

The Scenario:

A PhD Researcher [PGR] and their Supervisor are getting together for their first supervision meeting in quite some time. For the PGR, communication seems to have become an issue over the past 6-8 months: the Supervisor's emails go unanswered, and a number of soft deadlines have not been met. The Supervisor is becoming increasingly concerned for the PGR's wellbeing, and having managed to set up a meeting, is hoping to understand what has gone wrong, and what kind of help might be needed to get the PGR back on track.

Your Role: Professional Services Colleague

Your task is to study the interaction between the Supervisor and the PGR and consider how you would advise the Supervisor to proceed in this scenario.

How can the Supervisor seek help for this PGR?

What help should they be asking for at their Graduate School, or across the wider institutional structure of the University?

As you watch the conversation unfold, consider what your recommendations to the Supervisor would be. Weigh up the risks and benefits of different approaches to this problem:

- What would happen if the Supervisor tried to manage this themselves? What would the risks and potential rewards of this approach be?
- What would happen if the Supervisor left seeking further help in the hands of the PGR? What might the risks and benefits of this approach be?
- What would happen if the Supervisor engaged with their Graduate School (or your institutional equivalent) and with colleagues from support systems within the institution to get help with this situation? What would the risks and potential rewards of this approach be?

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Your Role: Supervisor

Your task is to understand the issues at play here for your PGR and support them to find a way through those issues to get their PhD project back on track.

You are concerned for this PGR. As mentioned above, communication has become an issue, and you are worried that the PGR may no longer be on track for timely completion of their thesis. Lack of clarity around progress has left you unsure what the implications of this might be for the project's funding, and how seriously this would affect the PGR. You also have a larger concern that this PGR's communication difficulty might be masking a much deeper problem relating to their mental health and wellbeing. As such, you are keenly aware of the importance of sensitivity and supportiveness in the present conversation.

However, you are a busy academic with a full schedule of teaching responsibilities, plus a number of research students that you supervise. While aware of the complexity of balancing your own workload, and taking care of your own wellbeing, you feel a duty of care towards your PGRs that represents a serious commitment for you, despite the challenges involved.

Having finally got this PGR in the room in front of you, you are really motivated to make the most of the present opportunity to understand their present situation, and how you can help them.

How will you encourage your PGR to be open with you? What strategies will you use in this conversation to help your PGR feel validated and supported? Can you identify what this PGR's needs are, and make a plan to help meet them?

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Your Role: PhD Researcher

Your task is to engage with your supervisor's attempt to support you in your present situation. As suggested above, your difficulty around communicating with your Supervisor indicates a much deeper problem. You are really struggling, and need to seek help, but are finding this difficult to do.

You are a 2nd year PhD Researcher who moved to a new institution in a new city during the pandemic to **begin your PhD**. You have found it difficult to integrate into your new community, and have struggled to make friends. You have not managed to form a support system in your new environment. The pressure of working on your research project alone, being away from your support system, and having fewer opportunities to build community in the post-pandemic landscape is weighing heavily on you.

Your work rate has started to slip, and you are feeling behind, stressed, and at capacity. You are finding it difficult to cope. Emails from your supervisor are a reminder of how badly it feels like you are failing currently, and you wish you could bury your head in the sand for a bit longer.

You appreciate your supervisor's attempts to reach out to you, but have no idea what to say, or how to explain how you're feeling. You've made it to this meeting today, and would love to access some support, but have no idea where to start.

What barriers to candidly sharing your current challenges are there for you in this conversation? What kind of environment do you need your Supervisor to provide to enable you to speak honestly with them?

Does this conversation leave you feeling validated, supported and ready to tackle the challenges ahead? If so, what made you feel this way? If not, why? What could have been done differently?