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# Self-care and social support in postgraduate study

Jemaine Stacey, Catherine V. Talbot & Astrid Coxon

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*Postgraduate study can often be a challenging and lonely experience. We share our experiences and advice in managing looking after yourself during your research and study, giving particular focus to social support strategies.*

Undertaking postgraduate study can be one of the most challenging, stressful, and isolating experiences in the course of an academic career (Cumerma, 2018). As well as the pressures of conducting and managing a large research project as an independent researcher, many postgraduate students struggle to balance their work and personal life. Postgraduate study can be very intense, and students often report poor health and wellbeing throughout the course of their research (Levecque et al., 2017).

In this article, we will discuss some key strategies we have used in managing challenges encountered during our postgraduate study, with a special focus on social support. In the first section, Astrid Coxon will describe her ‘three C’s’ of self-care in postgraduate study, and suggest some simple ways to manage your workload and wellbeing. In the second section, Catherine Talbot will discuss the value of social media for social support by reflecting on her own experiences of using blogs and Twitter. Finally, Jemaine Stacey will outline the benefits of social support and her own experiences of building a support network.

## The ‘Three Cs’ of postgraduate study

### *Capability*

Throughout Higher Education Institutions (HEIs), you will likely come across a phenomenon known as ‘imposter syndrome’ (Parkman, 2016). This term, first introduced in 1978, refers to an internalised feeling that, despite their numerous achievements, the individual does not feel they are worthy of their success (Clance & Imes, 1978). Anecdotally, I have spoken to academic peers who have explained how they fear being ‘found out’ as incompetent, worrying that their current position is the result of some error or oversight. Perhaps you have experienced this feeling yourself? Although there is no definitive way to completely eradicate this feeling, there are some practical ways in which you can help manage it.

- *Take a realistic assessment of your current skill-set:* Talk to your supervisors and your peers to gain some insight into your strengths and weaknesses in relation to your academic career. This is not a punitive exercise, but allows you to:
- *Identify areas for growth, and address them:* Use these insights to inform your continuing professional development. This could include training to use specialist software, workshops and seminars, or working on your presentation skills.
- *Celebrate your achievements:* Try writing up an academic CV, including presentations you have given, training undertaken, and any articles, discussion pieces or reviews you have contributed to publications (such as *PsyPAG Quarterly!*). Recognise and celebrate your achievements, and bolster your sense of self-efficacy.

### **Consistency**

Postgraduate study is hugely demanding, and sadly a prevailing rhetoric has developed that, to succeed in academia, individuals must burn the midnight oil and commit to their research over and above everything else. However, adopting this attitude runs the risk of academic burnout and developing mental health problems such as depression (Levecque et al., 2017). Consistency can be crucial to prevent the development of bad habits.

- *Treat your postgraduate studies like a 'regular' job:* This means having days off in the week, regular working hours (where possible), breaks throughout the day and even annual leave. Although a rigid schedule may not suit everyone, it can be a practical way to delineate your work and personal life, safeguarding your leisure time.
- *If you work 'overtime' one day, take it off 'in lieu' later:* The habit of late-night working can be hard to break – recognise when you have overworked in order to meet a deadline, and address it.
- *Try to establish a routine:* Try to create protected time (and protected spaces) for leisure, your family and social life (Powell, 2017). I do the majority of my work in a home office, but I also frequently take my laptop to coffee shops for a welcome change of scenery. I've made it a rule to never take my work to bed, or to the living room, otherwise every space becomes a workspace and it can be very hard to switch off (Cropley & Millward, 2009). I also use a Google calendar and the task management application Trello to help manage my time and prioritise my tasks.
- *Remember to take time to reflect:* Reflectivity and reflexivity are essential but often overlooked skills in postgraduate study. Build this into your work routine. Not only will regular reflection help you to consolidate your understanding, but it creates an audit trail for you to appraise your development over time (see above, 'Capability').

### **Communication**

Even when you have mastered your own sense of self-efficacy and developed a consistent and stable work routine, there may still be times when you feel hopeless, overwhelmed or isolated. Undertaking postgraduate research and study can be a very lonely experience, but it does not have to be this way. Turning to family, friends, your postgraduate peers and your supervisors for support can be an effective strategy in coping with the challenges of postgraduate life (Byers et al., 2014). Your supervisors can give you informed and objective views on your work and capability, while connecting with your peer group can be another means of addressing common concerns such as imposter syndrome.

If, like me, you conduct the majority of your research and study off-campus, it can be even easier to unintentionally isolate yourself. Here, your wider social circle can be particularly useful. Although friends and family may not necessarily have insight into the specific challenges faced by postgraduate students, they can still support you in other ways, and provide welcome respite from academic life (Kinman & Jones, 2008). In my own experience, I have found social media platforms such as Twitter invaluable as a means of connecting with peers in the wider scientific community. In the following two sections, Catherine and Jemaine will discuss the importance of communication and social support in postgraduate study in more detail.

### **A virtual community of postgraduates: Blogging and #PhDChat**

The postgraduate journey can be a lone venture for many students; however, social media could be changing the postgraduate experience for some students by offering a new avenue for social support. While there are many different types of social media, I have found blogging websites and Twitter to be particularly helpful and will focus on these.

While academic blogging offers a great way of communicating your research to a wider audience, it can also be an excellent source of support that you can draw on during your post-

graduate studies. Postgraduates and early career researchers have used blogs to share their experiences, struggles, and critique the working practices of academia (Gregg, 2009). Since postgraduate study can be such an isolating experience, you might find it reassuring to read blogs written by fellow postgraduates. I have found it very comforting to read blogs written by postgraduates as they have made me feel less alone in my experiences and have given me practical advice on how to overcome certain challenges (e.g. making time for self-care). A quick Google search of 'PhD blogs' will locate the most highly recommended and frequently visited blogs written by postgraduate students.

I have also found the act of blogging itself to be a therapeutic process. I created my blog after going through a bit of a blip in my PhD journey and found the process of writing about my struggles to be cathartic. It is also encouraging to know that one day someone else could benefit from reading my story. After publishing one of my blogs about struggling to manage multiple projects, several people tweeted and approached me at work to tell me they completely related to my blog post, reminding me that it is important for us to openly discuss the struggles we face as postgraduates and to not suffer in silence. Setting up a blog is easy to do using websites such as [wordpress.com](http://wordpress.com) and [wix.com](http://wix.com). I would recommend blogging to any postgraduate student – your experiences are valuable!

Twitter is another platform that I have used during my PhD to engage with the wider postgraduate community. Other postgraduate students and early career researchers are using Twitter for emotional support, as well as academic support, which is particularly important at this stage of their career (Lupton, 2014). On Twitter, a thriving community of postgraduates share their experiences and support one another using the hashtags '#PhDChat', '#PhDForum', and '#PhDLife'.

As a postgraduate student it is difficult to set aside time for writing. There have been times when I have tried to sit down and write my thesis but have lacked the motivation to do this. During these challenging times, I have found 'Shut Up and Write Tuesdays' (SUWT; O'Dwyer et al., 2016) to be a fantastic writing resource. SUWT is a virtual community of academic writers and on the first and third Tuesday of each month SUWT host three virtual writing sessions on Twitter. The sessions follow the Pomodoro format (two 25 minute blocks, separated by a five minute break). After each writing block the host cheers you on and provides advice. The UK session is hosted at 10am (GMT) by @SUWT, however, sessions are also hosted by @SUWTues and @SUWTNA for those in the Asia-Pacific region and those in the US and Canada, respectively. There is a session to suit everyone, whether you are an early bird or a night owl like me! If you would like to host your own SUWT when a session isn't running, you can use the hashtag #diysuwt to connect with fellow academic writers.

During my PhD, I have tweeted about my accomplishments and important milestones, such as completing data collection or submitting my first manuscript. Other postgraduate students often like these tweets and send their congratulations, giving me a sense of achievement. I have also used Twitter to discuss the less positive aspects of my PhD, such as being overwhelmed with data or suffering from a bad case of imposter syndrome. It is in these cases that I have found Twitter to be particularly valuable, because the online community of postgraduates are so helpful and will often reply to my tweets with practical advice and some much-needed support! It is reassuring to know that you are not alone in your experiences. The constant availability of Twitter coupled with the international community of postgraduates using #PhDChat means that you never have to feel completely isolated as you can tweet about your experiences at any time.

I cannot finish writing about online support without mentioning the memes and GIFs that are frequently shared on Twitter, giving me tremendous joy throughout the course of my PhD. These memes and GIFs joke about postgraduate life and have honestly helped me

through some of the darker times of my PhD. Remember, laughter is one of the best methods of coping!

### **Building social support networks**

As well as interacting with the online postgraduate community, face-to-face support is also important. This section will now focus on social support networks and reflections on how peer support has helped during postgraduate studies.

There are specific challenges involved with each year of postgraduate study; the first year in particular can be daunting as students acclimatise to their new roles. This involves building and managing new professional and personal relationships with faculty and fellow students. These relationships are integral in creating a positive experience during postgraduate study. There are several key factors which have been identified as detrimental to the completion of doctoral studies, one of which is social isolation (Lovitts, 2001). This is defined as a lack of meaningful social connections (Lovitts, 2001). The stressful nature of postgraduate studies coupled with an unfamiliar environment (new university/department) can contribute to increased feelings of social isolation.

A social support network including peers, colleagues, friends and family can help to combat feelings of social isolation and reduce stress (Jairam & Kahl Jr., 2012). This section will now outline personal experiences of engaging with the university community and the benefits of building a social support network. Like most postgraduate students, when I started my PhD I had to contend with a new city, a new university and a lot of new people. After the initial welcome events I found that despite the large numbers of postgraduate students there was not much opportunity to socialise. At other universities it may also be the case that students are situated in a department other than psychology or are one of only a few postgraduate students, making it difficult to meet other people.

To overcome this, I decided to contact all the psychology PhD students and research staff to organise a social event. This became a regular event where we would meet every four to six weeks and go for a meal. The social was useful when I was new to the university as it gave me the opportunity to make friends and socialise with people who were at different stages of their studies. Including research staff was also valuable because I was able to get to know other people in the department and it was good to talk to people who had completed their PhDs as they were able to offer advice, and it was encouraging to talk to people who have successfully completed their studies.

However, the logistics of organising such an event for a large group of people can be time-consuming. Recently, staff at my university have established other opportunities to socialise including a weekly coffee morning which the whole department is invited to. This is a good way to meet people face-to-face and it occurs at a set time and day every week which means there is no extra administration involved. Other ongoing social events which work well include team sports and pub quizzes.

As well as socialising, the benefits of these events are that peers and other academics can provide both practical and emotional support (Jairam & Kahl Jr., 2012). I have found that during different stages of my PhD the type of support I have needed has changed. In my first year it was useful to have practical support, for example; to discuss specific research problems or get clarification on university processes. In second year, students often experience a dip in confidence and motivation referred to as the 'second year dip' or 'second-year blues'. This is where I found encouragement from peers extremely helpful in overcoming these feelings.

At the time of writing I am nearing the end of my third year and find that emotional support from peers is invaluable. The looming thesis deadline coupled with the pressure of securing a job can be overwhelming and cause a lot of stress. Being able to discuss this with

peers has helped me to realise that these are issues which every postgraduate experiences and they can be overcome.

As well as receiving emotional support, I have also found that helping other students has had a positive impact on my studies. I am able to give advice about parts of the course I have already completed which has helped to combat imposter syndrome through making me appreciate the knowledge I have gained during my postgraduate studies.

Research examining the factors which aid postgraduate students to complete their studies advocates utilising support networks (Jairam & Kahl Jr., 2012). As peers share in the same experiences they are well-placed to provide support (Hadjioannou, Shelton, Fu & Dhanarattigannon, 2007; Jairam & Kahl Jr., 2012). Based on current research and my personal experiences, I would strongly encourage postgraduate students to seek out other students and start building your own support network.

### **Conclusions**

Self-care strategies and a social support network (online or face-to-face) are essential for getting through postgraduate study. This article has highlighted the benefits of peer support and advocates being proactive in order to seek out social support and build your own network. In the interests of peer support, perhaps you would like to share some of your self-care strategies with us on Twitter!

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## Resources

### Blogs

<https://suwtuesdays.wordpress.com/>  
<https://thesiswhisperer.com/>  
<https://phdlife.warwick.ac.uk/>  
<http://thegradstudentway.com/blog/>

### Twitter accounts

@PhDComics  
@AcademiaObscura  
@PhDWriteUp  
@PhDPositivity  
@SUWTUK

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