

Tracking Mental health, Well-being, Stress and Resilience in Post Graduate Research Students

Andrea Stein: PhD Researcher

Dr. Rod Dubrow-Marshall: PhD Supervisor

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UK Council for
Graduate Education

3

Primary theme: Promoting positive mental health

Secondary theme: Wellbeing and EDI



University of
Salford
MANCHESTER

Andrea Stein

PhD Student / School of Health Sciences
Address: L731 Allerton Building, Frederick Road Campus,
University of Salford. Manchester. M6 6PU
a.m.stein@edu.salford.ac.uk / www.salford.ac.uk



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Introducing myself

- Studies - PhD Researcher from the University of Salford in 3rd year/writing up.
- Works as an Associate Lecturer (Psychology) for University of Salford
- International student –from South Africa



University of
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Andrea Stein

PhD Student / School of Health Sciences
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University of Salford. Manchester. M6 6PU
a.m.stein@edu.salford.ac.uk / www.salford.ac.uk



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1. Background - Study

- Address mental health and wellbeing in PGR students
- **Why?**
- Mostly Undergraduate findings and research on student mental health (Vitae, 2018).
- PGR students show **higher** stress and anxiety. E.g. high task demands, importance of supervisor student relationships

(Amponsah, 2010; 94; RAND, 2017; PRES, 2019).



1. Background - Study

Factors predicting mental health issues for PGR students identified from recent research include

- **isolation,**
- **gender,**
- **social support,**
- **supervisory relationship**
- **self-care** (Hazell et al.,2020)

2. Research Objectives

1. What is the **PhD student lived experience**?
2. What are the **PhD student experiences of mental health**
3. What stresses are **unique to international PhD students**?
4. How are international (EU and international) students' experiences **different** to home students?



3. Study Overview

Study 1: Interviews



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1st Interviews 2021

2nd Interviews 2022

3rd Interviews 2023

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1824

The University of Manchester

1st Interviews 2021

2nd Interviews 2022

3rd Interviews 2023

Study 2 : Self reflection



Study 3 : Survey



Study 1-1st round survey
completed

Study 2-2nd round 2023

4. My experience as a PGR

“It is a Challenge”

1. Battle with PhD/Work/Life balance
2. High workloads, little income, needing to work, work (often teaching, affecting PhD commitments)
3. Stress!!! Additional stresses of doing a PhD during COVID- isolation.
4. Not a student or staff
5. WORSE as an international student
6. Assessment points –periods of extreme stress –for me!
7. Often I felt I could not cope & was this worth it?

Very similar to other interviewed PGR's

5. Mental health and PGRs

Mental health is "a state of well-being in which the individual realizes his or her own abilities, can cope with the normal stresses of life, can work productively and fruitfully, and is able to make a contribution to his or her community"- World Health Organisation (WHO)

Initial findings

Challenge to PGRs

1. Battle with PhD/Work/Life balance
2. High workloads, little income, needing to work, work (often teaching, affecting PhD commitments.
3. Additional stresses of doing a PhD during COVID- isolation.

6. PGR Well-being

State of happiness and contentment, with low levels of distress, overall good physical and mental health and outlook, or good quality of life- American Psychological Association (APA)

- Findings seem to show doing the PhD during the pandemic has lowered well-being. Especially as PGRs were working from home.



7. PGR stress

A state of mental or emotional strain or tension resulting from adverse or demanding circumstances

Workloads

Job insecurities – temporary staff- GTA's or Hourly Paid Academics (HPA) in my case.



8. Stress affects- But results show higher levels in PGRs – PRES 2021 survey.

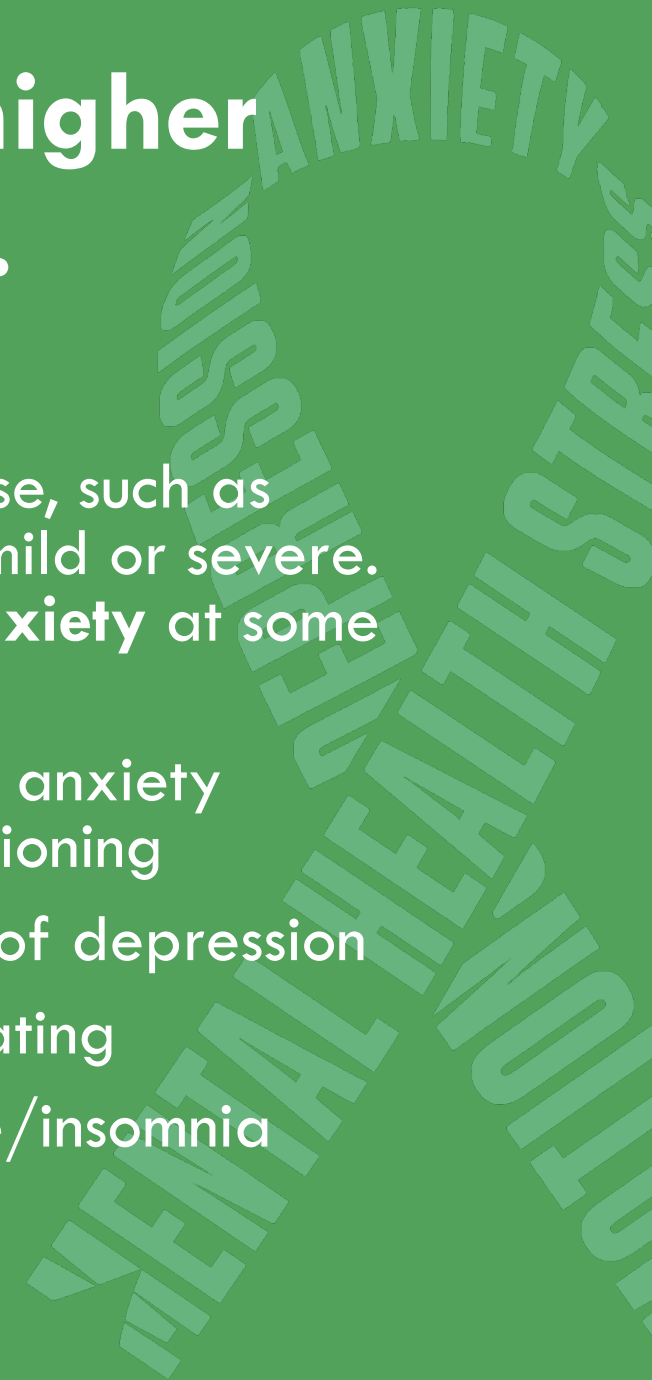
Physical

- High Blood Pressure
- High Heart Rate
- Fast/erratic breathing
- Physical illness/Cancer



Psychological

- **Anxiety**- a feeling of unease, such as worry or fear, that can be mild or severe. Everyone has feelings of **anxiety** at some point in their life.
- Anxiety disorders-excessive anxiety affecting coping daily functioning
- Mood – low mood feelings of depression
- Diet- overeating or undereating
- Sleep- too much or too little/insomnia



9. Resilience

- Psychological resilience is the ability to mentally or emotionally cope with a crisis or to return to pre-crisis status quickly.
- Bouncing back



MENTAL HEALTH STRONG WITH PROPER MENTAL ANXIETY

10. Why PhD students...

- PhD students show **higher** stress and anxiety.
- E.g. high task demands,
- importance of supervisor student relationships (Amponsah, 2010; 94; RAND, 2017;PRES, 2019).
- Lonely – PhD is isolating
- May have less university support



11. Findings: PhD experiences – Theme of COVID



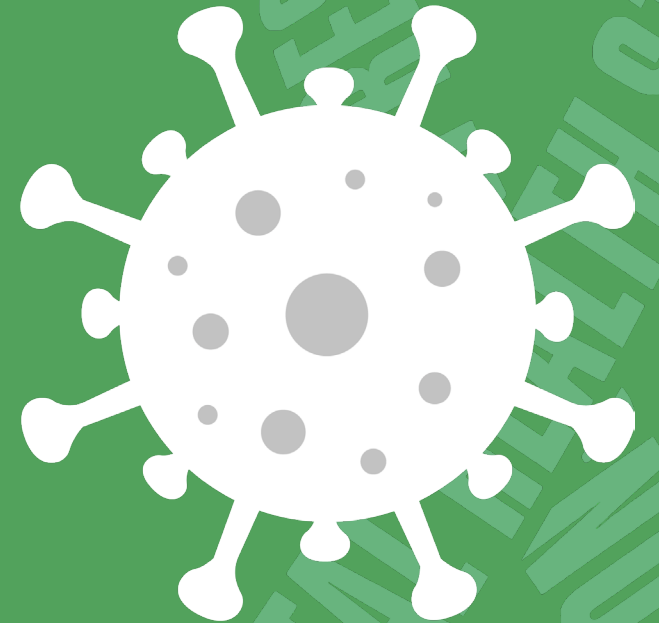
MENTAL HEALTH STRESSORS FOR PHD STUDENTS

11. Findings: PhD experiences – Theme of COVID



11. Findings: PhD experiences – Theme of COVID

- **Isolation and connectedness** “The last few months have definitely taken a toll on my ability to do my own research and that isolation affected different aspects of my well-being”. PhD 1st year
- **Working at home.** “I don’t like working from home. But that is more of a COVID thing” & “The only person I see is my partner and my dog. So it is just that loneliness, aspect. And I think I have gone slower”. PhD Final year



11. Findings: PhD experiences – Theme of COVID

- **PhD stress:** “my interactions with people and that is something that COVID stopped and because COVID stopped that. It made stressors of the PhD’s worse”. PhD Final year
- **Coping :** “what helped me during COVID. I started running half marathons, so going for a morning run every morning, which was really helpful and doing forms of exercise was really helpful”. PhD Final year.

‘No health without mental health’



12: Findings Intake 2: PhDs experiences – Moving though

Still analysing results:

Interviewed December 2021/March 2022

Many PhD students felt happier and less stressed after the lockdown , lockdown was a 'lowpoint'



12: Findings Intake 2: PhDs experiences – Moving though

- Why?
- COVID restrictions were lessened.
- Had in person social contact, face to face connection.
- More of a work life balance- return to the office & lab
- COVID- seemed to exacerbate the PhD stress- will be interesting to see what the students experienced in the 3rd set of interviews!
- “No health without mental health”



13. Initial research supporting Hazell et al. (2020) themes.

1) Isolation- COVID, cohort differences from University of Manchester (has a cohort- more positive experience), University of Salford (no cohort- less positive experience). Salford Doctoral school starting to introduce cohort system Sept '22

2) Gender

- Some students (particularly international students) felt more comfortable with female supervisors (aware of cultural & religious differences) and some felt that they were discriminated based on gender

3) social support

- Wanted more university support for:

- financial and cost of living issues

- Mental health and well-being. I personally felt counselling was tailored to UG &PGT or Staff. Want a PGR specific counselling service! Our issues are unique!

13. Initial research supporting Hazell et al. (2020) themes- (continued)

4) supervisory relationship

-this was a pivotal factor for PGR completion & success- poorer relationships led to drop out and MRes transition in my study so far- need the 3rd (final intake)

5) self-care

-PhD/Work/study balance

Self care & personal care such as exercise & healthy lifestyles suffered (diet, sleep, exercise)

13. So... how does this fit : *Primary theme: Promoting positive mental health*



Take home message

From my work and my personal reflections

More needs to be done to improve PGR positive mental health

-How – ask us –make us active to change the system

Treat PGRs as staff- especially if we work at the university- are valuable assists , don't feel as such!

14. So how does this fit- Secondary theme: Wellbeing and EDI

Take home message

Same as above- University doctoral schools need to listen to us PGRs to allow us to actively contribute to improving the system- work with us.

International issues

Need to recognise that international students have challenges –and assist us

Try to provide teaching opportunities for us especially for self-funded PGRs as the cost is excessive.

Employment issues

Provide teaching opportunities as well to willing PGRs so we can transition to staff –part-time to full-time rather than as casualised workers.

Better transition from PGR- teaching staff & or university staff (Research/support positions)

15.



<https://www.linkedin.com/in/andrea-stein/>

@StressPGR on Twitter



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Salford
MANCHESTER

Andrea Stein

PhD Student / School of Health Sciences
Address: L731 Allerton Building, Frederick Road Campus,
University of Salford. Manchester. M6 6PU
a.m.stein@edu.salford.ac.uk / www.salford.ac.uk



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15. Researcher details -For more information please contact me on:

<https://www.linkedin.com/in/andrea-stein/>

@StressPGR on Twitter



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Salford
MANCHESTER

Andrea Stein

PhD Student / School of Health Sciences
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University of Salford. Manchester. M6 6PU
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rushtono2002@gmail.com

Additional studio members: George Elliott & Tariq Al Janabi



Slide 12 & 13 Images

Hannah Gallagher & Alice Baldwin

4.56studio0@gmail.com

