

Striving to Be a Balanced Researcher?

Being a postgraduate researcher can often be an emotionally taxing business. In this article, **Martin Coffey** provides tips on how to cope with the stress, challenges and potential mental health issues that PhD students from all disciplines have to face along the road.

The Health & Safety Executive (www.hse.gov.uk) defines stress as “the adverse reaction people have to excessive pressure or other types of demand placed on them”. There are a many sources of pressure one can experience and a myriad of ways in which it can impact on a person. However, what is central is the individual’s perception of their circumstances.

Arnold et al (2005), page 402, suggests that workplace stress is caused by “job insecurity, information overload and a management style that punishes rather than praises”. As a PhD researcher you may identify with some or all of these, faced with what may at times appear to be an overwhelming environment full of information, or perhaps lack of information.

The Mental Health Foundation (www.mentalhealth.org.uk) state “the pressure of an increasingly demanding work culture in the UK is perhaps the biggest and most pressing challenge to mental health of the general population”. For a truly balanced life, work (read PhD research) should be an integral part of how someone perceives their life. Associating fully with what we do means that our work/research is not viewed as a separate entity on some continuum, with work at one end and life at the other.

Approaches such as Neurolinguistic Programming (NLP) and Cognitive Behaviour Therapy, include cognitive re-framing as a key tool. They suggest we do not have to just react to our circumstances but instead we can always choose our response to the “slings and arrows of outrageous fortune”.

On May 24th the Researcher Development Team put on a “Health and Wellbeing day” for PhD researchers. There was an opportunity to learn about a range of tools and techniques to manage the challenges of life and research. The focus was managing our perceptions of challenges. There were opportunities to learn techniques from NLP and to learn skills from current research on resilience. There were experiential sessions on meditation, mindfulness and stress management.

Whilst completing a PhD over three to six years is a daunting task, it pales into insignificance when compared to the 27 years Nelson Mandela spent in prison. Did I mention that perspective is also a key coping tool? Apparently, one of Mandela’s sources of strength during that time was the following poem, the last two lines seem particularly apt:



Martin Coffey, Career Development Adviser.

Invictus

BY WILLIAM ERNEST HENLEY

**Out of the night that covers me,
Black as the pit from pole to pole,
I thank whatever gods may be
For my unconquerable soul.**

**In the fell clutch of circumstance
I have not winced nor cried aloud.
Under the bludgeonings of chance
My head is bloody, but unbowed.**

**Beyond this place of wrath and tears
Looms but the Horror of the shade,
And yet the menace of the years
Finds and shall find me unafraid.**

**It matters not how strait the gate,
How charged with punishments the scroll,
I am the master of my fate,
I am the captain of my soul.**

As part of the Researcher Development Team at Leicester, Martin Coffey currently provides expert Career Management and Employability support to all PhD researchers across the University of Leicester. He can be contacted about the topic of this article or indeed for career advice via e-mail: mgc5@le.ac.uk.