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Saturday, 13 August 2016

Introducing the "PhD Journey"

Andy writes about the challenges faced by students embarking on a PhD course

-Andy Rowe

I cast my mind back nearly four years ago and the elation of being awarded funding to do a PhD. I think everyone who is accepted onto a PhD programme has a certain perception as to what it will be like: having your own office, jet-setting across the world and presenting numerous papers at conferences in glamorous locations (although this is usually not the case).

What is not well documented is the mental turmoil that one can face throughout the "PhD journey." It's difficult, really difficult in fact, and there are constant set-backs which students face particularly with workload and managing demanding supervisors. Not only this, but there are also issues in trying to find time to socialise, dealing with obnoxious peers, managing your own workload and supervisory issues. The fact is mental illness is all too common, but not well reported, and so people start a PhD with a degree of false pretence. Moreover, these issues need reporting to show what the PhD journey is really like.

I compare the journey to climbing a mountain unharnessed; it's precarious, you're on the edge and there are many ascents and descents. But the support (the harness) comes from family, friends, loved ones and of course peers and supervisors. These are the people you rely upon to get you through it; to be there in both the good and bad times. However, not all PhD students have a supportive network around them and can often feel isolated and alone. Isolation is common, very common in fact, during a PhD. There are those who work from home, who have families, who are carers, who may be ill themselves (either physically or mentally) and who don't live in close proximity to their university.

From my own personal experience, the PhD journey is an isolating experience, particularly working from home, but my tip is to never cut yourself off completely from training sessions and the chance to meet others. Use those more sociable occasions to create your own 'harness' or support network if you find you do not have support from family or friends.

Unfortunately, there is a culture of acceptance around mental health issues in academia, a point raised by an anonymous academic through [the Guardian website](#) in March 2014 and the constant work load causes students to burn out; exacerbating mental illness. It's a common problem and something which I have experienced on several occasions and there is an element of guilt which creeps in if you are not doing work. It's a vicious circle and one which is notoriously difficult to break out of.

My advice is not to be afraid of taking regular breaks, exercising, and taking days off and holidays. These can all help reduce stress and improve mental well-being. That's actually one of the advantages of doing a PhD: flexibility – you manage your own workload and you are afforded time off, just as you would be if you worked, so don't be afraid to allow yourself to unwind.

Posted by Student Minds Blogging Editorial Team at 13:26

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