

PhD students' mental health is poor and the pandemic made it worse—but there are coping strategies that can help

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[A pre-pandemic study](#) on Ph.D. students' mental health showed that they often struggle with such issues. Financial insecurity and feelings of

isolation can be among the factors affecting students' well-being.

The pandemic made the situation worse. [We carried out research](#) that looked into the impact of the pandemic on Ph.D. students, surveying 1,780 students in summer 2020. We asked them about their mental health, the methods they used to cope and their satisfaction with their progress in their doctoral study.

Unsurprisingly, the lockdown in summer 2020 affected the ability to study for many. [We found that](#) 86% of the UK Ph.D. students we surveyed reported a negative impact on their research progress.

But, alarmingly, 75% reported experiencing moderate to [severe depression](#). This is a rate significantly higher than that observed in the [general population](#) and [pre-pandemic Ph.D. student cohorts](#).

Risk of depression

Our findings suggested an increased risk of depression among those in the research-heavy stage of their Ph.D.—for example during [data collection](#) or laboratory experiments. This was in contrast to those in the initial stages, or who were nearing the end of their Ph.D. and writing up their research. The data collection stage was more likely to have been disrupted by the pandemic.

Our research also showed that Ph.D. students with caring responsibilities faced a greatly increased risk of depression. In our [our study](#), we found that Ph.D. students with childcare responsibilities were 14 times more likely to develop depressive symptoms than Ph.D. students without children.

This does align with findings on [people in the general UK population with childcare responsibilities](#) during the pandemic. Adults with

childcare responsibilities were 1.4 times more likely to develop depression or anxiety compared to their counterparts without children or childcare duties.

It was also interesting to find that Ph.D. students facing the disruption caused by the pandemic who did not receive an extension—extra financial support and time beyond the expected funding period—or were uncertain about whether they would receive an extension at the time of our study, were 5.4 times more likely to experience significant depression.

[Our research](#) also used a questionnaire designed to measure effective and ineffective ways to cope with stressful life events. We used this to look at which coping skills —strategies to deal with challenges and difficult situations—used by Ph.D. students were associated with lower depression levels. These "good" strategies included "getting comfort and understanding from someone" and "taking action to try to make the situation better".

Interestingly, female Ph.D. students, who were slightly less likely than men to experience significant depression, showed a greater tendency to use good coping approaches compared to their counterparts. Specifically, they favored the above two coping strategies that are associated with lower levels of depression.

On the other hand, certain [coping strategies](#) were associated with higher depression levels. Prominent among these were self-critical tendencies and the use of substances like alcohol or drugs to cope with challenging situations.

A supportive environment

Creating a supportive environment is not solely the responsibility of

individual students or academic advisors. Universities and funding bodies must play a proactive role in mitigating the challenges faced by Ph.D. students.

By taking proactive steps, universities could create a more supportive environment for their students and help to ensure their success.

Training in coping skills could be extremely beneficial for Ph.D. students. For instance, the University of Cambridge includes this training as part of its [building resilience course](#).

A focus on good strategies or positive reframing—focusing on positive aspects and potential opportunities—could be crucial. Additionally, encouraging Ph.D. students to seek [emotional support](#) may also help reduce the risk of [depression](#).

Another example is the establishment of [Ph.D. well-being support groups](#), an intervention funded by the [Office for Students and Research England Catalyst Fund](#).

Groups like this serve as a platform for productive discussions and meaningful interactions among students, facilitated by the presence of a dedicated mental health advisor.

Our research showed how much [financial insecurity](#) and caring responsibilities had an effect on mental health. More practical examples of a supportive environment offered by universities could include funded extensions to Ph.D. study and the availability of flexible childcare options.

By creating supportive environments, universities can invest in the success and well-being of the next generation of researchers.

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