



# Fit for the road?

Staying well and building personal resilience for your PhD journey  
and your future life in academia

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# Motivation for this session

- the inherently complex and demanding nature of the postgraduate journey and experience (MA, PhD and beyond)
- the rapidly changing nature of modern society and the academic world
- greater public awareness and understanding nowadays of the importance of mental as well as physical health and wellbeing
- the impact of the global pandemic – on health, education, socially, etc
- data relating to the incidence of poor mental health (including suicide) within the student population, including PGRs

... *'health warning': the need for self-care and 'time out'* ...

# Content of this session

- sharing something of my own experience
- the nature of wellbeing and the importance of ‘noticing’
- the negative impact of COVID19
- some practical tips for talking about wellbeing
- developing emotional resilience and the value of mindfulness
- breakout rooms for small group discussion
- dealing with ‘imposter syndrome’ in academic life
- some ancient wisdom to take away with us...

# My own PG & ECR journey



- completed first degree in mid 70s and worked in translation company
- retrained to teach EFL and worked in London schools for several years
- in early 80s moved out of London with husband and 2 small children
- taught short EFL courses + consultancy with Cambridge Exams
- undertook MPhil in English & Applied Linguistics, followed by PhD at Cambridge in early 1990s
- 1990s- short-term consultancy and long-term staff contracts for Cambridge Exams and IELTS in test research and development
- 2011- academic senior lecturer role with CRELLA at Uni of Beds

# Some of my own (bittersweet) PhD memories...



- 'failures' in the 1<sup>st</sup> year
- 'tears' in my supervisor's office
- 'frustrations' and delays in data collection
- 'struggles' with Rasch analysis
- 'fear' of not reaching the goal and/or 'not measuring up'
- 'pressures' over conference presentations and writing up
- 'anxiety' at accessing and keeping up with the literature (pre-WWW)
- 'exhaustion' at so many relentless demands on different fronts (i.e. study, work, husband, children, church, community - endless plate-spinning!)

*Am I actually an 'accidental academic'?*

Learning to reflect on ourselves to discern how well (or not) we are

- how we feel... how we are coping... or not coping...
- what helps.... what doesn't.... what triggers certain responses from us ...
- how we can become unwell... not just physically but also mentally...
- at any one time, we may be anywhere on a spectrum between being healthy and being unwell



- we can move along the spectrum at different times in our lives

# MENTAL HEALTH CONTINUUM MODEL

HEALTHY	REACTING	INJURED	ILL
<p>Normal fluctuations in mood Takes things in stride Good sense of humour Consistent performance Physically &amp; socially active Confident in self &amp; others Drinking in moderation</p>	<p>Nervousness, irritability Sadness, overwhelmed Displaced sarcasm Procrastination Forgetfulness Trouble sleeping Low energy Muscle tension, headaches Missing an occasional class or deadline Decreased social activity Drinking regularly or in binges to manage stress</p>	<p>Anxiety, anger Pervasive sadness, tearfulness, hopelessness, worthlessness Negative attitude Difficulty concentrating Trouble making decisions Decreased performance, regularly missing classes/deadlines, or over work Restless, disturbed sleep Avoidance, social withdrawal Increase used of alcohol- hard to control</p>	<p>Excessive anxiety Panic attacks Easily enraged, aggressive Depressed mood, numb Cannot concentrate Inability to make decisions Cannot fall asleep/stay asleep Constant fatigue, illness Absent from social events/classes Suicidal thoughts/intent Unusual sensory experiences (hearing or seeing things) Alcohol or other addiction</p>
<p>Nurture support systems.</p>	<p>Recognize limits, take breaks, identify problems early, seek support.</p>	<p>Tune into own signs of distress. Talk to someone, ask for help. Make self-care a priority. Don't withdraw.</p>	<p>Seek professional care. Follow recommendations.</p>

# The importance of ‘noticing’

- mental health problems (e.g. anxiety or depression) are similar in lots of ways to physical health problems (e.g. a chest infection or a broken leg or a bout of flu)
- they are common – lots of people experience them – sometimes for just a short time, sometimes for longer – sometimes medication is needed, sometimes just rest and loving support
- BUT...
- it can be much easier to see when someone’s physically unwell
- it’s much harder to know when someone’s mentally not very well – so we need good ‘noticing skills’
- we can all learn to pay attention to our own mental wellbeing and to the wellbeing of those around us, e.g. our friends, family, students, colleagues, etc

# The negative impact of COVID19



- COVID19 has affected all our lives - things keep changing all the time, which can feel really hard to deal with – we feel we lack control over our own lives
- some people have struggled with the effects of multiple lockdowns and changing restrictions on their everyday activities
- others have struggled with the constant changes to their daily/annual routine
- many have been affected by a sense of isolation, especially those with family far away and unable to visit
- some have experienced significant personal loss due to serious illness, bereavement, postponement/cancellation of family life-events, unemployment...
- others remain anxious about future uncertainty or are depressed by daily news reports of 'doom and gloom'

# Some recent statistics...



- 65% of people have felt more stressed since the Covid19 restrictions started
- 53% admit to feeling more anxious than usual
- 43% feel more depressed than usual
- top causes of lockdown stress:
  - 46% feel disconnected to others
  - 54% feel isolated
  - 46% are stressed by uncertainty about when things will get back to normal
  - 36% reported difficulty concentrating
  - 38% feel a lack of motivation

(Stress Management Society, 2021)

Just talking about mental health breaks down barriers...



Here are some ideas for good conversation starters...

- ask someone “how are you?” - and mean it!
- arrange a meet-up or an online-call with someone you care about
- check in with someone over text or email
- call someone you’ve not spoken to for a while
- go for a walk with someone and ask them how they’re doing
- tell someone you appreciate what they’ve done for you

# Some practical tips for talking about mental health



## **1. Ask questions and listen attentively**

- ask open questions: ‘how does that affect you?’ or ‘what does it feel like?’

## **2. Think about the time and the place for a conversation**

- sometimes it’s easier to talk side by side. Try chatting while you’re doing something else, like walking.

## **3. Don’t try and fix things – you probably can’t, but you can empathise**

- resist the urge to offer quick fixes. Often just listening is enough, and it’s helpful for someone to feel they’ve been heard and taken seriously.

# The value of developing 'emotional resilience'

- taking steps to look after our wellbeing can help us deal with pressure, and reduce the impact that stress has on our life. This is sometimes called developing **emotional resilience**.
- resilience is not just our ability to bounce back, but also our capacity to adapt in the face of challenging circumstances, whilst maintaining a stable mental wellbeing
- resilience isn't a personality trait – it's something that we can all take steps to achieve

# How can we stay well and resilient during a pandemic?



- This Youtube video (4' 30") makes a number of practical suggestions about how to cope positively with anxiety and maintain our mental wellbeing
- As you watch, you might like to note down 1 or 2 'top tips' you could take away from the video
- <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xzNMABRELPg>

# 5 ways to wellbeing (advice from MIND UK)



- **CONNECT** – stay connected with other people: family, friends, colleagues
- **BE ACTIVE** – physical activity: walking, gym, stretching
- **TAKE NOTICE** – ‘mindfulness’: natural world, local environment, meals
- **LEARN** – new skill/craft, read a book, sign up for a online course
- **GIVE** – contribute time and energy to benefit others: volunteer, visit

# 'Mindfulness' - how can it help us stay well?



- This short video clip aims to explain more about what 'mindfulness' is and why it might be helpful (2' 20") ...
- <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vzKryaN44ss>

So mindfulness can help us ...

- see our thoughts and feeling as they are beginning
- know what we're feeling as we're feeling it
- know what we're thinking as we're thinking it
- choose what we will strengthen and bring into action
- choose what we will gently let go of
- avoid being at the mercy of old (unhelpful) habits, or old ways of thinking or being

Mindfulness can empower us to live more kindly and gently with our thoughts and feelings – especially the negative ones - so that they needn't overwhelm us.

It just takes practice!

# Recognising 'imposter syndrome' (IS) in academic life

- IS refers to an internal experience of believing that you are not as competent as others perceive you to be
- the sense of 'feeling like a phony' or 'a fraud'
- a common experience in the academic world – but not a medical condition or diagnosis
- probably more common among women but also experienced by men
- some of the characteristics of IS:
  - inability to realistically assess your competence and skills
  - fear that you won't live up to expectations
  - self-doubt
  - setting very challenging goals and feeling disappointed when you fall short

# The impact of imposter syndrome

- irrational thinking: ‘what gives me the right to be here?’
- sense of growing anxiety
- a feeling of not really belonging
- a tendency towards perfectionism and over-achieving
- a risk of over-motivation or de-motivation
- *‘women – particularly under-represented minority women – and early-career academics feel like imposters in fields that value brilliance’*
- IS can be experienced at any age (e.g. by the retired as well as ECRs)!

# Learning to cope with imposter syndrome

- Start by asking yourself some searching questions, e.g.
  - *What core beliefs do I hold about myself? Do I believe I am worthy of love as I am? Must I be perfect for others to approve of me?*
- Try to become more comfortable with and perhaps kinder towards yourself:
  - acknowledge your feelings and question your irrational thoughts/beliefs
  - share your feelings so irrational beliefs don't grow and overwhelm you
  - focus on and support others who feel like you
  - assess your abilities and accomplishments honestly and fairly
  - avoid comparisons – use social media moderately and wisely
  - set sensible and manageable goals for yourself
  - welcome and learn from constructive criticism, and even from the competition
  - keep going - and try to live each day with an 'attitude of gratitude'

Finally, the power of ancient stories....



- can help us understand ourselves and what we experience
- can help us understand the world around us
- can help us to learn and to live well

BUT...

- ancient stories can sometimes be taken and used to communicate something that may not have been intended by those who originally wrote and shared them
- and they can sometimes be misunderstood or misrepresented

An alternative perspective on an earlier story we heard....

- Now listen to a slightly different version of the story of the 2 wolves (3' 30")
- <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JHXwPFMvaXk>
- What can we learn from this 'original' version of the Native American story of the 2 wolves?
- Is this actually a more helpful and hopeful interpretation?

Take good care of yourselves –  
and stay well on your journey!

# UKALTA

UK Association for Language Testing and Assessment

