



Managing Your Mental Health During Your PhD*

*and what we can do about it

University of Liverpool | 27th March 2023
Invited Talk & Discussion

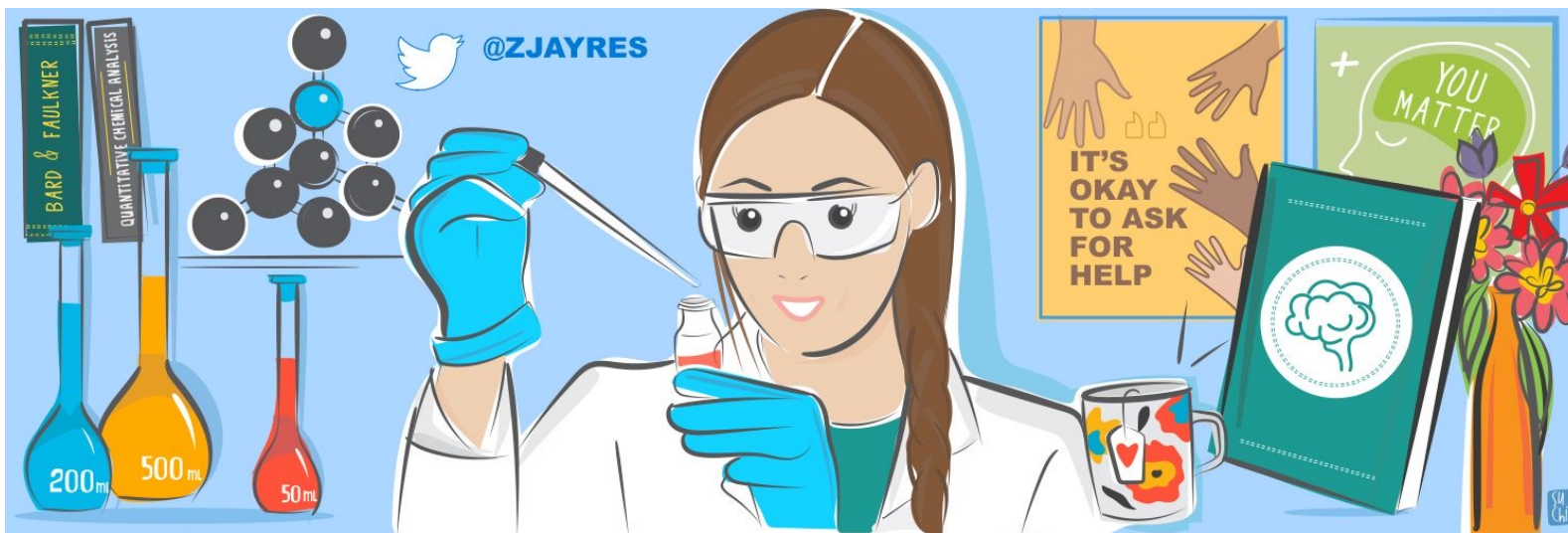
With thanks to:



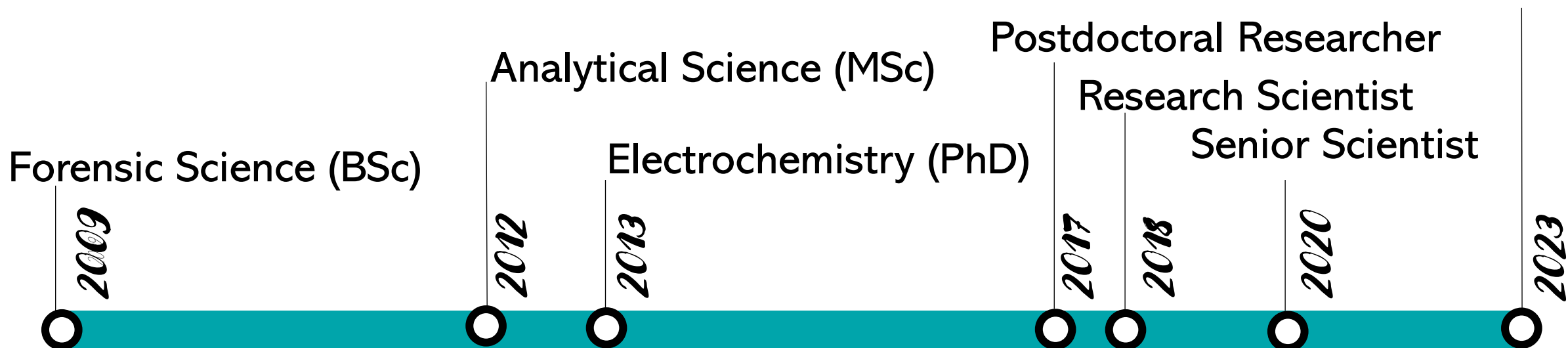
LEVERHULME RESEARCH CENTRE
FUNCTIONAL MATERIALS DESIGN

By Zoë Ayres (@zjayres)
she/her
www.zjayres.com

My career so far

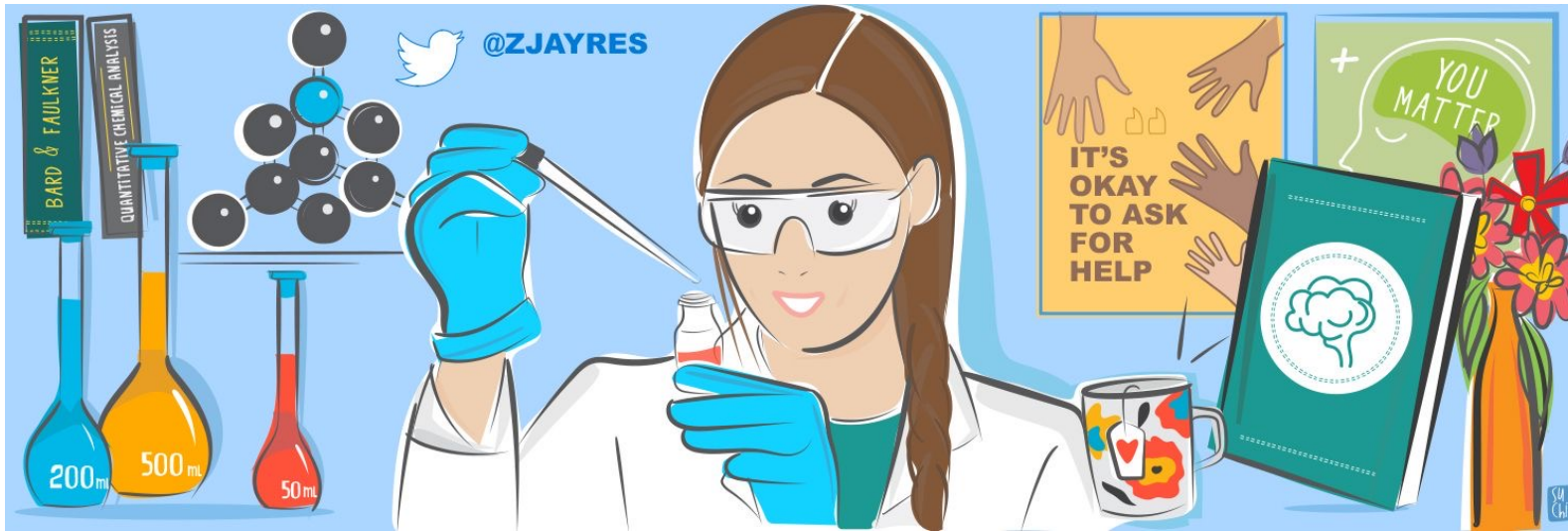


Head of
Laboratory
Facilities

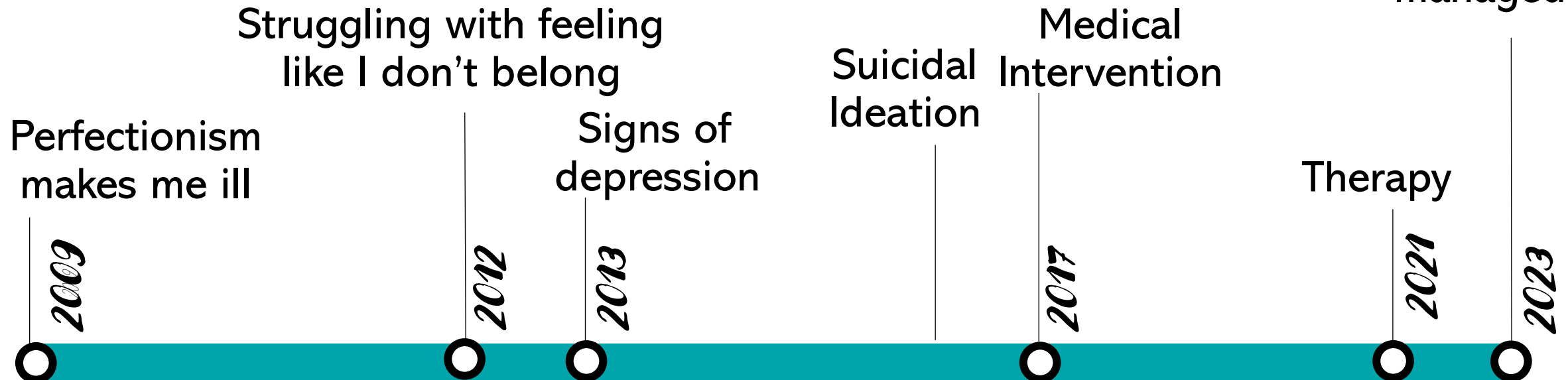


What I'm not: A medical professional

My career so far

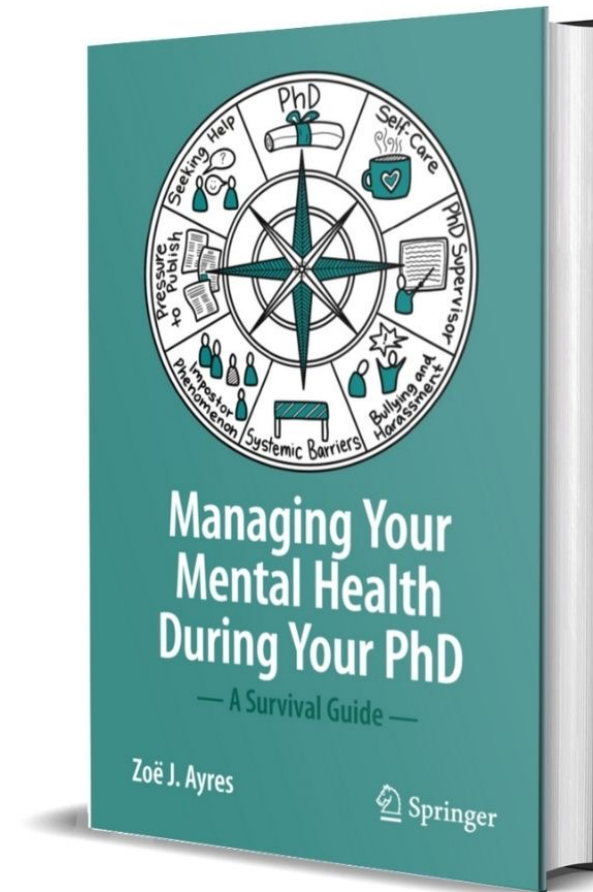


Today: Still
someone with
mental illness
BUT better
managed

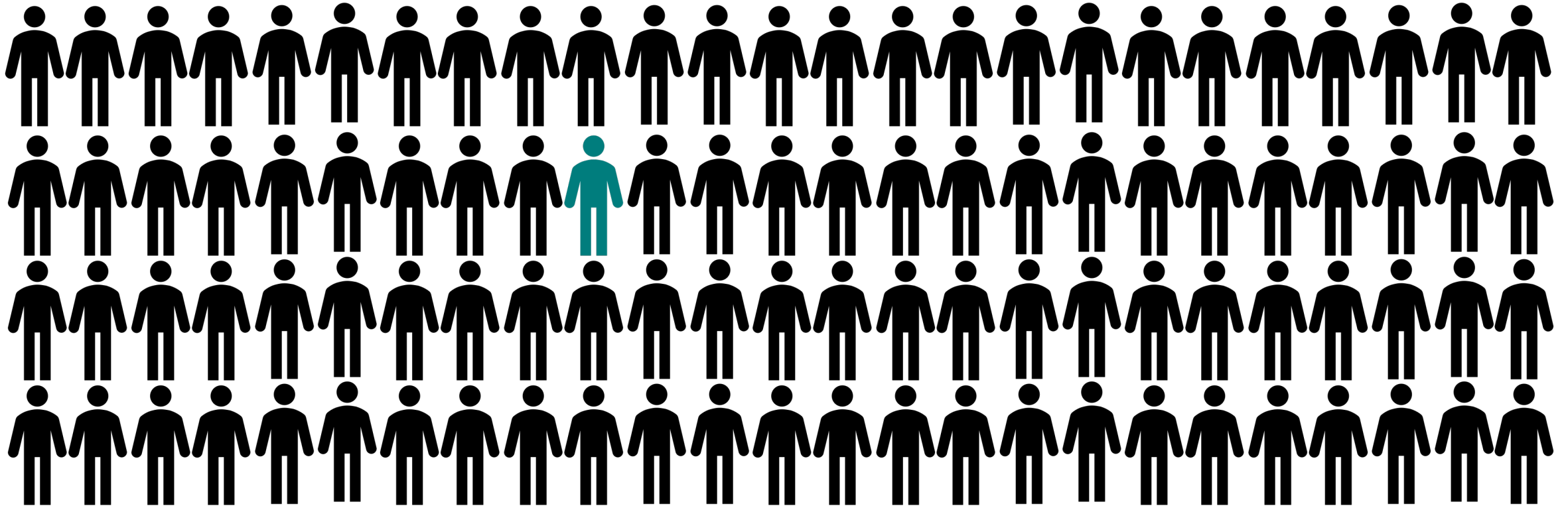


Managing Your Mental Health During Your PhD

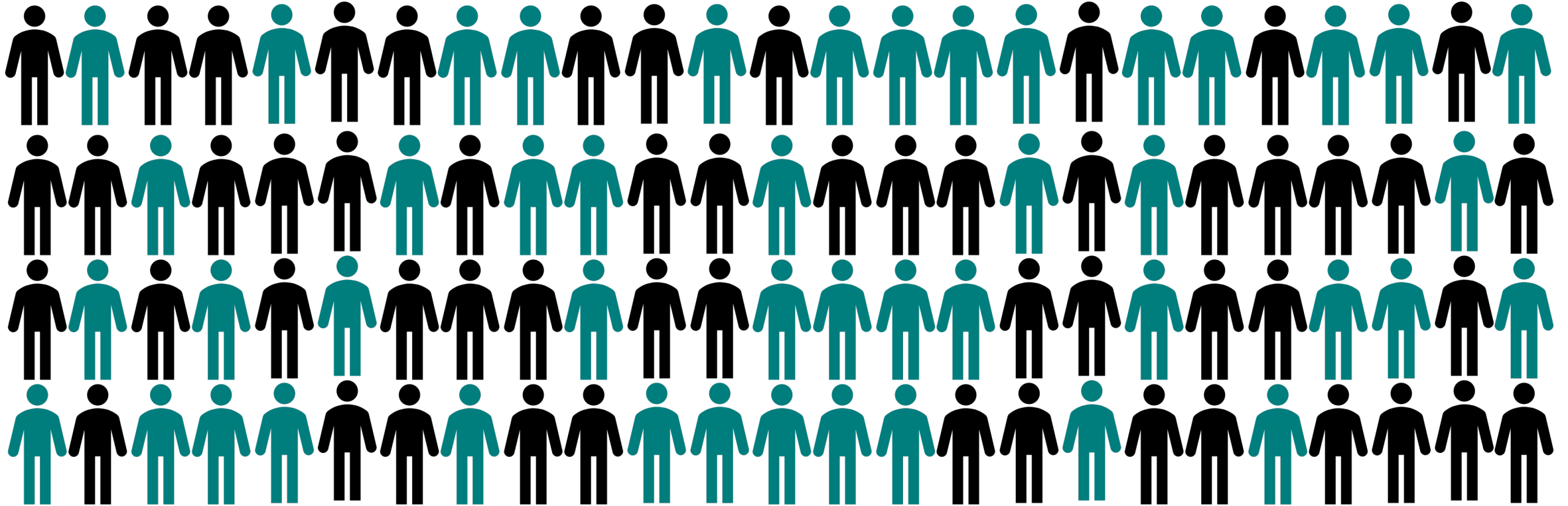
The lived experience
guide to **thriving not
just surviving** during
your PhD



The mental health crisis among PhD students



The mental health crisis among PhD students



46% of PhD students have mental health concerns¹

¹UC Berkeley Graduate Assembly. *Graduate Student Happiness and Well-being Report* <http://ga.berkeley.edu/wellbeingreport> (2014).

PhD mental health – the stats

- Graduate students have **6x** higher rates of severe anxiety and depression than the general population.²
- More intelligent people are more likely to have a mood disorder, such as anxiety or depression, but are *less likely* to seek help.³ Mood disorders underly **80-90%** of suicides.⁴
- **4 in 5** researchers showing signs of mental health distress during the pandemic⁵

² Vanderford et. al. *Nature Biotechnology* 36, 282–284(2018).

³ Woolston et. al., *Nature* 550, 549–552 (2017).

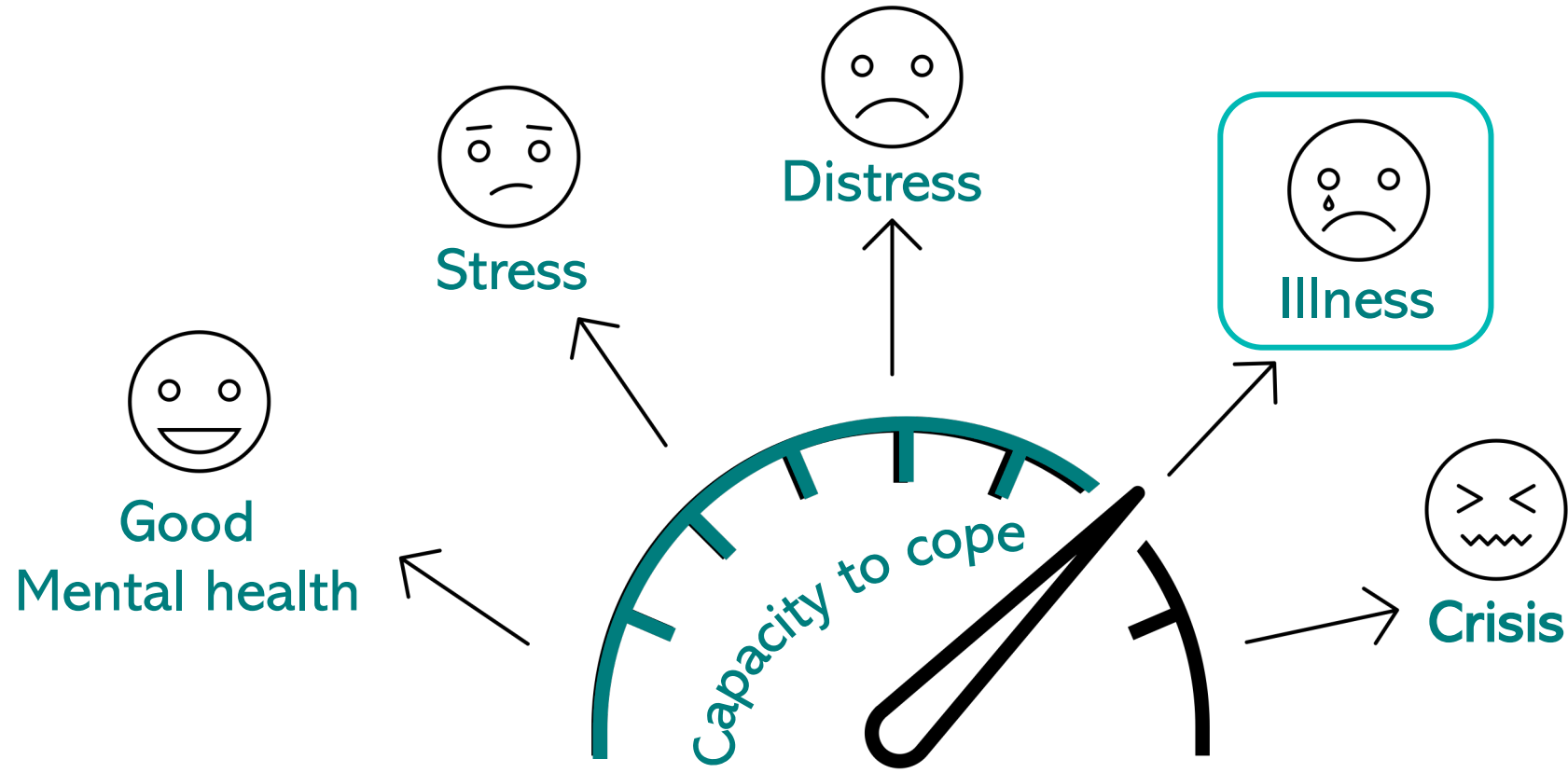
⁴ Karpinski et. al., *Intelligence*, 66, 8–23 (2018).

⁵ SMARTEN & Vitae. *COVID-19: Impact on Researchers*. (2020).

Why are PhD student mental health concerns so high?

(1) We aren't taught about mental health

As PhD students it is assumed with know what mental health is

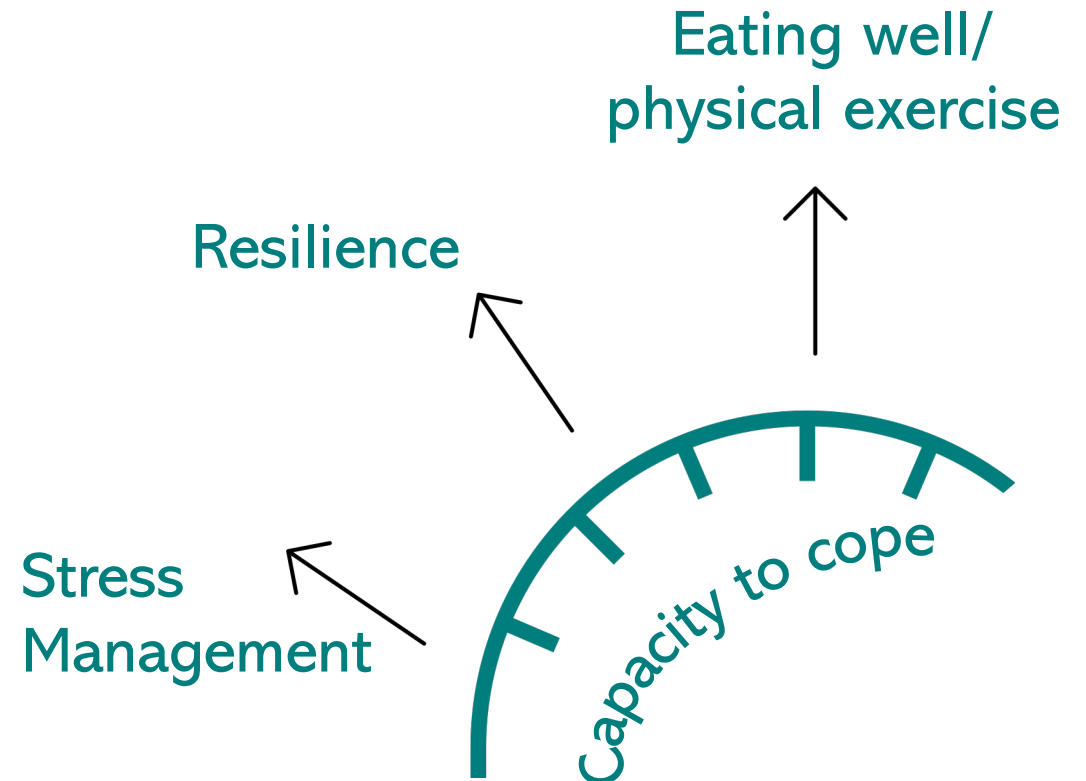


(2) Wellbeing advice is often broad

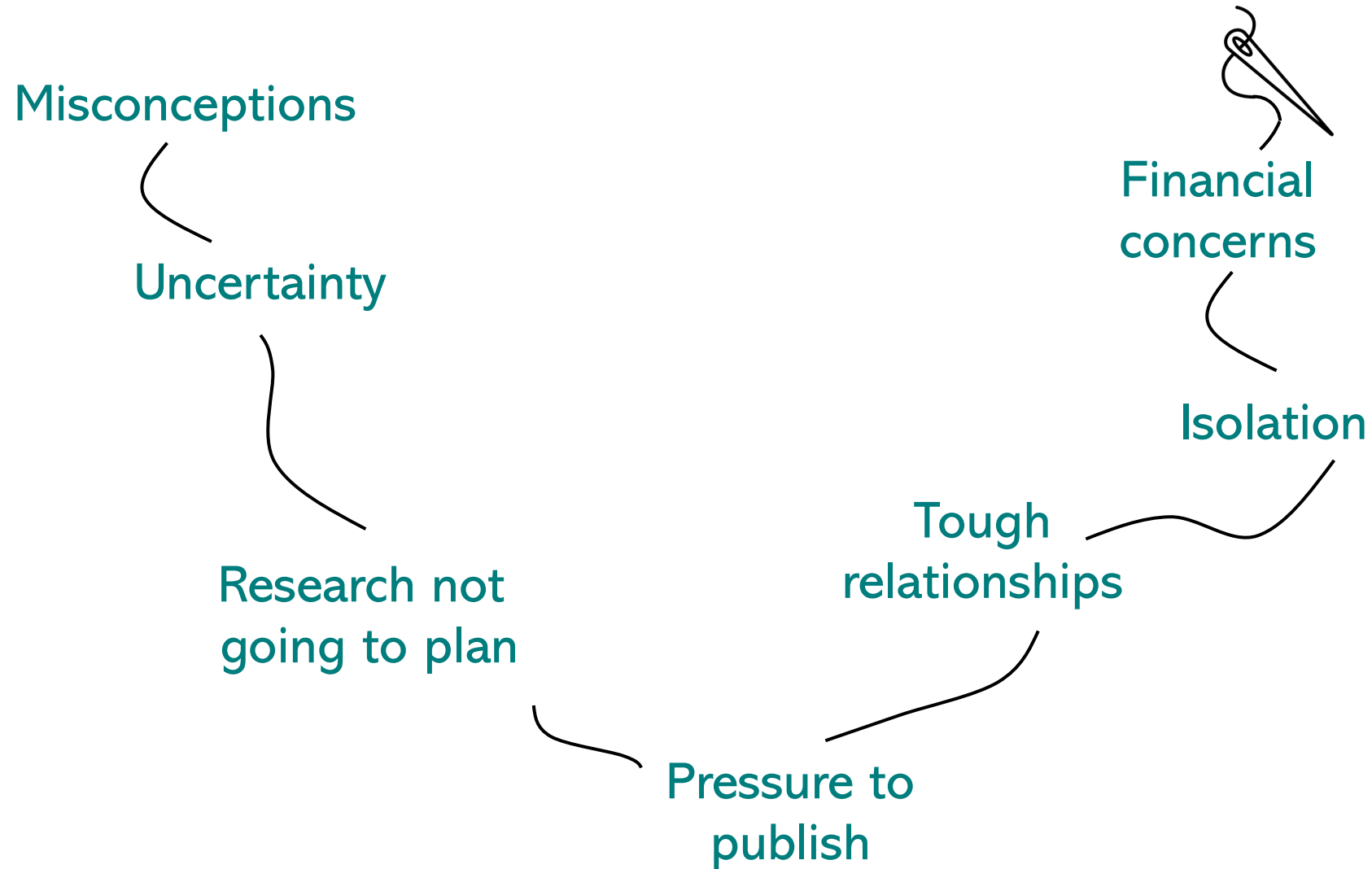
- Every mental health experience is unique
- Advice can sometimes feel disingenuous
- Focus is placed on our capacity to cope
- Must recognise that this is a toolkit



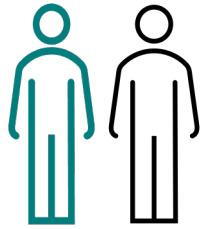
What matters is
improving our ability to
cope (in a healthy way)



(3) PhD specific stressors impact mental health



(4) Yet environmental factors are rarely acknowledged



1 in 2

of researchers have sought, or have wanted to seek, help for mood disorders such as depression or anxiety.⁷

78%

of researchers think that high levels of competition have created unkind and aggressive conditions.⁷

49%

of researchers said they would not feel comfortable talking to those in senior positions about their mental health to get help.⁸

61%

of researchers have witnessed bullying/harassment/racism in their workplaces.⁷

Institutional responsibility for change

⁷ Wellcome Trust, What researchers think about the Culture they work in, 2020 report

⁸ CACTUS Global, Joy and Stress Triggers: A global survey on mental health among researchers, 2020

Well then, what can *we* do about
managing our own mental health?

Giving you the tools to manage your mental health



Biological
factors

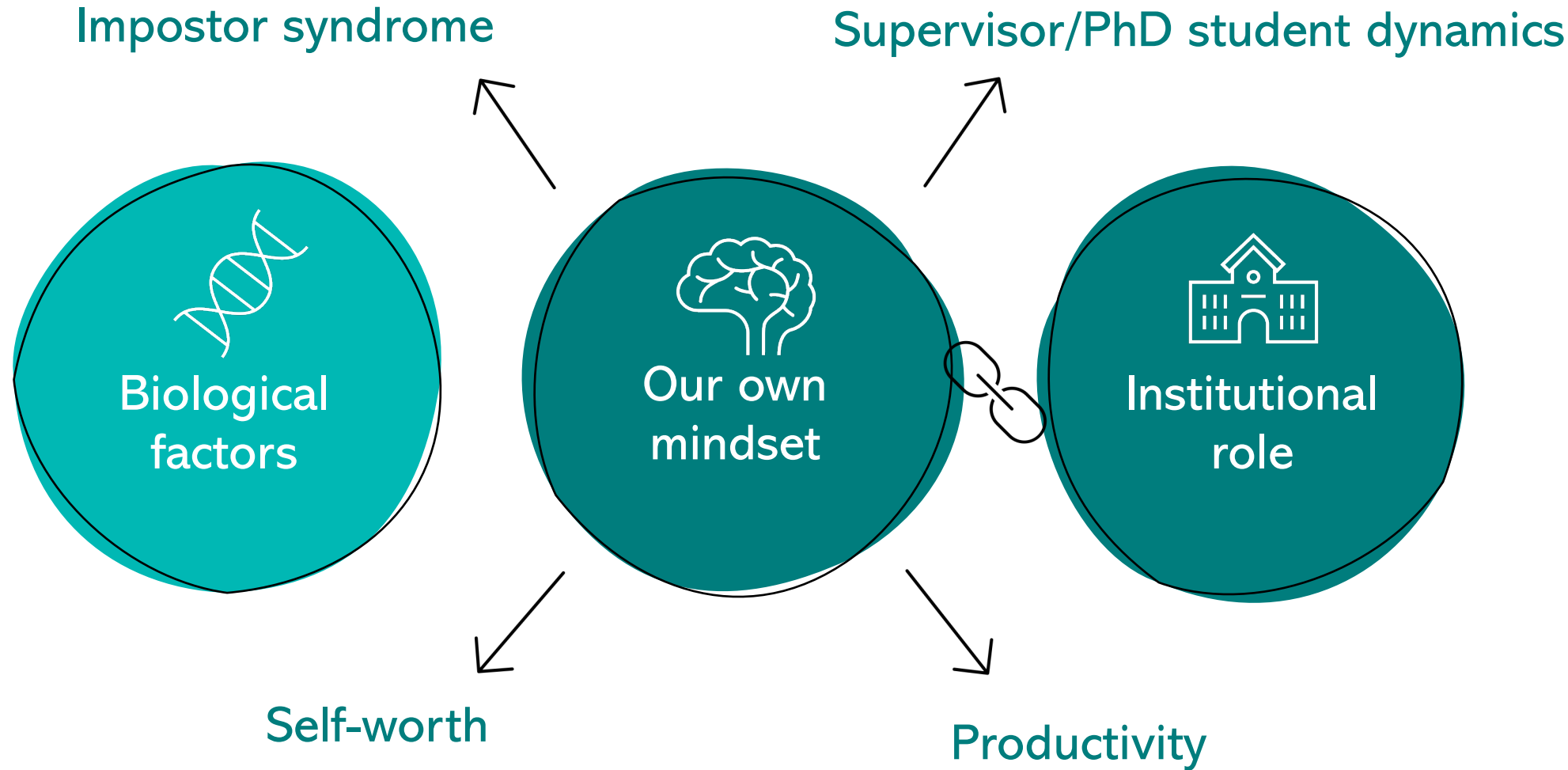


Our own
mindset

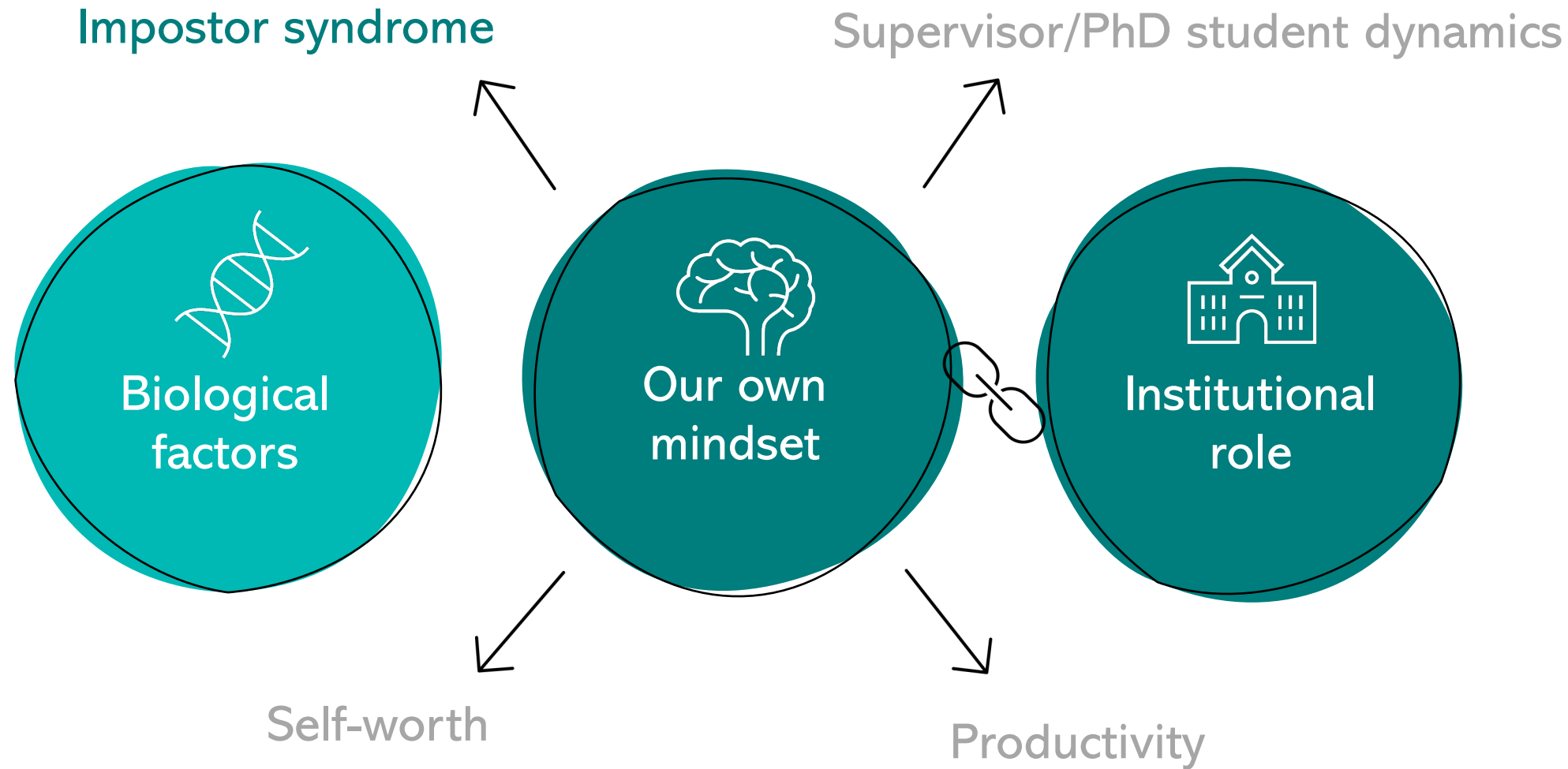


Institutional
role

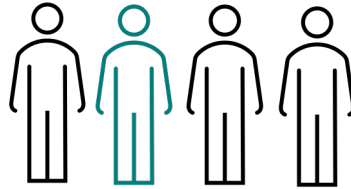
Giving you the tools to manage your mental health



Giving you the tools to manage your mental health



What is the impostor syndrome?

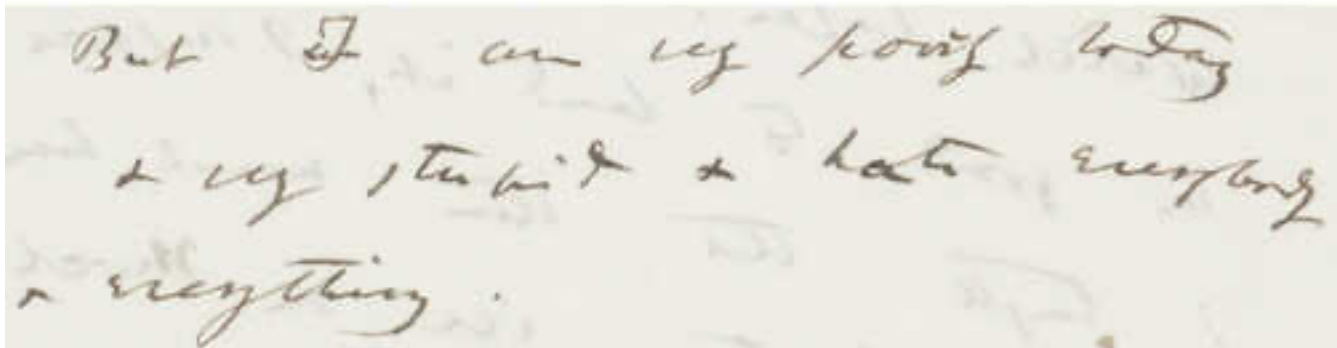


Feeling like a fraud – that you did not get to where you are today on merit

First discussed by **Clance and Imes** (1978) in their ground-breaking work
“The imposter phenomenon in high achieving women: Dynamics and therapeutic intervention.”

Present in men and women **equally**.

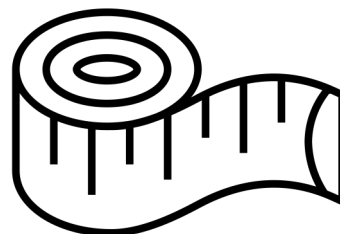
Even Charles Darwin suffered with Impostor Syndrome

A photograph of a handwritten note on aged paper. The text is written in cursive and reads: "But I am very poorly today & very stupid & hate everybody & everything."

“**But I am very poorly today & very stupid & hate everybody & everything.**”

The “inner” voice

“My research isn’t working so I am a failure.”

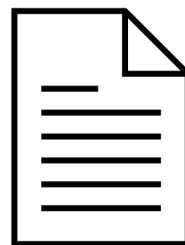
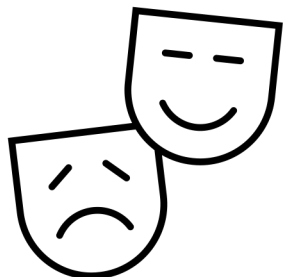


“They are doing much better than me.”

“I need to work 24/7 else I might let my guard slip.”

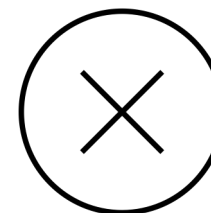


“What if someone figures out I don’t deserve to be here?”



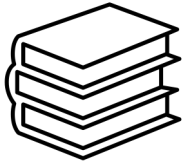
“My grades were a mistake.”

“What if I am really not qualified to do this?”



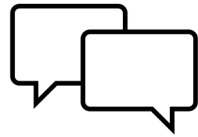
Types of Imposters

The Expert



"I must know everything before I act."

The Lone Wolf



"I can't ask for help else they will know I don't know."

The Perfectionist



"If I do it perfectly they won't notice I'm a fraud."

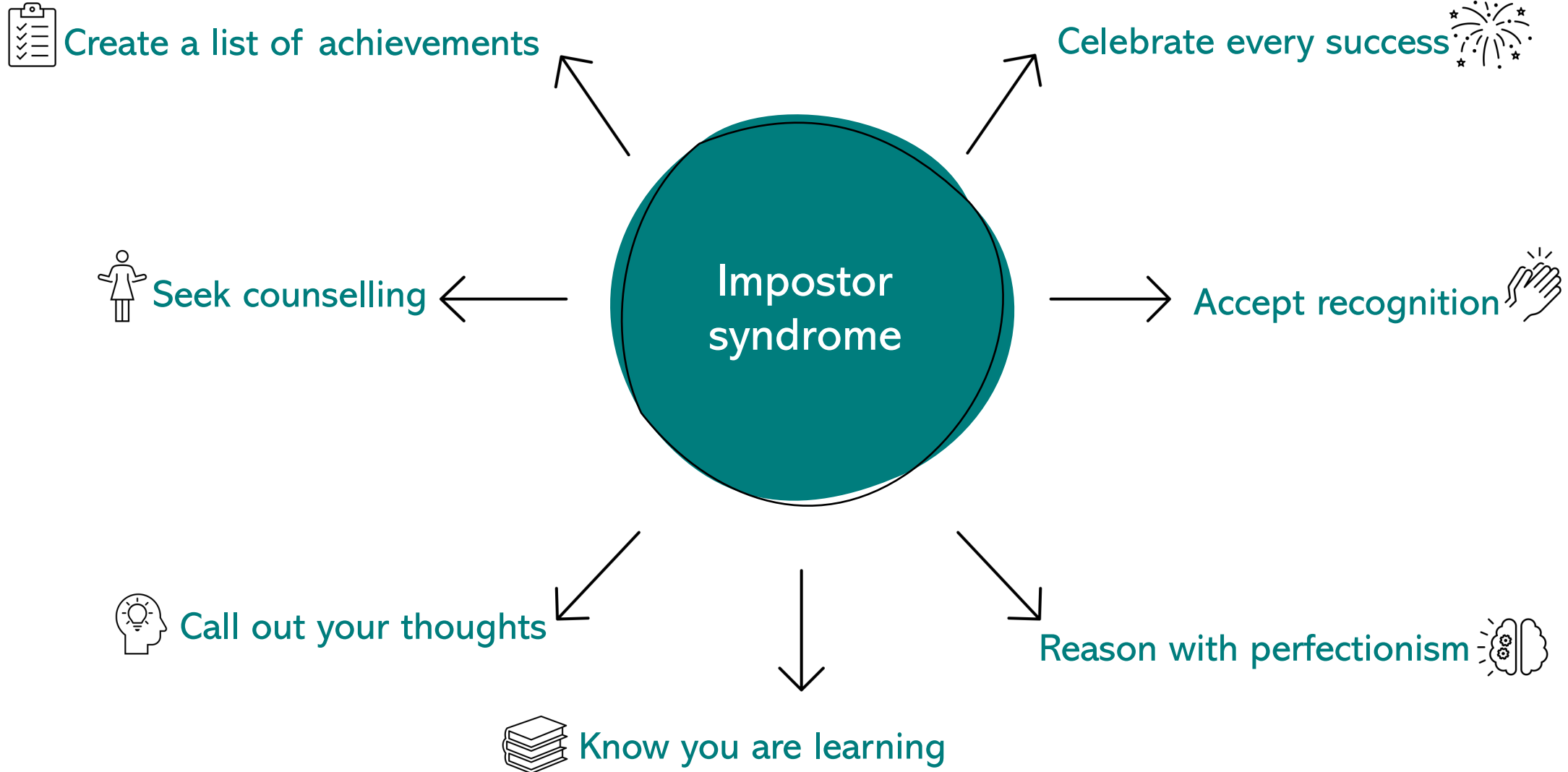
The Superhuman



"If I do ALL of the things it'll distract them."

All of these, if unaddressed can add significant pressure

Managing the Impostor Syndrome



The institutional role in impostor syndrome



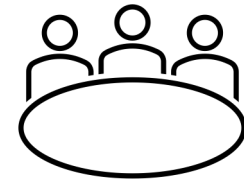
Is there active effort to improve diversity and inclusion?

Are mentoring schemes an option for PhD students?

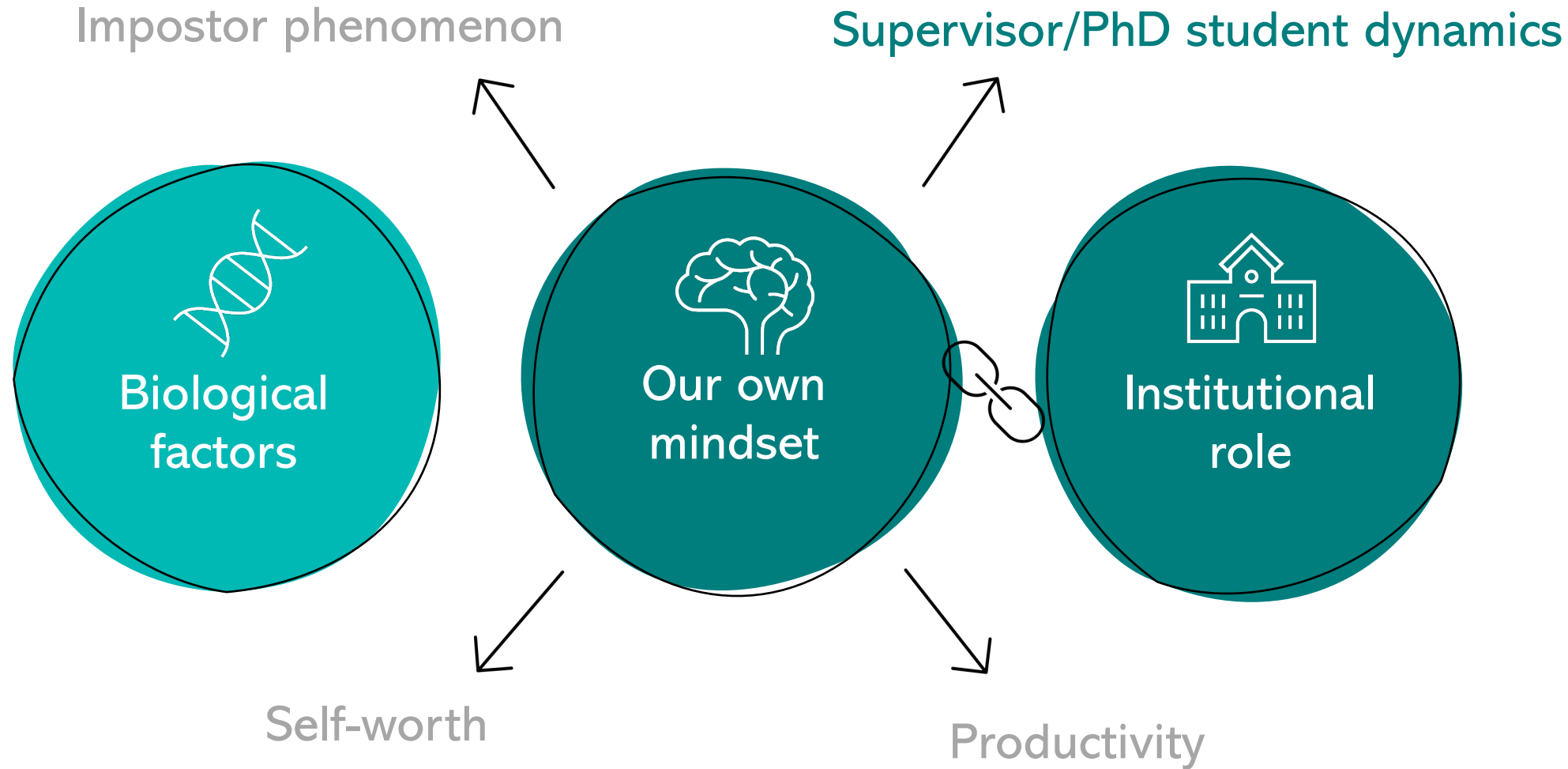


Are there orientation programs for international students?

Is impostor syndrome discussed within academic settings?



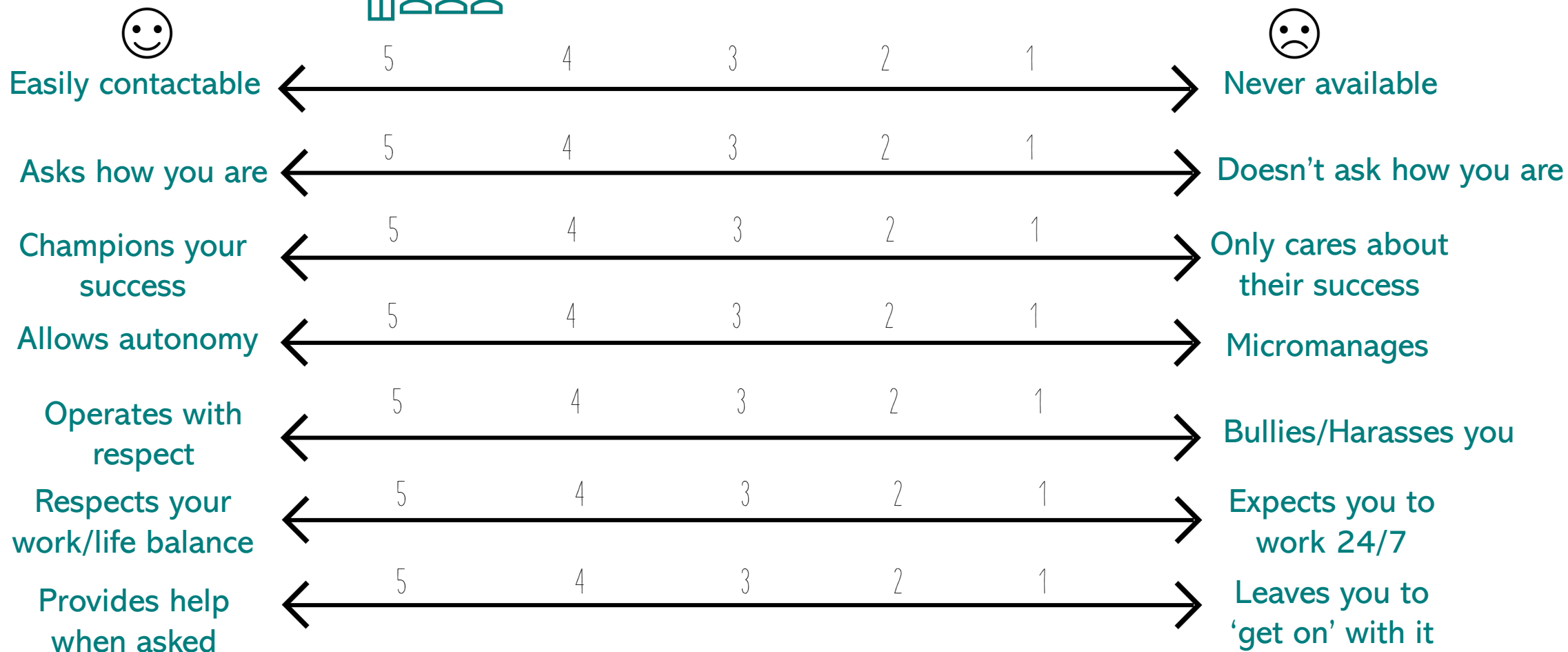
Giving you the tools to manage your mental health



Supervisor/PhD student dynamics



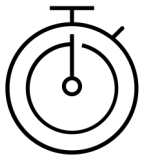
Your relationship with your supervisor
can really impact your PhD experience



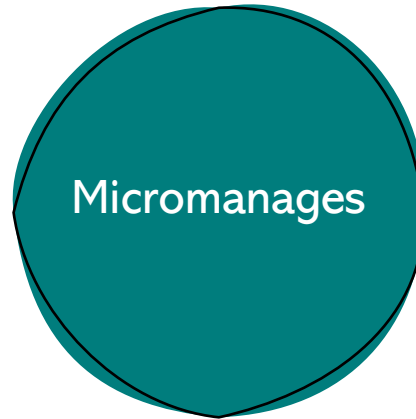
Managing the manager



↓
Explicitly ask for
more contact time



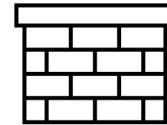
↓
Find an independent
mentor



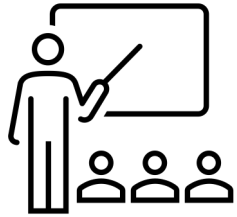
↓
Push back – create
clear, defined targets



↓
Start setting boundaries
– start small

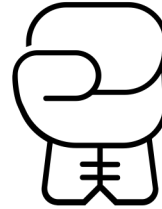


The institutional role in supervisor/student dynamics



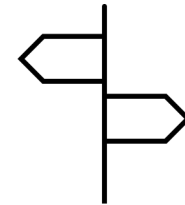
Are supervisors given training on how to supervise students?

Are there clear reporting routes for misconduct?

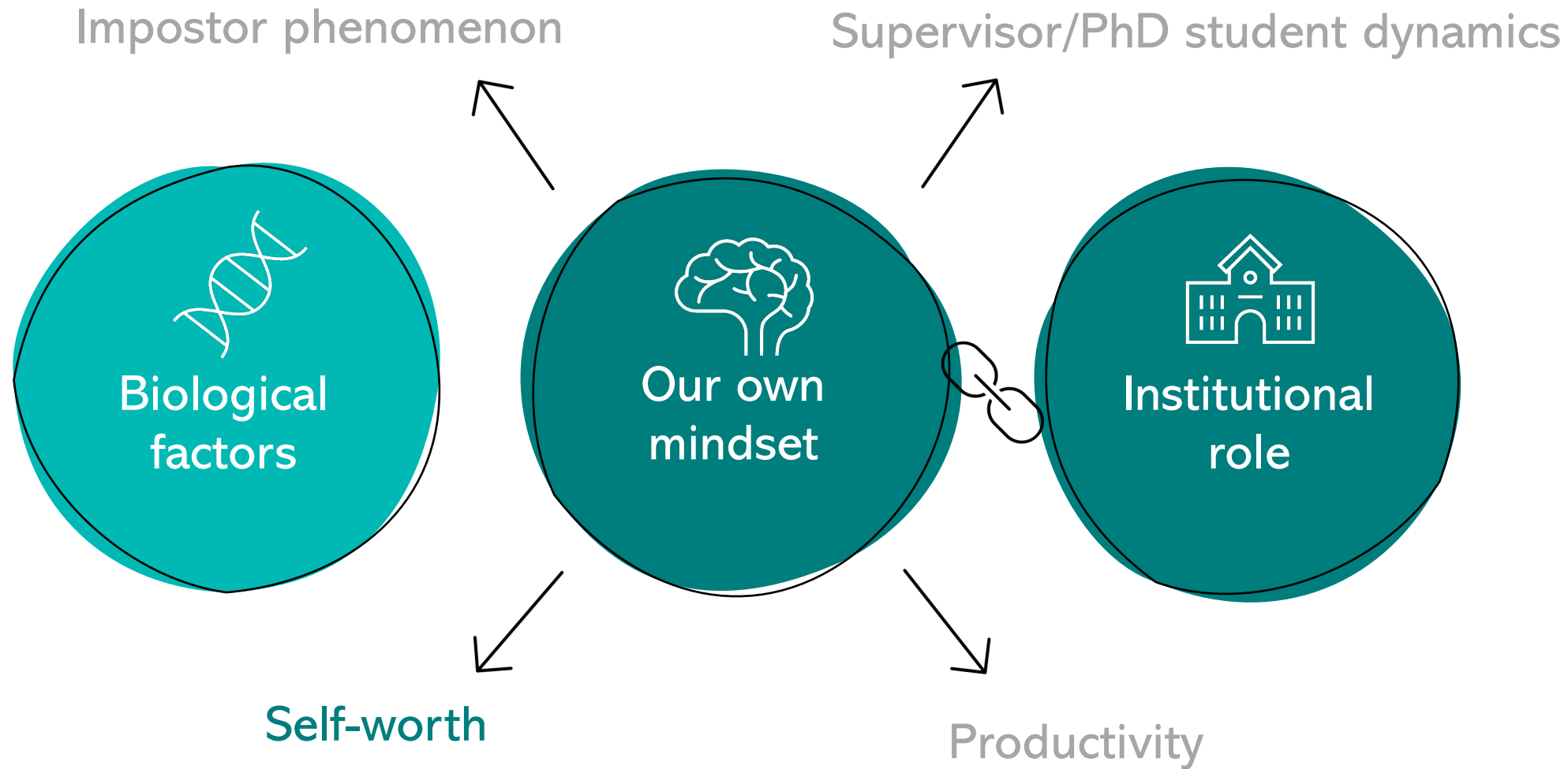


Are known bullies held accountable?

Do supervisors know how and where to point students for support?



Giving you the tools to manage your mental health



Defining your own worth

When I started my scientific career **VS** now



Separating your worth from work



Amanda Luff, MPH
@AmandaPLuff

Replying to @ZJAYres

For a couple months, every day I took a moment to write down one thing I was proud of that day that was NOT work related. I got colorful pens and a special wall calendar so that I would see all the good things all the time.



Dr Dennis Golm
@GolmDennis

Replying to @ZJAYres

Not working on the weekend and having hobbies.

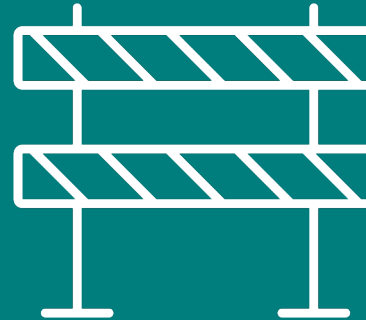


Bronagh McKee 💙💜
@BronaghMcKee1

Replying to @ZJAYres

I took a career break but in fairness it was family caring roles too made the decision. Can't do them all

“ No matter what,
what I have achieved
to date is fact ”



“ Doing other things
means I have joy
elsewhere ”



Joao Pereira
@jdpereira

Replying to @ZJAYres

In terms of academia, the perspective I got from industry helps.

This is a job. It is not a life commitment. There are others. Many and varied.



Michelle 🧐
@LibraryGurrl

Replying to @ZJAYres

Embracing my multiple identities. I am NOT only an academic. I am a mother, a friend, a fitness enthusiast, a book nerd. I find meaning in so many places.

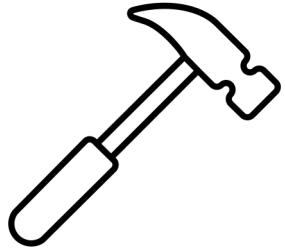


Dr. Enilda Romero-Hall
@eromerohall

Replying to @ZJAYres

I communicate regularly with family and friends who just see me as “Eni” and not Dr. Romero-Hall. Who I am is not attached to my citation count, number of publications, grants, or title. To them I am just Eni.

The institutional role in self-worth



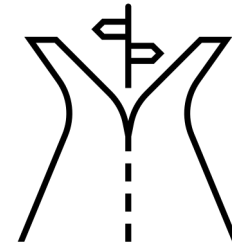
Are students encouraged to develop other skills?

Is work-life balance modelled and protected?

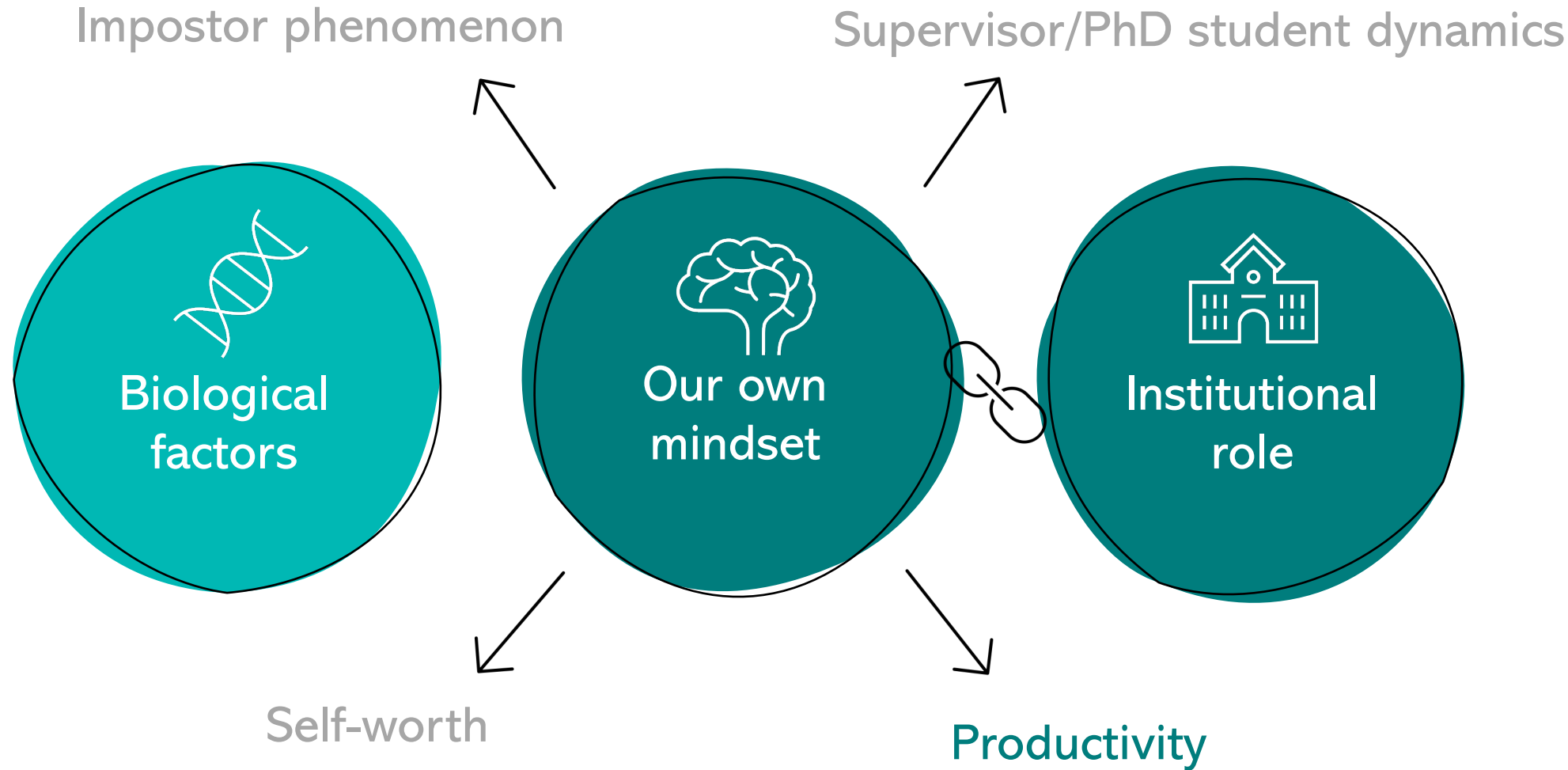


Are people celebrated for more than academic achievements?

Are people encouraged to look at jobs outside of academia?



Giving you the tools to manage your mental health



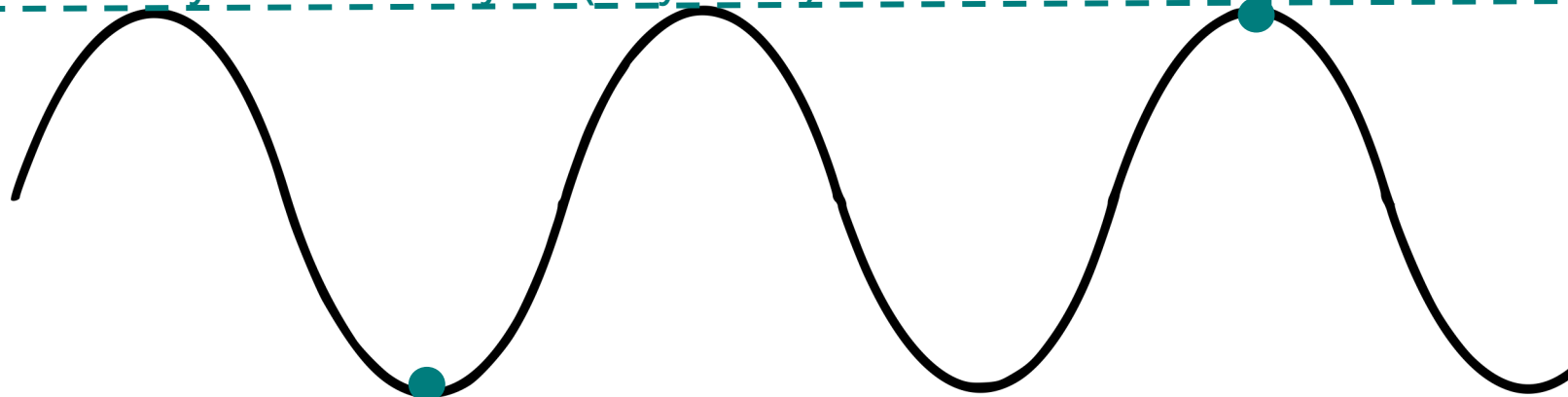
Productivity is a wave

(and this is often linked to our mental wellbeing)

Pushing too hard
can lead to burnout

To stay at the peak we need
to look after our wellbeing

Where we think everyone else always is (they aren't)

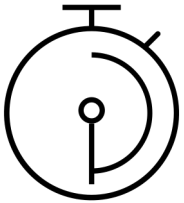


Where we are when we feel bad,
looking up the hill at others being
productive

Burnout can lead to
exhaustion and can lead
to ineffective working

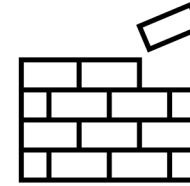
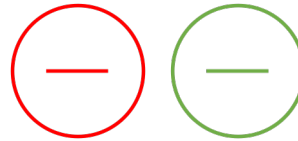
Managing your productivity

Try out time
management
methods



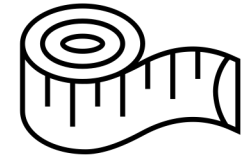
Schedule in
downtime daily

Adapt your to
do list



Focus on
progress not
perfection

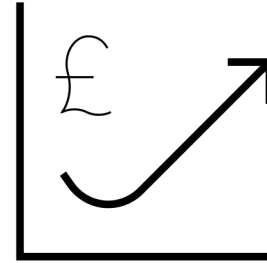
Try to not
compare yourself
with others



The institutional role in productivity pressures

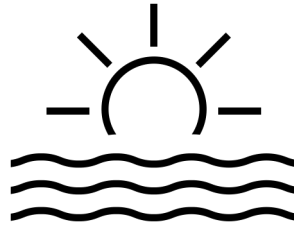


Do postgraduates know
and use their holiday
entitlement?



Are there clear reporting
routes for academic
misconduct?

Are all contributions to
academic departments
recognised and valued?



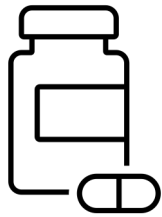
Are postgraduates paid a
living wage and does it
keep up with inflation?



Seeking help

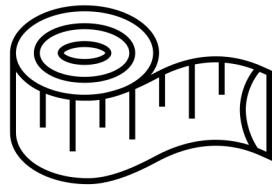
significant **change** in the person's normal experience
upon onset, impacting daily function negatively

-----NORMAL



"I am not sick enough"

"Others have it worse"

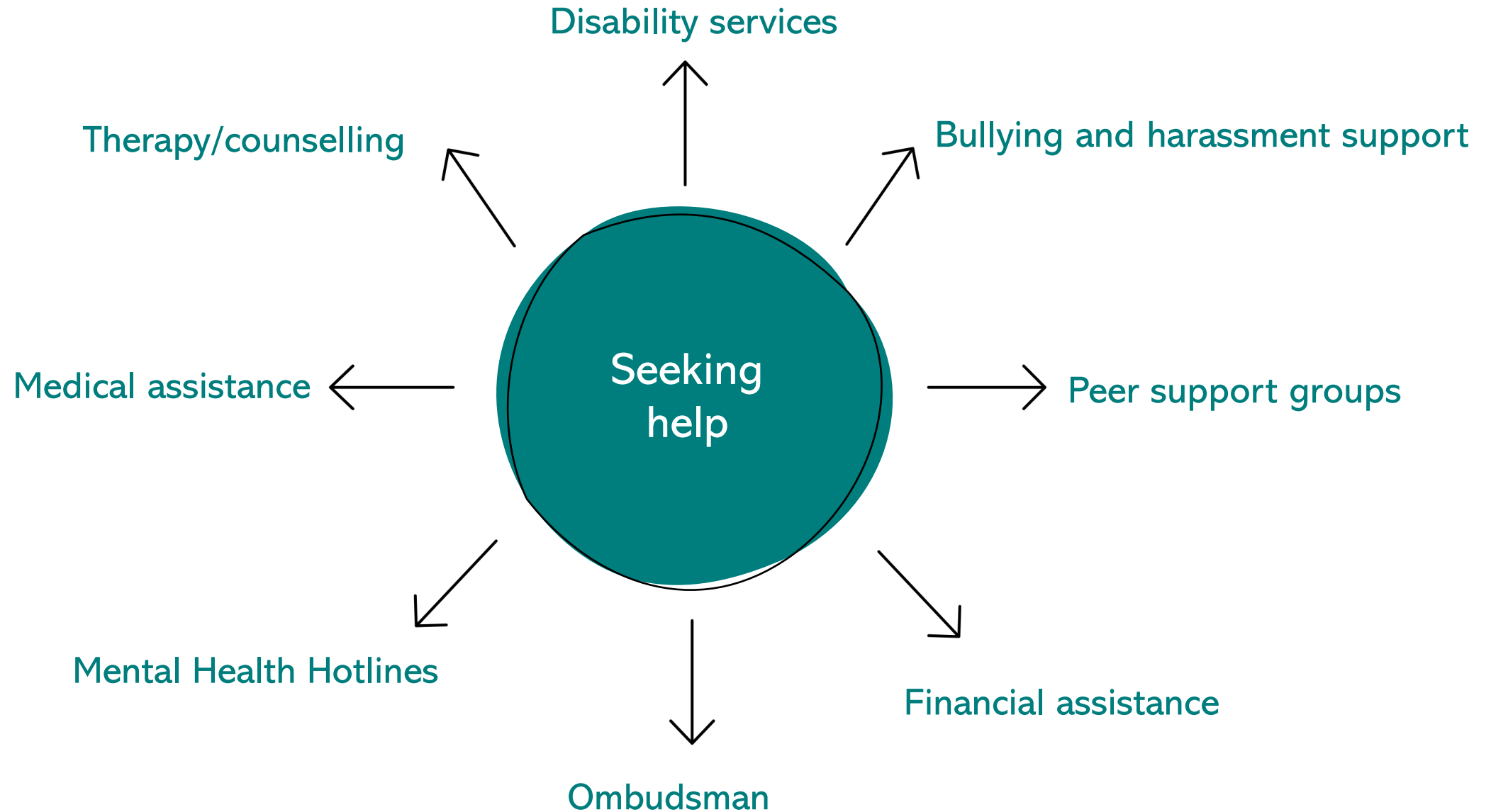


"I should be grateful"

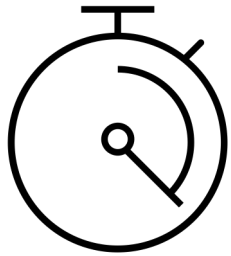
"I don't deserve help"



What help is available?

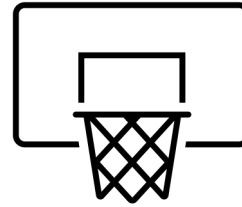
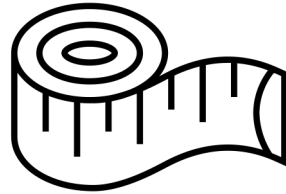


The institutional role in seeking help



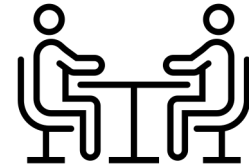
Are resources available that are quick and free to access?

Are the resources being provided tailored to PhD students?

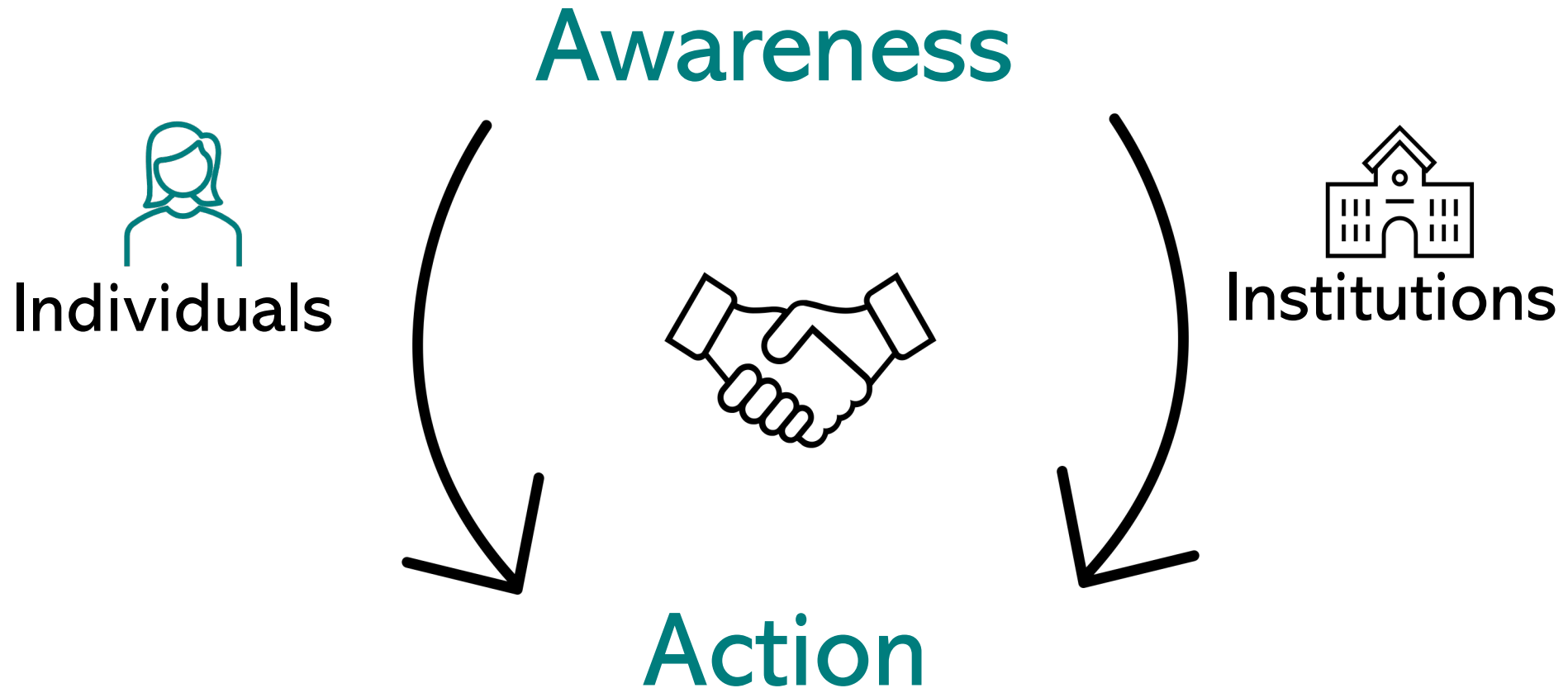


Does support require many hoops to be jumped through?

Is an open culture about talking about mental health fostered?



Improving PhD mental health



Thank you!



Immediate Support

+44(0)151 7951000

advice@liverpool.ac.uk

MerseyCare Zero Suicide Alliance

Samaritans: 116123