

Anxiety and depression in academic careers

Neurodiversity lunch seminar

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Anxiety and depression in graduate students: let's look at the literature

Several single studies/surveys:

- Belgium, 2017, 3500 PhDs + benchmark:
one in two PhD in psychological distress
30% reports symptoms of anxiety or depression
10-15% in the benchmark¹
- 2018, globally, mainly PhDs
40% report anxiety, 6 times the normal population²
- Biennial survey by Nature, 2019, online, 6000 PhDs
30% of PhDs sought help for anxiety or depression³
- Italy, online survey on 7000 PhDs
2 out of 3 PhDs feel sometimes or often depressed⁴

1: Levecque, K., et al. "Work organization and mental health problems in PhD students." Research Policy (2017)

2: Evans, T. M., et al. "Evidence for a mental health crisis in graduate education." Nature biotechnology (2018)

3: Woolston, C. "PhDs: the tortuous truth." Nature (2019)

4: Associazione Dottorandi Italiani, online survey, 2023

Anxiety and depression in graduate students: let's look at the literature

Satinsky, Emily N., et al. "Systematic review and meta-analysis of depression, anxiety, and suicidal ideation among Ph. D. students." Scientific Reports 11:1 (2021): 14370.

2021, review and meta-analysis, 16 studies,
≈ 20 000 PhD students globally, mainly in USA

- depression among 24% ± 6%
- anxiety among 18% ± 6%

Possible limitations: bias in sampling, correlation between mental health and academia does not immediately imply causation, cultural or country-specific differences

Conclusions: 15% to 30% of PhDs experience anxiety or depression, at least twice as much as the general population

- my experience fits with these numbers
- a moment of deep distress was the key to open up

Is your perception coherent with the data we just discussed?
Have you ever opened up to somebody in your group?

Do you bind your self identity to research?

Passions are wonderful, till they possess you

Fuelled by passion, I

- put most of my life and identity in "being a researcher", neglecting the rest
- worked **overhours** (→ burnout) and set high **expectations**
- kept a **close-mind** approach towards different career paths (narcissistic traits)

Do you introduce yourself as a scientist or researcher?
What would you be doing if not research?
Would your ego/self-identity stay together if you would quit?

PI-student relationship is key for the well-being of the student

- detrimental for future steps, and thus very *asymmetric*
- scientists as managers
- toxic potential: recommendation, prone to blackmail

Working abroad is just more difficult:

- hard to integrate with locals
- visa issues
- fragile network, isolation, covid

Multicultural environments are cool, but miscommunication and incomprehensions are way more likely

and also...

- working in "neurospicy" environments *without awareness*
- continuous, biased, comparison with peers

Is science inherently difficult? Or is it the environment?

"Is not a real PhD if you don't consider quitting it at least three times..."

How to handle it?

If you desire to see, learn how to act

talk therapy is often the first and main tool

might require trying more than one therapist or different types of therapy to find a good match

- **online** therapy is great for expats (BetterHelp, WePraxis, from your own country, ...). Is discrete, efficient and effective!
- in-person therapist: ask your doctor or do online searches
- Psychiatrist when appropriate
- For emergencies, UPK has a walk-in clinic (8-16 Mon-Fri), or else call 144
- Help lines: 0800 143 000 in English, 6 to 11 pm; 143 in German, French, Italian
- talk about it with friends, family, colleagues