

# Promoting positive mental health for postgraduate researchers: a feasibility study

Chloe Casey, Bournemouth University



**BU**



@ChloeinHE



ccasey@bournemouth.ac.uk

- Metcalfe Vitae report
- Catalyst Fund call
- 17 UK studies funded

- Student Minds launch The Wellbeing Thesis

2018

2019

2020

2021

2022

- UKCGE 1<sup>st</sup> International Conference on the Mental Health and Wellbeing of PGRs

- Metcalfe Catalyst Fund Programme Evaluation Report

**Mixed  
Methods**



**Co-  
production**



**Feasibility  
Study**



**1. To explore the factors that affect PGR wellbeing and resilience.**

**2. To co-produce preventative interventions to promote PGR wellbeing and resilience.**

**3. To test and evaluate interventions to promote wellbeing and resilience.**

## Assessment Phase



**2019**  
Online survey ( $n=54$ ) and  
follow-up interviews  
( $n=18$ ).

## Development Phase



**2020**  
Online focus groups with  
PGR advisory group  
( $n=7$ ).

## Intervention Phase



**2020**  
3 interventions:  
• Project Planning  
( $n=10$ )  
• Mindfulness ( $n=6$ )  
• Mentoring ( $n=10$ )

**Assessment  
Phase**



**The Juniper  
PhD  
Wellbeing  
Scale**

**The  
Warwick  
Edinburgh  
Mental  
Wellbeing  
Scale**

**The  
Connor-  
Davidson  
Resilience  
Scale**

<b>JPWBS Domain</b>	<b>Mean</b>	<b>SD</b>
<b>Health and Home</b>	2.62	1.05
<b>Research</b>	2.39	1.14
<b>Social</b>	2.29	1.22
<b>University</b>	2.19	1.11
<b>Development</b>	2.16	0.76
<b>Facilities</b>	1.84	0.92
<b>Supervisor</b>	1.59	0.87







## Assessment Phase



Domain	Factor	Mean	SD
Health and Home	Experiencing high levels of stress because of your research	3.49	1.57
Research	Feeling frustrated/demotivated by your results and apparent lack of progress	3.20	1.50
Health and Home	Having a high workload that impacts your private life	3.18	1.42
Health and Home	Making unreasonably high demands of yourself in the name of research	3.10	1.54
Research	Lacking confidence in your ability to conduct research to the necessary standard	3.04	1.54



# Exploring the wellbeing and resilience of postgraduate researchers

Chloe Casey <sup>a</sup>, Orlanda Harvey <sup>a</sup>, Julia Taylor <sup>b</sup>, Fiona Knight<sup>b</sup>  
and Steven Trenoweth <sup>c</sup>

<sup>a</sup>Health and Social Sciences, Bournemouth University, Poole, UK; <sup>b</sup>Doctoral College Academic Manager, Bournemouth University, Poole, UK; <sup>c</sup>Principal Academic, Bournemouth University, Poole, UK

## ABSTRACT

Much research around student mental health focuses on undergraduate students. However, recent research suggests that depression and anxiety are just as prevalent among postgraduate researchers (PGRs). This study explores the experience of PGRs in the UK ( $N = 50$ ) and their wellbeing and resilience. The results of the survey indicated that the participants had significantly lower wellbeing and resilience levels in comparison to the general population. The analysis of qualitative survey responses highlighted five factors that affected the participants' perceived wellbeing: supervision, expectations, support, balance, and coping. A benefit of the current study is that it investigates a whole range of known stressors in contrast to previous research that tends to focus on one or a small number of factors. The study puts forward several key recommendations for supervisors and universities. The authors recommend that supervisors and doctoral schools encourage peer support networks and open dialogue with students around the reality of PGR study, to manage expectations and reduce self-doubt. Further research should look to investigate in more detail the challenges faced by PGRs across the whole journey to develop beneficial wellbeing interventions that are aligned to PGRs' specific needs.

## ARTICLE HISTORY

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## KEYWORDS

Wellbeing; resilience;  
postgraduate research;  
doctoral researchers; higher  
education; student mental  
health

# Assessment Phase



Pressure Points

Protective Factors

Control

Balance

Coping



## Assessment Phase



### Control

- Expectations
- Uncertainty & Self Efficacy
- Power & Autonomy
- Identity

### Balance

- Isolation
- Health
- Demands

### Coping

- Managing Wellbeing
- Social Support
- Time Management





**Control**

**Balance**

**Coping**

**Expectations:**

*“The beginning was truly awful... I could have done with more support... For the first three months of the MRes I was mostly furious and/or bewildered.”*

**Isolation:**

*“I'm disabled so some days I can't get into uni... it's harder to bond with people when you're not seeing them all the time.”*

**Social Support:**

*““I don't know what I'm doing. I don't know who to talk to you. Do I talk to my supervisors, do I talk to other PhD students?”*

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## Intervention Phase



**2020**  
3 interventions:  
• Project Planning  
( $n=10$ )  
• Mindfulness ( $n=6$ )  
• Mentoring ( $n=10$ )

## Development Phase



### Coping

- Managing Wellbeing
- Social Support
- Time Management

### Interventions

- Mindfulness
- Peer Mentoring
- Project Planning

# Development Phase



## Assessment Phase



**2019**  
Online survey ( $n=54$ ) and  
follow-up interviews  
( $n=18$ ).

## Development Phase



**2020**  
Online focus groups with  
PGR advisory group  
( $n=7$ ).

## Intervention Phase



**2020**  
3 interventions:  
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• Mindfulness ( $n=6$ )  
• Mentoring ( $n=10$ )

# Intervention Phase



## Project Planning

Week 1: Getting the most out of supervision

- The supervisory relationship
- Expectations and assumptions
- Managing supervisory meetings

Week 2: The project plan

- Making a plan and breaking it down
- The PGR journey

Week 3: Managing your time

- Fundamentals of time management
- Time stealers
- Planning & prioritisation

Week 4: Knowing yourself and keeping well

- Understanding your "drivers"
- Recognising imposter syndrome
- Work-life balance and avoiding burnout

# Intervention Phase



## Mindfulness

Week 1: Intro to mindfulness

- How can we make space for mindfulness in our daily lives?
- Guided exercise: simple breathing practice

Week 2: Stressors of PGR life

- How can mindfulness support academic performance
- Guided exercise: stop thought exercise

Week 3: Bodily mindfulness

- What is bodily mindfulness?
- Guided exercise: 15-minute progressive body relaxation

Week 4: The cycle of change

- The Transtheoretical Model of Change
- Guided exercise: sensory experience exercise

Week 5: Guided visualisation

- What is visualisation?
- Guided exercise: peaceful place visualisation

Week 6: Ideal self

- Ideal self, motivations, and aspirations.
- Guided exercise: 5-minute breathing exercise



# Intervention Phase



## Mentoring

Week 1: What is good mental health & wellbeing?

- What helps you to maintain good mental health and wellbeing during your studies?
- Homework: complete the Calgary Symptoms of Stress Inventory

Week 2: How do we cope with stress?

- What is stress and can we manage our stress? What works for you?
- Homework: complete the WEMWBS

Week 3: How can we better solve problems?

- Why is problem solving important?
- Homework: complete a wellness action plan

Week 4: How do we maintain our wellness at university?

- How can we maintain positive mental health and wellness during the PGR journey?

# Intervention Phase



## Peer Forum



Peer-led content:  
Video blogs and interviews with PGRs



Workshop resources:  
Resources from the project planning and mindfulness workshops were shared with all PGRs at the university after the course.



Discussion boards:  
An inclusive, accessible forum for PGRs to ask questions and interact.

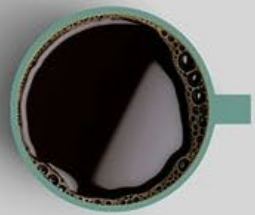
## Intervention Phase



<b>Intervention</b>	<b>n</b>	<b>Attendance (%)</b>
<b>Project Planning</b>	10	77
<b>Mentoring</b>	10	100
<b>Mindfulness</b>	6	47



# Intervention Phase



Recruitment and Adherence

*"Many of Health and Social Science students do engage with this sort of thing... they're not necessarily the people that we need to reach out to."*  
Mentoring facilitator

Perceived Benefits

*"If I'm ever stressed or I feel like I can't cope it's usually because I'm not really sure what I'm supposed to do... If I know my roadmap, it's just building something out of Lego."*  
Project planning group member

Attendance and Engagement

*"With mindfulness, it's much more human... which is something that is better covered face to face... Being able to elicit responses from people."*  
Mindfulness facilitator

Workshop Content and Delivery

*"He gave us the tools... It's opened my eyes to taking care of myself."*  
Mentoring group member



## Intervention Phase




### Recommendations for practice:

- Promote social support with awareness of the burden of peer support
- Provide project management training to effectively manage expectations and uncertainty
- Consider how to engage PGRs with less mental health literacy

### Recommendations for research:

- UK should continue to spearhead the issue and not let PGR mental health and wellbeing fall down the agenda
- Continue to develop interventions to promote positive mental health and wellbeing including co-production and robust mixed methods evaluation



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