

# 'You have to suffer for your PhD': Poor mental health among doctoral researchers

January 12 2022, by Cassie M Hazell

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Credit: Madison Inouye from Pexels

Ph.D. students are the future of research, innovation and teaching at universities and beyond—but this future is at risk. There are already indications from [previous research](#) that [there is](#) a [mental health crisis](#)

brewing among Ph.D. researchers.

My colleagues and I [studied](#) the mental health of Ph.D. researchers in the UK and discovered that, compared with working professionals, Ph.D. students were more likely to meet the criteria for clinical levels of depression and anxiety. They were also more likely to have significantly more severe symptoms than the working-professional control group.

We surveyed 3,352 Ph.D. students, as well as 1,256 working professionals who served as a [matched comparison group](#). We used the questionnaires used by NHS [mental health services](#) to assess several mental health symptoms.

More than 40% of Ph.D. students met the criteria for moderate to severe depression or anxiety. In contrast, 32% of working professionals met these criteria for depression, and 26% for anxiety.

The groups reported an equally high risk of suicide. Between 33% and 35% of both Ph.D. students and working professionals met the criteria for "suicide risk." The figures for suicide risk might be so high because of the high rates of depression found in our sample.

We also asked Ph.D. students what they thought about their own and their peers' mental health. More than 40% of Ph.D. students believed that experiencing a [mental health problem](#) during your Ph.D. is the norm. A similar number (41%) told us that most of their Ph.D. colleagues had mental health problems.

Just over a third of Ph.D. students had considered ending their studies altogether for mental health reasons.

There is clearly a high prevalence of mental health problems among Ph.D. students, beyond those rates seen in the general public. Our results

indicate a problem with the current system of Ph.D. study—or perhaps with academia more widely. Academia notoriously encourages a culture of overwork and under-appreciation.

This mindset is present among Ph.D. students. In our focus groups and surveys for [other research](#), Ph.D. students reported wearing their suffering as a badge of honor and a marker that they are working hard enough rather than too much. One [student told us](#): "There is a common belief ... you have to suffer for the sake of your Ph.D., if you aren't anxious or suffering from impostor syndrome, then you aren't doing it "properly."

We explored the potential risk factors that could lead to poor mental health among Ph.D. students and the things that could protect their mental health.

Financial insecurity was one risk factor. Not all researchers receive funding to cover their course and personal expenses, and once their Ph.D. is complete, there is no guarantee of a job. The number of people studying for a Ph.D. is increasing without an equivalent increase in [postdoctoral positions](#).

Another risk factor was conflict in their relationship with their [academic supervisor](#). An analogy offered by one of our Ph.D. student collaborators likened the academic supervisor to a "sword" that you can use to defeat the "Ph.D. monster." If your weapon is ineffective, then it makes tackling the monster a difficult—if not impossible—task. Supervisor difficulties can take many forms. These can include a supervisor being inaccessible, overly critical or lacking expertise.

A lack of interests or relationships outside Ph.D. study, or the presence of stressors in students' [personal lives](#) were also risk factors.

We have also found an association between poor mental health and high levels of perfectionism, impostor syndrome (feeling like you don't belong or deserve to be studying for your Ph.D.) and the sense of [being isolated](#).

## **Better conversations**

Doctoral research is not all doom and gloom. There are many students who find studying for a Ph.D. to be both [enjoyable and fulfilling](#), and there are many examples of cooperative and nurturing research environments across academia.

Studying for a Ph.D. is an opportunity for researchers to spend several years learning and exploring a topic they are passionate about. It is a training program intended to equip students with the skills and expertise to further the world's knowledge. These examples of good practice provide opportunities for us to learn about what works well and disseminate them more widely.

The wellbeing and mental health of Ph.D. students is a subject that we must continue to talk about and reflect on. However, these conversations need to happen in a way that considers the evidence, offers balance, and avoids perpetuating unhelpful myths.

Indeed, in our own study, we found that the percentage of Ph.D. students who believed their peers had mental health problems and that poor mental health was the norm, exceeded the rates of students who actually met diagnostic criteria for a common [mental health problem](#). That is, Ph.D. students may be overestimating the already high number of their peers who experienced mental health problems.

We therefore need to be careful about the messages we put out on this topic, as we may inadvertently make the situation worse. If messages are

too negative, we may add to the myth that all Ph.D. students experience mental health problems and help maintain the toxicity of academic culture.

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