 You have some areas in your life with a good system of self-care. Some areas also need focus and new habits. Take a close look at one or two areas that need attention now, and focus on them.

50-90 This score would indicate that you are struggling and could use some assistance in developing a stronger self-care system. Look seriously at the area(s) in your life that need attention now. You may need to establish a structure to enhance your life through more discipline and consistency.

Below 50 You are experiencing some serious difficulties in the area of self-care. Take time to determine if these difficulties are stemming from a current change in your life, and if so, ask how you can create some structure in your life to take better care of yourself in this challenging time. You will need to pay serious attention to some immediate action toward self-care in order to rekindle your personal vitality. Appreciate yourself for being so rigorously honest with yourself. This is the first step to growth.

Regardless of your score, here is a short list of actions to get you started on the next chapter of your self-care journey.

• Take time to do a more thoughtful inventory — paying particular attention to the scores that were lowest. Review any blocks that may be getting in your way of creating a self-care system that serves you best. Also, be sure to take time to acknowledge the strengths of your current self-care system.

• Reflect on the score that you gave yourself in this inventory. Ask whether the assessment fits for you. Does this score reflect how you are currently taking care of yourself? Take your self-care seriously by taking a good honest look at yourself.

• Be sure to give yourself some credit for any areas in your life where you are attending to yourself.

• Pick one area in your life that needs some focused attention to self-care, and develop a lan for working in this area using the "Taking Action" process outlined below.

The following specific actions may also help you develop your self-care system.

• Create a "sanctuary," a place or time for you to get away from the demands of others to be still and listen to the voice within. This could be a physical space, a room in your house, and/or a time during the day or week that you can unplug from technology, distractions, and demands just to be with yourself.

• Connect with a support system to give you a fresh perspective, and help hold you accountable to work with the area that you are focusing on. This could be a trusted friend, therapist, coach, mentor, trainer at a local gym, massage therapist, a religious community, social club, or a support or recovery group.

• Search for a confidant, a person with whom you can share your innermost thoughts, feelings, dreams, and challenges.

• Sign up for a class that will help you, such as yoga, Tai Chi, mindfulness meditation, or relaxation.

• Remember, start small and be consistent. It's better to walk even five minutes every day than an hour a month.

• Do a "clean up" in your life to make room for something new (e.g. de-clutter your house, get rid of anything that is not bringing you joy, let go of any relationships that are not life-giving, donate clothes that you haven't worn in years to charity, have a garage sale, or clean out those old self-help books you no longer need).

• If self-compassion is an area you would like to develop (which is a particularly a big one for me), a useful tool can be found on Dr. Neff's Web site: www.self-compassion.org. You may also find Brené Brown's book, The Gifts of Imperfection, to be a valuable tool.

Taking Action

Take an honest look at each of the six following areas and do a quick analysis. Where are you and where do you want to be? Which areas show a gap between current reality and your vision? Start with one area that you are committed to work on. Which areas are going well? Acknowledge your progress in these areas.

Note: seek out an "accountability partner," a trusted friend or advisor who will support you and help keep you accountable.
- Physical health
- Mental wellbeing
- Managing demands and personal agency
- Spiritual health and inner wellbeing
- Supportive relationships
- Meaning

Annex 2 - SUPERVISION LEARNING AGREEMENT TEMPLATE

Practicalities
- Frequency of meetings
- Length of time
- Location
- Record Keeping
- Induction / Orientation completed
- Professional / training organisation requirements

Working Alliance
Roles, Responsibilities and Rights
- Responsibilities of both parties:
- Rights for both parties regarding:
- Role of supervisor:
- Role of supervisee:
- Role of Institution:

    Induction / Orientation

    Monitoring and Wellbeing

    Communication and Conflict resolution

    Training and Professional development

    Career Development

Presenting in Supervision
- How will meeting time be spent
- How will notes / action points be stored and distributed
- How will feedback be given? Preferences (comparators, verbal, written, verbal style)
- How will work be presented in meetings?
- Other

Expectations
- Learning needs
- Goals
- Objectives

Evaluation
- When will formal evaluation take place?

- What evaluation criteria will be used?
- Review / Evaluation of working relationship

Signed : Supervisor

Signed: Supervisee

Date:

References

David Irvine (2016). SELF CARE INVENTORY, www.davidirvine.com, visited 09.12.2022