

MINDS 2024 - Day 2 Exchange - Breakout room 2: Interventions & Skills - Transcript

Shiropa (chair)

Hi everyone. Welcome to the MINDS Exchange Session Two. My name is Shiropa, and I'll be the chair for this session.

I'll briefly describe how the MINDS Exchange Session will run. This will be a virtual poster-style session where we have invited individuals from around the world to share with us an initiative, experience, or idea. These presenters will give three-minute presentations that will each be followed by a three-minute question period. Once all presenters are done, we'll also open the floor for a general question and discussion period.

We have two breakout rooms today: one for creative thinking and one for interventions and skills.

Alexandra (moderator)

I'll go ahead and introduce our first speaker, which is Magdalena, and she will start off with our first poster for today.

Magdalena

Hi, everyone.

Alexandra (moderator)

Yeah, whenever you're ready.

Magdalena

When I'm ready?

Alexandra (moderator)

Yeah, go ahead.

Magdalena

Lovely, great stuff. So, hi, everyone from London in the UK. My poster has to do with a framework that I called the grid, and it's a framework that's kind of come out of my work with academics. In the first instance, when I saw them being very stressed—a lot of the things that the previous speaker was talking about: high stress, high burnout, lots of anxiety, worry, the sorts of things that are common to science that I've experienced in my PhD and later on, and that I saw people experience at different stages.

Basically, the framework began by recognizing that for a long time we've been talking about life and work balance. There's lots of research literature about that, but one of the things I've noticed about first academics, then researchers, then postdocs, and then PhD students doing COVID is that there are two other quadrants that don't get talked about very much. I've called them self-care and career. When it comes to the nervous system—I'm a neuroscientist by

training in my PhD, but I now work as a psychologist and a therapist with people and do a lot of consulting work around this space of well-being and mental health in higher education—what I see is that the self-care quadrant and the career quadrant tend to re-energize and put back a lot of the energy that life and work, the day-to-day things we do, tend to expend. If you think of it almost like a bank account, that's sort of what happens.

I've called this framework a 2x2 grid mostly because it's like a mathematical four areas. The framework works at different levels. At a very global level, for example, after COVID, a lot of people I saw had a lot of difficulties, anxieties, and potentially depression. The framework could be used like a post-it note on a day-to-day basis to make sure that you're doing one or two tasks that balance you out. The idea is that you're balancing out your nervous system a bit more, so it's not all skewed towards one quadrant.

One of the things I've seen in science is that science is often passion-driven, so there can be a propensity to make one of those quadrants explode at the expense of the others. That is often how the initial imbalances set into poor habits and make things really difficult. We use the grid as a way of setting goals, so people can think about what they actually want to be well and to flourish across the four quadrants. Then we can use it on a weekly basis in terms of developing the various things you want to do.

I, for example, have ADHD, so I do like to do multiple things, but they can be difficult to keep track of and keep those deadlines or get to the points where you get the payoffs that other people care about. In the grid, we have this nice method of putting things in there, but then we work to our own energy. We basically pick the things we want to do from that menu by energy and by task that we like doing, and then we collect points by highlighting the things we've done. Over time, it's a way to combine people who are really good at the meta-level picture—like setting goals and having visions—but maybe not so good at day-to-day implementation. Equally, some people are good at the day-to-day stuff but lose sight of where it's all going. The grid works at these multiple levels and helps combine the different elements.

We've been trying it out with all sorts of people here in the UK, and also people in the States, Turkey, and Portugal. It's been really working. At this stage, I'm just wanting to get this out to more researchers, students, and people who can find it useful. There's a lot of stuff on the website that is free, like blogs, films, and techniques to help people use it. That's all I really wanted to say. I hope that's under the three minutes.

Alexandra (moderator)

Great, thank you so much. Does anyone have any questions? You can also type them in the chat. If you just type it to everyone, it should go into our break room, so that's okay as well. If not, we can move on to the next speaker, and then if you have any questions, we can go through them at the end because we have that extra 15-minute period as well. Should be good.

Now we'll move on to Diana.

Diana

Yes, so hello everyone. My name is Diana, and I am from Latvia. So currently, it's already past midnight over here, so I'm a bit tired, but I hope I will be okay. I am really grateful to be here today and to talk to you about our initiative. Before I do, I would like to give you a little background about the academic environment in my home country. We do have some problems here. According to OECD data, we have the smallest number of PhD degree holders in the whole European Union. Obviously, there are some reasons for it. Actually, I had the privilege to personally experience what some of those reasons might be because I used to be a PhD student in the Latvian higher education system myself. I formally graduated, I am a PhD candidate, but I was never able to defend my thesis. Back then, when I realized that it was time to quit academia because it would never work, first of all, I didn't have a plan B. I was supposed to be a scientist because that had been my dream forever. Then I had this huge identity crisis because of that, and I was not able to fully recover from that experience until some years later when we had this idea that, hey, we should do something about it and we should start changing things around. Then this concept of social entrepreneurship just popped up in my mind, and we liked it and we went with it.

So we founded our social enterprise dedicated to supporting early career researchers in Latvia. Social enterprise in Latvia is a legal term, so we even have a law dedicated to social entrepreneurship that dictates what we can and cannot do. Currently, we are taking our baby steps. We are still in the proof-of-concept phase, so there's still a lot of trying and erroring for us, a lot of learning. The way we work, the way we operate, is we have this impact model where we work directly with early career researchers. We do that by offering them trainings and seminars. At first, we were primarily focusing on communication skills and science communication, but now we are shifting our focus more towards mental health and well-being because we truly see that this is something we have to work on. On the business side of things, we are cooperating with higher education and research institutions, and through them, we are gaining access both to the funding and to our primary target group. The main advantage of this model is definitely the flexibility and the autonomy. We are a separate entity, and as such, we can basically do whatever we want. We are not restricted by any one organization, any gatekeepers, any organizational policy, so we are free to work however we see fit.

However, one of the main challenges that we are encountering is this huge mental health stigma that is still very prevalent in Latvia. People often don't even understand how to talk about mental health and what it even is, especially people in STEM. You are talking to a person and you see that they're struggling, but they often lack the vocabulary to express their discomfort, and that's a huge problem. We really see that this is something we have to focus on, and we have to raise awareness around mental health and well-being and educate people. That's our primary focus for now. So yes, basically that's it from my part. I think I have used up my time. Thank you very much for your attention.

Alexandra (moderator)

Great, thank you so much for your presentation. If anyone has any questions, feel free to ask.

I will actually start off with one myself. You mentioned that you are making the shift towards mental health initiatives. I was wondering how new that was and if there's anything that you've done recently in that space that you can share as an example.

Diana

Yes, well, I have started to create seminars to talk to people about career aspects and how different research environments, especially for young researchers, a relationship with a supervisor seems to be very important and how that can impact your mental health. Actually, something that I've been trying to stress a lot is that if a person is struggling, it might not necessarily be their fault. Often times, and I would say in most cases, there is something wrong with the environment. When you are in that position, you don't even know that. I remember myself; I had no idea that it was not my fault, that there was something wrong with the environment and with my supervisors. That's something that I've been really trying to get across so that people feel at least at ease. Maybe we cannot fix their problems right away, but we can at least help them not think about themselves that there's something wrong with them.

Alexandra (moderator)

Yeah, that's a great point.

If no one else has any questions, we can move on to the next speaker. Thank you so much, Diana. That was a great presentation. We'll move on to Geraldine.

Geraldine, you're muted.

Geraldine

Thank you for that. Hi, everyone. I'm coming to you from Ireland this evening, and I'm delighted to be here with you. It is almost 11:00 p.m., or at least it's getting closer to 11:00 p.m. I can't say that I've worked this late recently, but I bring to you the personal development module that we've developed at the Technological University of the Shannon in Ireland. We are the only social care work program in the country that provides personal development for our students for four years of their study. That involves a two-hour lecture weekly and one hour of group work weekly across the four years.

I know my poster slide looks a little bit stark, but what the personal development is trying to do for the students is connect that mind-body piece, which is something that we found in my research with 41 participants that isn't always present for the workers that are working on the front line with vulnerable people. You can see the picture of the hands, almost like they're being pulled in so many directions. We discovered that without personal development learning, the students or the graduates burn out quicker than those that have had the personal development. The findings showed us that the participants were likely to assertively say that they'd had enough, that they really couldn't deal with another client, or that they weren't the right person to work with the client.

I'll just pop in the chat the definition of personal development so that you can see what that is exactly that I'm talking about. From my own research, I defined it really as a purposeful commitment to form a more truthful relationship with the self and others whilst attempting to courageously overcome the fears and struggles associated with that commitment in order to bring the best version of the self to personal and practice life.

What we found was, and why I say courageously, it's a very scary place to be. A lot of our students are 18, 19 years old, up to the mature. We've even had a student 70 years of age. The difficulty is they're scared to share themselves, and the danger is if they don't do this work in college, they will go out and leak some of their stories. We are, I suppose, really conscious of burnout, the need for self-care. The results showed us from the findings that those that had personal development training were assertively able to boundary themselves. They wouldn't take on any extra work that they weren't able for. They would check in with themselves if they were the best person to do the job. Sometimes they got called when they were on annual leave, and they refused to answer and refused to do any work during their time off, which we found a lot of the younger students from other universities were inclined to want to please, and so they would do too much and then burn themselves out.

The findings were quite interesting around the self-awareness, which was something that they got. I'm just flying down through them now. I'd say my time is nearly out. There was huge transformation for those students. In terms of their mental health, these students who became graduates were very aware of the dangers of burnout and their own mental well-being. They would use a lot of contemplative pedagogy such as mindfulness and meditation and other self-care strategies. They were also able to recognize when they might be going into triggering situations and avoid that. Their mental health was really, I suppose, much better than their counterparts that didn't have the personal development training.

That's just a flavor. Ask me anything at all that you want. I'm sure my three minutes are up. Any questions that you have? The last picture I should say is myself facilitating one of the personal development groups. I'm sure it's similar around the world, but we have very few males come to social care or social work. We always get one or two brave souls, and they also have to be treated quite sensitively, particularly if they're younger males trying to open up in a group of women. It's quite threatening. I'll leave it there. I could talk all night about it, but it's really not my best time of the day at this hour. I know Diana and Magdalena are in the same situation. That's it from me.

Alexandra (moderator)

Thank you for the presentation. I'm so sorry. I didn't realize that so many of you were in Europe and it was so late. That must be why the questions are a little slow to come in.

I had a question. I was wondering if you focus on improving self-confidence in your initiative a lot because I think with a lot of the issues that you're talking about, they can often come from a place of impostor syndrome and not feeling like you're worth it, so you tend to overwork

yourself. I mean, I used to do that a lot when I started when I was 18 and 19 because I just felt like I wasn't smart enough to take time off and care for myself. So, I was wondering if you talk about that or discuss ways to improve that.

Geraldine

Yes, it came up a lot. Our students go on a work experience placement for 15 weeks at the end of the second year and 15 weeks at the beginning of the third year. Their supervisors would say that the confidence they see in the students that are coming from our university compared to other universities around the country is so different. They will say that they're the first to get up and put their hand out and shake the hand of a service user or a vulnerable person and say, "Hi, I'm so-and-so, and I'm here on placement," whereas they said the other students almost need to be given a little gentle push or a nudge to introduce themselves.

The practice educators would say categorically that even the young students that go out in their work placement have a maturity level three or four years ahead of their counterparts. They would put it down to that piece of personal development.

Alexandra (moderator)

That's great, thank you. Oh, we have another question in the chat. Sierra asks, "Do you have any suggestions for getting school administration on board with implementing personal development modules?"

Geraldine

Sierra, it is a great question. We fight every four years. We have a programmatic review, and we fight tooth and nail to keep it. My research has helped us keep that personal development module going because it is not cost-effective for the university. They don't want to pay my salary to have ten people sitting in a circle. They consider it arty, farty, fluffy stuff. It's not the hardcore science. They wonder what we're doing in that room. Do we just cry all day? You get those kinds of comments from people sometimes, so it's really difficult to hold on to it. But sharing my research with them has helped them understand because they're giving back to the industry. We partner with the organizations around the university that take our students, and what we say to administration is those staff that we've trained will stay with the organizations. They are the first to get employment if there's a social care job or similar coming up. Our students, our graduates, will always get that job. We kind of say to administration it's paying off in dividends. Also, the vulnerable people that they work with are getting the best version of that employee that they possibly could.

Alexandra (moderator)

Great, thank you so much. I believe the three minutes for Q&A is up, so we'll move on to the next presentation. If you have any more questions for Geraldine, we can ask at the end.

Okay, now we'll move on to Paul.

Paul

Good evening. I'm afraid I'm another European here, so another late evening. I've got my headphones on because the kids are asleep upstairs, so I don't want to shout too much. I want to start by saying thank you to Diana because there was a phrase that she used, and forgive me for paraphrasing, it was something along the lines of when you're doing your PhD or when you're doing your postgraduate studies, you only have that experience, that's the only experience you have, you don't know any different. Forgive me if I butchered that, Diana, but I think that's something that we're trying to address in what we're doing here.

We, as academics, should, at least in my opinion, have a broader view of the way you can do research, the way that you experience your PhD, than our PhD students do, than our postgraduate research students do. Not just PhD students but Masters by research and things like that. While there is a lot of formal support for research students, primarily through supervisory teams, that is primarily focused on the research, guiding the student through the research methods, integrating scientific community, and so on. There are other support networks that are available for students within universities, whether that's grad schools, which are fairly common in UK universities and I guess elsewhere too, that provide training courses and so on, informal networks such as your peers in your research group and so on. But these typically rely on your personal initiative, and if you're not in a position personally, emotionally, whatever the case may be, to seek out those opportunities, then it can become even more difficult.

The idea of providing pastoral support, which in the UK at least is very common at the undergraduate level, seems to be completely absent at the postgraduate level. This is effectively a point of contact with whom you can talk about, discuss basically anything that's not to do with your research directly. That's what we're trying to do. What I'm presenting here is in contrast to what everybody else has done in that this is a proposal that we're getting off the ground. It's not something that we have any results or outcomes from. What I quite like to do today and the reason for attending all of the other talks is to get ideas, to get some answers about what we can do that will improve or maximize the utility of such a scheme to help our postgraduate students. You all know of a wide range of problems that can exist, whether it's problems with your supervisory team, whether it's isolation even if you do have a good relationship with your supervisory team. I did when I was a PhD student, but there was a relatively high amount of isolation because there was little interaction amongst the other people with my research group and beyond. That can make it quite a lonely place to be. It can be difficult to reach out once you're in a position like that.

While we're not trying to force people to talk to us as the sort of pastoral support, and we're certainly not positioning ourselves as mental health support because we're simply not qualified to do so, simply having a point of contact who is a member of staff and so can have the same access to information and facilities and support that their supervisory team could have, having somebody who is independent from that, we're hoping will provide another avenue through which our research students can gain the support that they may not realize they need but would be tremendously helpful for their personal development as much as for their research development.

So that is it from me. Thank you very much.

Alexandra (moderator)

Great, thank you so much. We'll just give a few seconds for some questions.

Paul

Most of us are tired.

Alexandra (moderator)

Yeah, I can imagine. I'm tired and it's only like 6 PM for me, so I can't imagine.

Magdalena

Paul, I have a question for you.

Paul

Yeah, please go ahead.

Magdalena

Can you clarify for me what sort of support you have in mind?

Paul

Of course. For example, at my university and typically through UK universities in my experience, most interactions of the student with the institution go through the supervisory team, whether that's form filling, access to resources, and so on. If the student is in a position where they either do not feel able to or do not feel comfortable in approaching their supervisory team for issues that are outside of research or if they have a poor relationship with them such that even approaching them for research things is difficult, then it basically leads to isolation from not just the research process but also from any other mechanisms of support that could be accessed through the institution. Providing them with another avenue for accessing that information, for accessing that support, that's why we thought it was important that this should be taken on by another staff member who is basically of equivalent level to their supervisory team. It was an important part of this because it means that anything that their supervisory team could have access to, they could also get access through their more informal pastoral contact point. Does that make sense?

Magdalena

Yeah, thank you for clarifying.

Paul

That's okay. I mean, there's of course a limited amount that we'd be able to do. It's myself and a colleague who are taking on these roles. In my school of computer science, we have a few research groups, and because each one of us is a member of a different research group, we're

basically looking after students who are not in our research group. So we are independent from their supervisory teams in that way, still part of the same school but some distance at least.

Geraldine

Can I ask a question, Paul?

Paul

Of course.

Geraldine

I'm just wondering, and this is my timetabled hat on, are there hours for the staff to take on this role, or is it solely a labor of love?

Paul

At the moment, it's a labor of love, partly because we have no idea what sort of load is involved in this. I suspect initially it will take a very long time for people to actually realize we're here, even if we send them like hundreds of emails. We genuinely don't know. We hear from and about the students who are heavily engaged with the process, with the school, with the academics and so on. By its very nature, we don't hear from those who are disengaged from that, and so we genuinely have no idea what it's going to be like. It could be very highly variable over the academic year with different deadlines and so on, and over the years where we get different cohorts of PGR students coming through. I wish I had an answer. That's something that, once we've run this for a little while, I can take to my head of school and say, look, this is what we're estimating will be the workload associated with this, but at the moment it's just something we try.

Geraldine

Thank you for that. I think it'll be absolutely super because sometimes the student might ask somebody that they're not that close to, you know, even about etiquette, you know, stepping on other people's toes and things like that or how to, you know...

Paul

I'd like to think that this sort of thing would happen naturally within a research group. If you've got a good research group, this should sort of happen anyway. But the reality is that research groups are not always the ideal form that you might expect. In my view, you can't rely on just people being good to each other, which is most often the case. But having something structural in place to mitigate the possible absence of just the kindness of others is necessary.

Any thoughts on how we can do this better? Because like you said, Geraldine, there are so many things that we just simply don't know yet.

Geraldine

Absolutely.

I suppose maybe a tradeoff between if there's two people on the supervisory panel that one of those people will swap with someone else and be the mentor for someone else's student and then you'd be the mentor for their student.

Paul

Yeah, so we could do that at some point in future, but I think there are fewer people. I think there's a different role here, right, between being a research supervisor, and that encompasses a whole range of things that are not directly related to research. Of course, you mentioned etiquette, and I think you're quite right about that. That is an important, often unspoken aspect of research when you go to a conference, for instance. But I think there's a distinctive role to actually providing more pastoral support in the sense that we provide for undergraduates in the UK, where you're explicitly there to at the very least signpost them towards the resources that they probably don't know are there.

Geraldine

Yes, yes. No, I get it. My brain is so slow. That's exactly what you've been trying to say. I'm so sorry, Paul.

Paul

Quite all right. I hope I'm making sense.

Geraldine

You are absolutely, but I'm a little bit slower catching up and keeping up.

Alexandra (moderator)

I had a question. How many people do you have currently involved in this right now? Are you looking to expand your team, or is it just...?

Paul

Well, at the moment, I lead the postgraduate program in the school. We look at all the forms that students have to submit at various points, go through the paperwork every so often, and so on. But that's probably the best place for something like this to go because there's not much more oversight in terms of PGR processes within universities. It's typically left to supervisory teams, right? I was just speaking to some colleagues, and the idea actually came from elsewhere. It wasn't my idea; it came from elsewhere in the university. I'm afraid I forget where right now. But we thought it was a good idea and worth trying. As I said, we've not actually started yet. We haven't sent out the message to the students yet that they can contact us. I'd hope the students would be able to contact members of staff if they have troubles anyway, but that's not an assumption we can make safely, I don't think.

Alexandra (moderator)

For sure, that makes sense. Do you have an example? Are you scheduling one-on-one meetings on Zoom or in person? What are you thinking for the interaction?

Paul

At the moment, we have either a weekly drop-in session, where people can turn up without appointments, or they can contact us to arrange a specific appointment. I think the benefit of having drop-in sessions is that there's a lower barrier to gaining access to the person you want to ask for advice or help from. But equally, given my timetable and my colleague's timetable who's running this with me, that's only going to be a certain time in the week because we're teaching or in meetings, and that time might not work for the person who needs our support. It's certainly not a perfect system. It would be nice to get other people involved, but I think there's a distinctive role here, and I'm not sure whether all of my colleagues would be comfortable taking on the more pastoral role in addition to research supervision, which is part of being an academic. Does that make sense? It's an imperfect system, and I don't have answers because I don't know how well it works. To be honest, I've heard of people acting as informal mentors for others, and we're not trying to position ourselves explicitly as mentors. We haven't asked to be mentors, and we're not going to impose ourselves as mentors. At the start, at least, we're going to be relatively reactive. We'll be proactive in making students aware of the opportunity but reactive in not forcing ourselves on them unless they ask for assistance. Whether that's a good idea or not, I would quite like your opinions.

Alexandra (moderator)

I really love the idea of having a point of contact. For example, in undergrad, there weren't a lot of resources for mental health. We had one person for the entire faculty of engineering who you could contact if you had issues or were struggling with courses. Her schedule was super busy, and they couldn't provide a lot of the support they were offering. Our university has a mental health wellness center where you can book appointments and see a psychiatrist, but sometimes that's more daunting because it's like already thinking you have a problem.

Paul

Yeah, that's right. That's why I quite liked what Diana said earlier. If your only experience of postgraduate research is your own, you've got no other reference point. We as academics, having been in multiple universities and at multiple stages of the ladder, should have a broader perspective that we can use.

Magdalena

I think Paul, what you say makes an awful lot of sense. You know, I've returned recently from a piece of work in Manchester about sort of postgraduate research students who had dual supervision because they're in a you know very fancy doctoral Training Center. Yeah you know quite a lot of additional support. But I was really struck spending a week with them about how the supervisors you know of course in a way were there to extract the best out of those students scientifically, but I think it was very clear when we ran some kind of working Labs of problem solving. Sort of the problems, a bit like along [the lines of] what Geraldine has been doing, along

those lines, kind of very personal development, based on some of the challenges you are really facing. And some of them came up that were somewhat shocking actually. It was for example basics of.. we have a lot of international students and there's a lot of issues to do with hitting the ground running, just to get your you know rent sorted and a lot of logistical things. No one there to do or people felt under stress, then relationships with supervisors were often quite problematic. And then where do you go if your Visa is tied to your lab and you're afraid of hurting you know that relationship. And sometimes even actually being threatened or bullied. There were all kinds of different sorts of dynamics there. It was very clear that even there with two supervisors, it can actually, the setup can be at times worse because each supervisor assumes that the other ones got it covered. And so I got a students are falling kind of in between. There's a case study on my website of another department we've worked with where I was really struck by how useful "Psychoeducation of the Journey" of what a postgraduate research student will [go through]. What a difference that made - sort of you know literally giving people like a little manual to say - "this is your journey here are the things that are kind of useful for you to really think about almost like checklist [of] things. And then saying come back to [me] that you might really need help with [something]. And some of the students particularly the industry sponsored students said - this was a God sent because they were really got dropped in, almost like soldiers into this really strange environment where they did not know about the industry.. Yeah so, I'm thinking that can help. I've worked with departments where they are signposted, postgraduate, teaching, mental health aid, all sorts of systems .. But strangely enough in many places the sense is that they don't often [go to the resources] - they can be a point of Last Resort. But a lot of students still don't feel comfortable in coming to voice their issues so much. So you kind of need almost some kind of focus groups or some kind of very well positioned interventions to really get at the threads of what the challenges are. To kind of help equip them. And I did walk away thinking the supervisors could do it, a bit more training.

Paul

[With] that I absolutely agree I'm a supervisor and I welcome more training, but equally I think it's to expect supervisor to be able to provide the sort of mental health support that some of the students actually would be very beneficial in receiving, I'm not a trained professional in terms of mental health support in any way. But I think that sometimes having that sort of intermediary. Because I think it's quite a big step to say for anybody including research students to say "I want to go and seek mental health support from the mental health services at a university". There's quite a big step to do that, so even though somebody like me can't provide mental health support, we could be like an intermediary to at the very least like I said provide that sort of signposting but also

In the first case almost validate that there could be a problem, not necessarily with themselves that they are um they are the cause of the problem but like has been mentioned uh um before that they're an environment that at the very least they're unfamiliar with which is understandable, but at the very worst is you know actually damaging to them. So having some help in at the very least acknowledging that I think could be helpful it's probably not as far as you're suggesting Magdalena, perhaps. And perhaps that's as far as we should go, but I'm not sure I can do that.

Magdalena

I think in my experience you know doing some training for research leaders I certainly think that, and Geraldine might have a view on this as well especially from social care [point of view], but my sense is that a lot of the training tends to be often this sheep dipping information only, cognition of what it is, and the trainings that for example I have found far more effective and and short have been in relational skills. So really relational skills of.. Okay, you're going to sit with this student. How are you going to make them feel safe, to open up to you, say something like "something's not quite right"? How are you going to even out the playing field of that power Dynamic? How are you gonna use your..? What I mean.. So, they're much more practical and I haven't said.. often quite a bit of training can be very information led. So you're sort of told things, but you are told things got nothing to do with your confidence or ability to do [them]. It's really helpful because as you say, I think a supervisor need not be a mental health professional, but actually a lot of it, speaking like a neuroscientist. I think a lot of it is about getting the nervous system of hyperactivated/hypoactivated person just equalized. It just brought into a kind of calm space where people's natural agency with support takes over. And actually can do some really good confidence building. And that could be perhaps I'm sure Geraldine will have a view even though it's late for us, but yeah.

Geraldine

I do, in some sense myself and [collaborator's name] we carried out some research on the social care of students. And they were so compassionate about anybody in their sphere that would be suffering from any mental health difficulties at all, but when it came to announcing their mental health difficulties they said "Absolutely, not". And that they'd be afraid that they wouldn't be considered competent to continue on with their education. So, it's a really difficult situation, because they're afraid that if they tell us that they're struggling with their mental health that we will look at them as less than or not fully capable. And you can give that talk at the beginning that coming and asking for help is a sign of strength rather than a sign of weakness, but whether it's heard or not that's a very different situation.

Paul

I think knowing that and or being told that and actually feeling that is the case is quite a big difference. I realize that for myself.

Geraldine

Yes, but even in my own work where I carry out external supervision - we had a CEO set in on supervision of an organization one day with their staff, and they were given permission to say how they were feeling and that they could go to the CEO at any time and say - they were struggling a little bit, a little burnt out or maybe browned out not quite burnt out. And one of the staff emailed me and said I went to my supervisor with some issues and she went to the CEO and they have brought me in and basically given her a dressing down, saying that is she saying she's not up to the job. So it was completely misunderstood.. This person was saying "I'm not in the right headspace to work that closely with this particular person", but it was heard as "I'm not able for this job". Yes, it's a difficult one really.

Paul

It is and I think we're very reliant still on individuals having the capacity for flexibility, kindness, understanding and there's no systemic support for that in the same way so if you're lucky enough to have a line manager or colleagues who are understanding then brilliant. if you're not well you're stuck.

Magdalena

I think you're right, I think there is too much in the system that depends on luck of the draw of the supervisor. I mean one of the things I was struck by asking a group of 50 incredibly intelligent people, and I said "Do you know? What do you understand your supervisor expects from you?" and people couldn't articulate this. And I said "Well, but you're working with this person. Wouldn't you think that it'd be a good idea to ask? What are some expectations? What would you expect? What should I have in three months? Six months? Or how does it all work?" And they were so deadly afraid to ask. So, almost like checklists for students and PIs to have to say "Have you thought about having the..?" It's like the equivalent of I guess "induction good policies force". But more tailored towards the kind of research environment and the dynamic of supervisor student. It can be very helpful actually if they are enforced in some sense. Because I guess.. I've been in places where they are there, but when you ask the research PIs "Do they do them? - that's a very different story.

Geraldine

I think when I take on a student I like to let them know what's expected. So that six months down the line they don't get a shock, that why you wanted me to have all of this done. You know and the Gantt is great to look at, but it really gets forgotten about, once the proposal is accepted. You know, so it is really I think crucial for us to be very clear on day one, what the expectation is, and make sure that they're okay with that expectation. Make sure that there's wriggle room. I can be very bold sometimes, if I know I'm getting a procrastinator, I shorten the deadlines, because I know that the piece I'm looking for is going to be, you know, two or three weeks late. So, sometimes I make that judgment and provide a deadline much earlier than it's needed. because it's never going to be met and we're lucky to get it in that time frame. So there is that piece about getting to know who your student is and how they operate. Some of our students could knock out 2,000 words in their lit review overnight, someone else could take two or three weeks to do it, so it just depends.

Alexandra (moderator)

Thank you, everyone, for your attendance and active participation today!