

Becoming a resilient researcher



Ro Bolland & Natalie Read- Student Counselling Service

Introductions

- Please say your first name and area of research
- Briefly describe a beautiful moment that you experienced recently

Workshop programme

- Discussion with other PhD students about the challenges you face and identifying steps that may help overcome these.
- Understanding resilience and how it can help you in your PHD/career
- Develop your 'Resilience tool kit'
 - Developing self compassion and self-care
 - Understanding our inner critic/Impostor Syndrome
 - Challenging our negative thinking with CBT
 - Managing overwhelm
 - Mindfulness
 - Improving communication with your supervisor

What is Resilience?



- Resilience is the ability to bounce back/recover when faced with difficulty
- "It is not the strongest of the species that survives, nor the most intelligent that survives. It is the one that is most adaptive to change." Charles Darwin
- Flexibility, learning, gathering support, being positive and proactive
- It is not a trait, but something that can be learned.

Group discussion

- What difficulties do you face?
- What would you like most from this session?

Building your resilience 'tool box':



- Self analysis of resilience strengths and opportunity areas

- Self-care analysis

Building your resilience 'tool box':

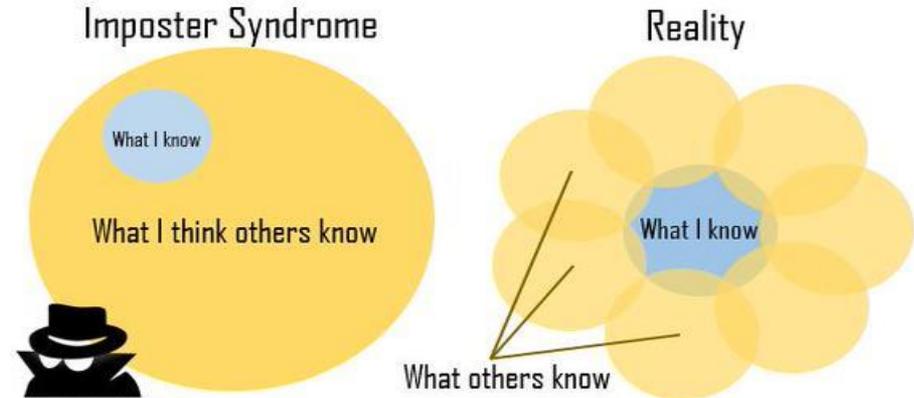
- Develop time for self reflection
- Self-care
- Stress Management techniques
- Build Self-Esteem
- Enhance your problem solving techniques
- Resilience attitude/mindset
- Connect to others and know when to ask for help
- Challenge your thinking



Lifestyle Balance Inventory

- Take a few minutes to consider your individual lifestyle balance and any stress busting activities you have - questionnaire.
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Imposter Syndrome – common to PhD Context



- Perception that you are a fraud, not intelligent, over evaluated by others, do not deserve success
- Particularly common in high achievers - Signs include: perfectionism, overworking, fear of failure, discounting praise and undermining achievements
- Can lead to anxiety, stress, low self-confidence, depression, shame and self-doubt

The problem of *Perfectionism*



- Over the past 30 years, young people have become 33% more self critical, in terms of perceiving their environment as excessively demanding (Curran & Hill, 2017).
- This is attributed to self-imposed unrealistic standards, critical comparisons with others and severe self-criticism.
- Over the past 30 years we have compelled young people to compete against one another, with increasingly demanding social and economic parameters.

Imposter Syndrome - reduced excerpt

Hayton article – see <https://jameshaytonphd.com/phd-impostor-syndrome>

I always had the slight feeling that I had bluffed my way in and would, eventually, be found out. This is the impostor syndrome, and is a common problem among PhD students.

- If you're working day after day in pursuit of a goal, part of you must believe it's possible. But the contradiction between the belief and the doubt—the forces pulling in two opposite directions—creates a stress that can stop you working to the best of your ability, which in turn reinforces the doubt.
- It's healthier, and more accurate, to [think of a PhD as a beginner's qualification](#). It is during your PhD that you develop basic research skills,but it's going to take a hell of a lot longer than your PhD to build that experience and reputation.
- Ability is not fixed—it is almost always possible to improve upon whatever talents you have ...this is only possible if you acknowledge where those limits are.
- Impostors, by definition, hide their identity. In the context of a PhD, this means hiding any insecurity or weakness in knowledge; avoiding asking the “stupid question”, avoiding mistakes.... It is a state motivated by fear, by the avoidance of a negative outcome, but it actually makes the negative outcome more likely.
- Sometimes it's worth embracing the very thing you fear the most. Rather than avoiding being found out, why not be open about what you don't know?
- If you think of yourself as a beginner, the question is no longer whether you are good enough, but how to get better. If you embrace the beginner mindset by being enthusiastically open about your weaknesses, it frees you to ask questions, to make mistakes and to learn. This is a much more positive outlook.

Managing our internal *critics*



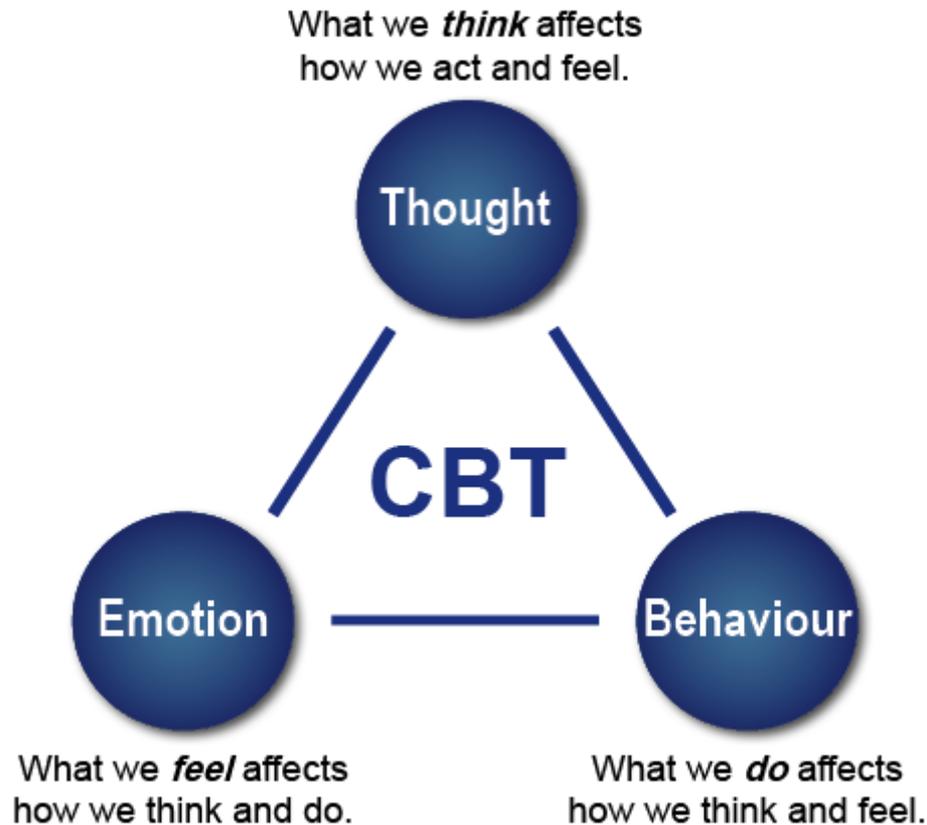
- Develop self-compassion – allowing freedom to be ourselves and acknowledging our strengths alongside areas for development.
- Allow yourself not to hide what you don't know
- Allow yourself to be a learner & to make mistakes
- Allow yourself to be in lifelong development – the 'Hayton' position.

Superego/inner critic

- Gets implanted as we grow up. It is like the ‘inner policeman’ in our minds.
- It attacks our ego, it attacks whatever sense of deficiency it finds in your experience.
- Often trying to protect us in some way. Ignoring it makes it louder but we can modify it through awareness, self compassion and patience!
- Thoughts are not facts! Approach judgements with curiosity, self compassion and nonjudgmental awareness.
- What would your best teacher or someone you care about say about the situation?
- Sometimes it is appropriate to check out criticism. All humans have areas to improve on and it is impossible to be liked by everyone or succeed in all opportunities!

Cognitive Behaviour Therapy

(CBT)



Changing thinking by challenging negative thoughts - EXERCISE

- **What the alternative?**
 - Is there another way to think about my situation
 - Is the way I am thinking about my problem making it better or worse?
- **Where's the evidence?**
 - Is there any evidence, or proof that what I am thinking is true?
 - Is there any evidence, or proof that what I am thinking is NOT true?
- **What if its true?**
 - Maybe the negative thoughts I am having are true. Now what?
 - How can I cope with this situation? How can I support myself?
 - What do I have control over in this situation? What can I not control?



Coaching exercise. Identifying strengths

- Focusing on our strengths can help build positive cycles and generate motivational energy

- 5 minutes each in pairs

Managing Overwhelm

Recognising Overwhelm



- Always rushed, too much to do, not enough time.
- Mentally scattered, not feeling in control.
- Tunnel vision: irritation at anything that breaks your focus.
- Internal pressure: knot in your stomach.
- Impatience: lack of compassion for self /judgmental thinking.
- Numbness: little feeling / mental or emotional paralysis.
- Decreased enjoyment : of projects, relationships, or life in general. Not managing to leave your studies behind.
- Subliminal or overt sense of panic

Managing Overwhelm

- Accept yourself - that you will sometimes feel anxious. Self-compassion in what you expect of yourself.
- Change 'overwhelm inducing' thoughts – internal pressure/unrealistic study expectations/lack of time?
- Avoid Rushing – what is your natural pace? Try doing something for 10 minutes at a nurturing pace. How does it feel?
- Try to be totally present in what you are doing. Not living in the future

Managing overwhelm - Study tips

- Apportion percentages and then monitor
- Perfection does not exist "deliver on time fit for purpose"
- Last-minute or early starter - manage the risk
- Breakdown targets
- Internal measures of success rather than external
- Get clarity

Mindfulness: for your resilience tool Box

- "The present moment is as it is. Always. Can you let it be?" Tolle (2003)
- Notice what is happening in you: thoughts, feelings, physical sensations without judgement.
- Research demonstrated that mindfulness can reduce depression, anxiety, pain, improve relationships and performance.

Mindfulness: for your resilience tool Box

[Experience](#) 3 minutes breathing space

Ways to practice

Apps: [Headspace](#), [Buddhify](#)

Book: Mindfulness: A practical guide to
finding peace in a frantic world

Join a Mindfulness group!



Communication (and PhD Supervisory Relationships?)

‘Doctoral students may need to think like UN peacekeepers, detectives and divorce lawyers at different points of their studies’

Kevin O’Gorman and Robert MacIntosh

- Link to: <https://www.timeshighereducation.com/blog/how-manage-your-phd-supervisor>
- **If there is a problem:** Think of a challenging interaction or relationship that you have in your academic world. This situation may be frustrating or limiting in how you can go about your studies.
- Hold this in mind whilst we outline the DESO model of communication.

DESO Model of Intercultural Communication

- **D** Describe the exact behaviour that is challenging - be objective; use concrete, terms.
- **E** Express your feelings about the situation. If you are upset, confused, frustrated, just say so calmly, directing yourself to the behavior and not the person.
- **S** Specify the new behavior you would prefer. Speak about alternate approaches.
- **O** Outline the positive outcome expected from the new behavior. This helps all parties to commit to your suggestion.

Back to small-group discussion

- What action can you take to address your difficulties?

- How can you further build your resilience?

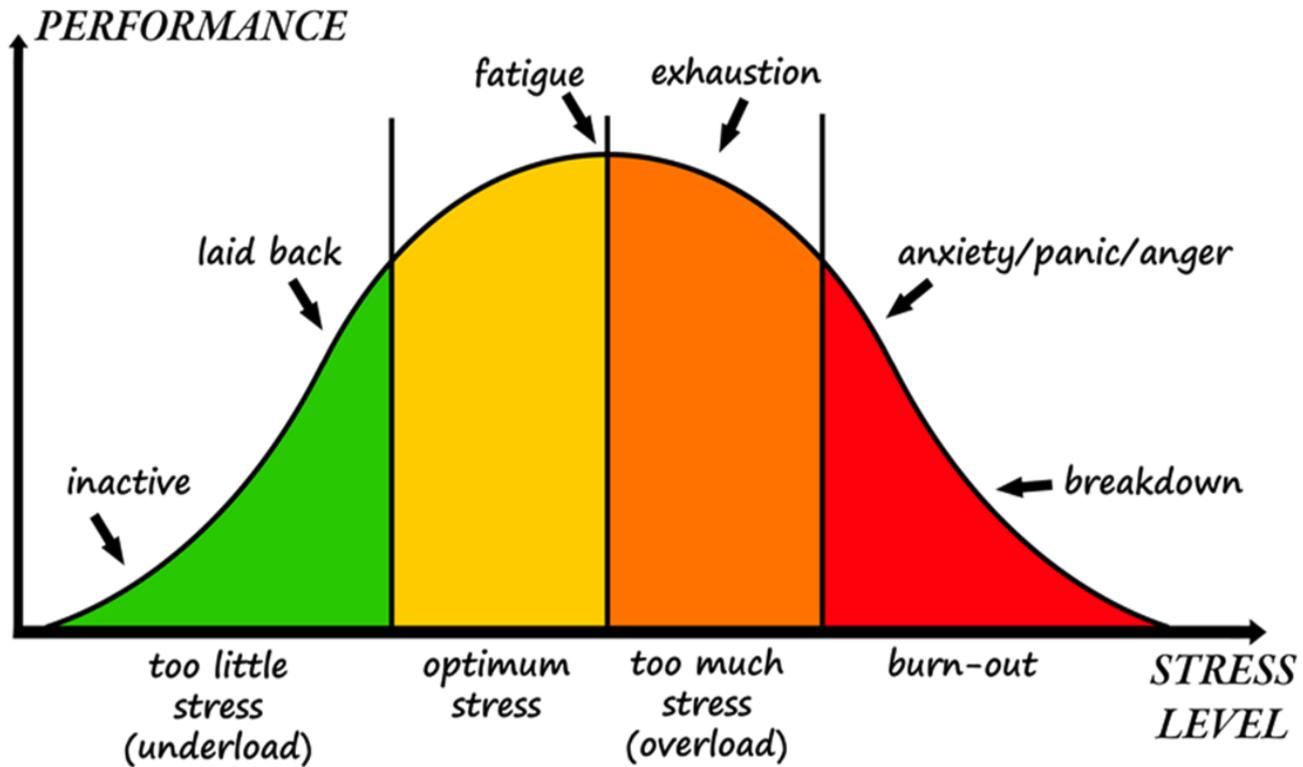
What Next?

- Student Counselling Service
 - Website, peer support, study group
- Big White Wall
- Well-being
- Staff Counselling if eligible
- GP
- Just ask

Further resources

- Bristol Well-Being
- Resilience article:
<https://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/design-your-path/201305/10-traits-emotionally-resilient-people>
- Imposter Syndrome - 21 ways to overcome:
<https://startupbros.com/21-ways-overcome-impostor-syndrome/>
- The thesis whisperer
- MIND

STRESS CURVE



Optimizing Your Self-Care Based On Your Coping Style

- **Avoidant**
 - “Task mode” focus on task, cut off from the emotion and feel it later (days or even weeks)
- **Ruminative**
 - “Problem solver” Can feel and think about the stress in the moment, but they continue to think about it.
- **Hypervigilant**
 - “Physiological reactive mode”, fight flight response, take in information quickly and make decision quickly. Can feel overwhelmed.

Advantages to all three styles but if you are continually facing demand and responding from all three styles burn out can result.

Optimizing Your Self-Care Based On Your Coping Style

- **Avoidant**
 - **Regularly** down time in routine. Away from work doing things that are fun, energising that allow you to recharge. **Regularly** stepping back **allowing the emotional experience** to catch up, as this is what gets cut off when your stressed. Then connect and processing the experiences by talking or writing.
 - **Ruminative**
 - Down time in daily routine. **Engage your focus and attention away from things that you ruminate on.** Sports, hobbies, connecting with **people that know how to connect with you outside of your work role.** You need to help your brain to change channels from work mode to a rest/recover mode.
 - **Hypervigilant**
 - **Exercise as part of daily routine,** fight and flight is physiological response, **exercise helping to bring us back to our physiological baseline.**
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