

Supervisors and PGR Mental Health: Practising Support Skills through Role-Play

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Plan for today

- Background of the training workshop
- Introduce role-play
- Volunteers to try out role-playing
- Feedback from supervisor participants
- Our recommendations
- Questions

Catalyst Fund Project at Queen Mary

Supporting PGR mental health & wellbeing

- April 2018 – Jan 2020
- **New training for supervisors on supporting PGR mental health**
- Facilitated PGR Support Groups
- New wellbeing training for PGRs

(see links at the end of the presentation)



Training for supervisors

‘Supporting the mental health and wellbeing of your PGRs’

- 3-hour in-person workshop (first ran in May 2019)
- During Covid-19:
 - Asynchronous Training
(Durham’s PGR MHFA e-learning
from Catalyst Fund)
 - 2-hour online live session



Feedback from training

Supervisors' feedback:

- anxious about conversations around depression and suicidal ideation;
- fear of making mistakes



Introduction of Role-Play

An opportunity to practise:

- listening
- empathising
- signposting appropriate support services

in a safe environment where they can make mistakes



Role Play Scenario

Karl is an overseas PhD student. In the last month, he mentioned a few times that it doesn't really matter whether he's making progress or not. You're currently in a one-to-one meeting with him and he mentions that he often feels so overwhelmed by everything that he is struggling to see the point in anything.

- How do you respond to Karl?

How does it work?

- Ben is the student, Fryni facilitates
- Volunteer supervisor participants talk to the student in turns
- Supervisors can stop if they want to ask anything, eg feedback from other participants on what they can say next.
- Ben can also stop in his role
- Facilitator can pause to check how “Karl” or “supervisor” are feeling

Role Play Scenario

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- How do you respond to Karl?

Unhelpful supervisor responses include:

- “You shouldn’t feel this way, you’re doing well”
- Jump to solutions
- Sympathise rather than empathise

“

The **role-play element really drove home the kind of problems you would have in the moment** with these kind of issues. It might be good to expand further if possible.

“

The role-play really hit close to home! **It was good to 'visualise' a potential situation.**

“

I'm glad that **you reinforced the message that it's okay we aren't professionally trained.** It's realistic to know our own boundaries, but that doesn't mean we can't help. **I feel so much more confident, as I left the session equipped** and I think it'll help me even better support for staff and students alike.

Recommendations

- Introduce role-play in any support training (including MHFA)
- Allow sufficient time for role-play and discussion
- Be prepared to offer or signpost support for supervisors themselves; this work is challenging and they can find it difficult to cope
- Seek specialist support/training

Thank you!

Catalyst Fund project info & free resources: bit.ly/CatalystQM

Article 'Enhancing postgraduate researcher wellbeing through support groups': bit.ly/PGRSupport

