

The Role of Research Office in Postdoctoral Researchers' Mental Health and Wellbeing





Audience reminders

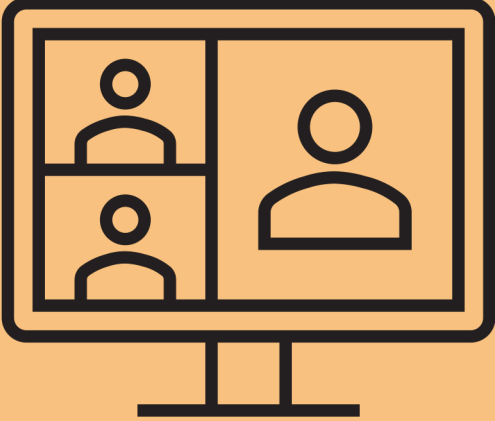
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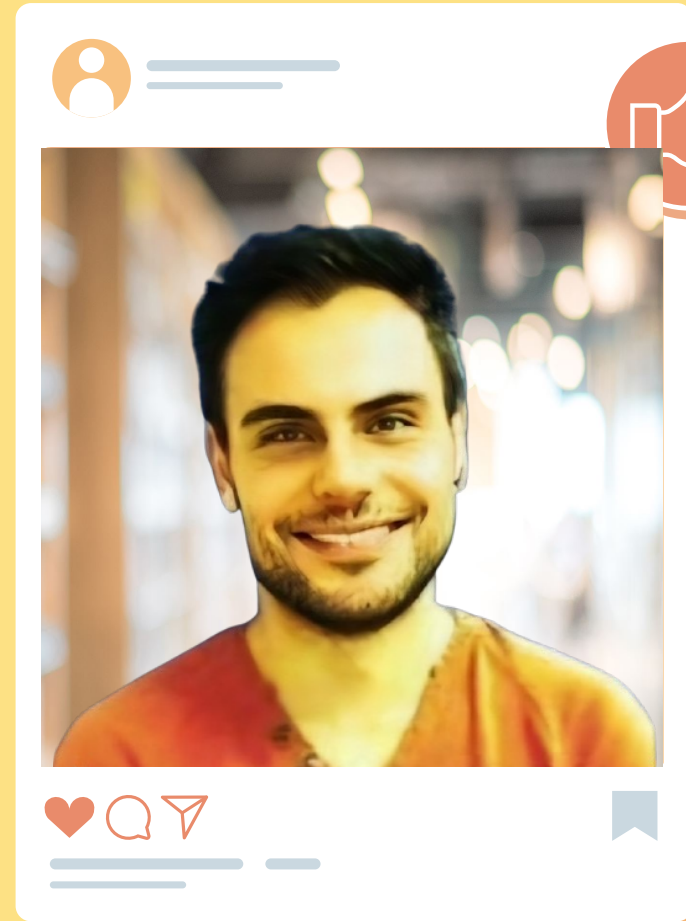


Hello, I'm...Frane

I am an applied psychologist and clinical associate working at NHS Scotland. I also work as a Low-Intensity Therapist. Besides my clinical roles, I am also actively engaged in research and teaching with Doctoral College.

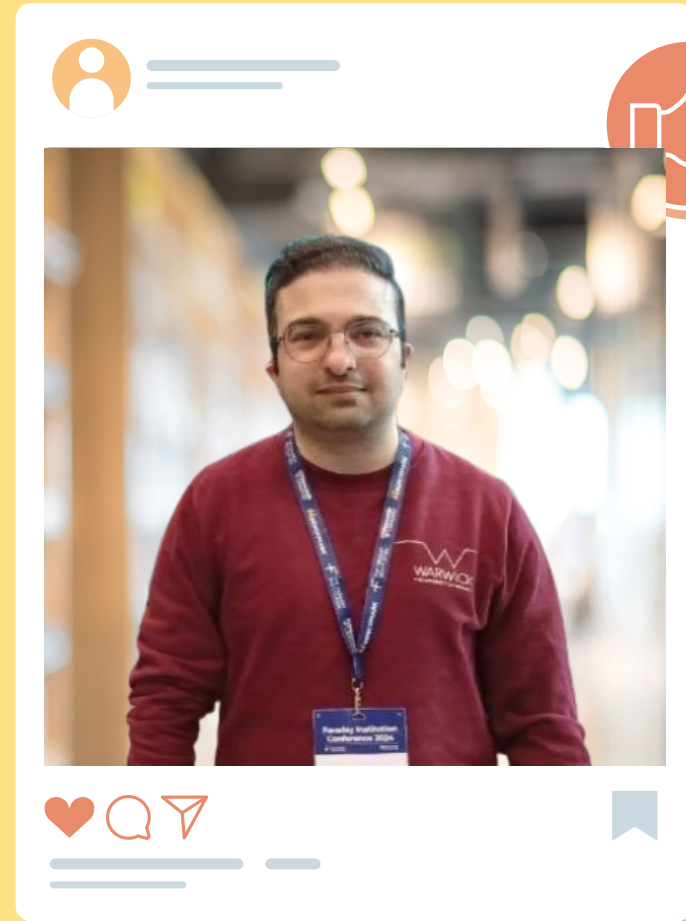
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Hello, I'm... Ehsan

Completed PhD in the chemistry department at the University of Warwick. Currently, I am a postdoctoral researcher at the School of Engineering.

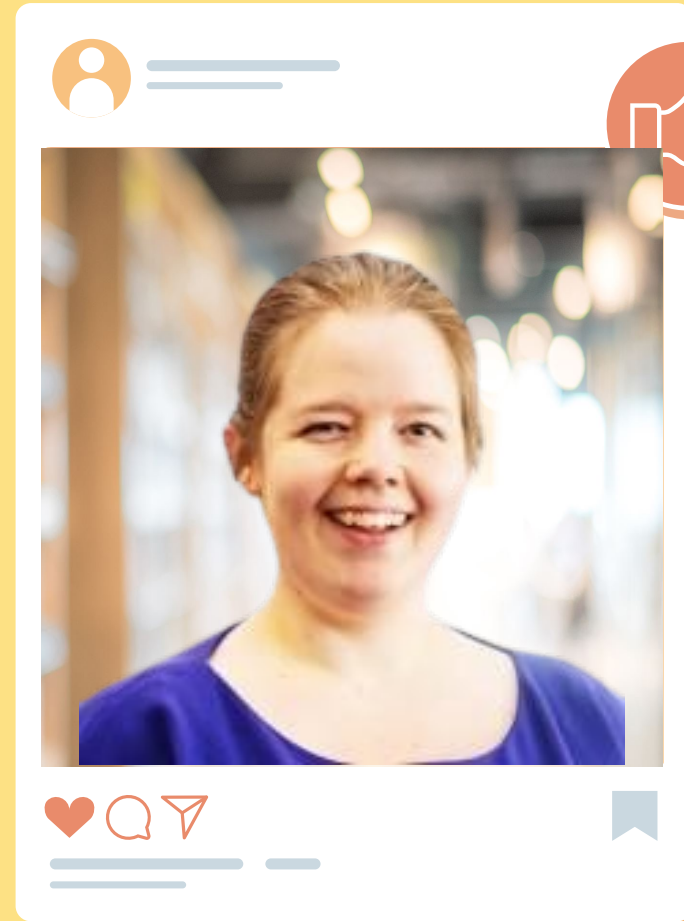
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Hello, I'm ...Sara

I am the Research Manager for WMG, supporting academics with research activities, including funding opportunities, networking, collaborations, reviewing applications, and facilitating outcomes from projects like publication strategy and capturing impact from our research.

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Aim of this session is...

01

To discuss postdocs' specific challenges, focusing on mental health and the available support mechanisms.

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02

To explore how the experience of being in academia can sometimes create unexpected setbacks, like project rejections, and how these events can cause stress, anxiety, and even depression.

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03

To address the importance of building a supportive, empathetic, and culturally sensitive environment for postdocs to thrive, even when setbacks arise.

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04

To highlight how these challenges often come with uncertainty and, at times, dashed hopes, which can further exacerbate mental health struggles.

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What is a postdoc?

- Postdoctoral researchers (postdocs) are considered essential pillars of academia
- Life as a postdoc is a nuanced blend of research fervour, the pursuit of academic excellence and the relentless drive for career progression
- Postdocs generally move from one project to the next with no guarantee of a permanent employment contract

Source: Nxele, S.R. A wish list to improve postdoctoral life. *Nat Rev Bioeng* 2, 631–632 (2024). <https://doi.org/10.1038/s44222-024-00202-4>

We will talk first about...

...specific postdocs' challenges, while focusing on mental health and the available support mechanisms



Anxiety

Anxiety is what we feel when we are worried, tense or afraid.

We all experience anxiety

Anxiety is something we all experience from time to time.

However

anxiety in itself is not dangerous; although anxiety may feel horrible, it is not harmful

Natural and useful response

Anxiety is a natural and, at times, useful emotion to experience.

Symptoms of Anxiety

- Feeling stressed out
- Feeling tense or nervous
- Unable to relax
- Feeling on-edge or irritable

Anxiety as a warning signal

It is our mind's warning signal that something is dangerous, and we must act.

Anxiety doesn't last forever

When we are anxious, it may feel like the anxiety is never going to end, but all anxiety is temporary and will eventually decrease

Stress

Stress is how we react under pressure in situations we do not feel we can manage or control.

Stress as a normal response

Stress keeps us motivated to meet demands.

However

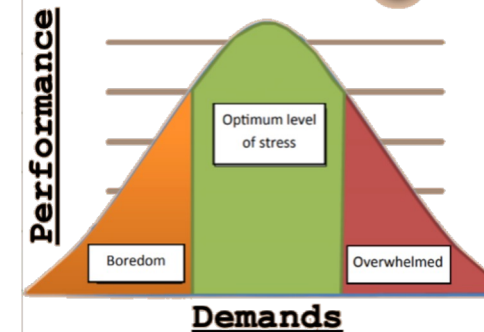
Stress in itself is not dangerous; although stress may feel horrible, too much stress can have an impact on body and mind.

Striking a balance is a key

Too little stress causes boredom, while too much can lead to burnout and anxiety.

Symptoms of Anxiety

- Feeling stressed out
- Feeling tense or nervous
- Unable to relax
- Feeling on-edge or irritable



Prolonged or intensive stress is a problem

Stress is a problem when it is prolonged or is very intense

Anxiety doesn't last forever

When we are anxious, it may feel like the anxiety is never going to end, but all anxiety is temporary and will eventually decrease

So how chronic stress and anxiety impacts postdocs^x

Lack of Productivity

Due to need for avoidance or procrastination

Social withdrawal

Social withdrawal can impact you networking and collaborations

Outburst of anger/snappiness

Relationships with peers, colleagues, supervisors can become impacted.

Insomnia

Insomnia can often lead to feeling tired and lacking energy

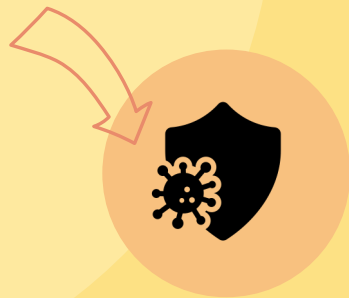
Physical separation

Separation from the sources of support networks can have a significant impact on stress and anxiety levels.

Feeling being marginalised

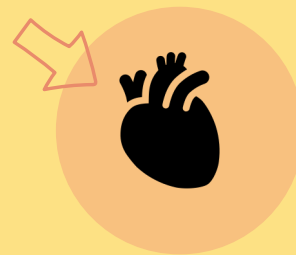
Marginalised academics have the poorest access to mental health support and resources

Long term impact of untreated Anxiety or Stress



Weakened immune system

A weak immune system makes you vulnerable to viral infection and frequent illnesses



Cardiac issues

Anxiety can affect hypertension (high blood pressure), which is correlated with risk of heart disease



Cognitive decline

Prolonged anxiety may lead to adverse consequences for memory, focus, and decision-making, among other aspects of cognitive function.

Low mood (Depression)

Low mood can be caused by many things

For example, life events, pressures or biological factors.

Symptoms of Low mood

- Emotions (sadness, crying)
- Body changes (fatigue, insomnia)
- Negative thoughts (concentration, memory issues, negative automatic thoughts)
- Behaviour (procrastination, avoidance, decision-making issues)

When we're feeling down, we might notice changes like reduced activity levels, fatigue, difficulty focusing, negative thoughts, and possibly changes in our eating habits, whether that means eating more or less. It's completely normal to experience these feelings when we're feeling low.

We all feel down from time to time!

Everyone's experience of low mood is different.

However

Low mood can impact both the psychological and physiological functioning of postdocs.

Avoidance

By doing less you feel less tired and irritated, and you don't feel motivated to do them anyhow.

Depression

When low mood persists for over two weeks and starts affecting daily life, it may indicate depression. Struggles can negatively impact others, creating a vicious cycle.

Contributing factors to low mood and depression in Postdocs'

Uncertainty

Unclear career progression and lack of permanent roles can lead to feelings of hopelessness and stagnation.

Work performance

Depression can significantly impair cognitive function and motivation and decrease work quality. Inability to meet expectations often exacerbates the depression.

Feelings of failure

Repeated rejections of research proposals, grants, and papers can foster self-doubt and a sense of failure.

Decreased productivity

Low mood, anxiety, and stress can reduce productivity, making it difficult for postdocs to focus and complete tasks on time.

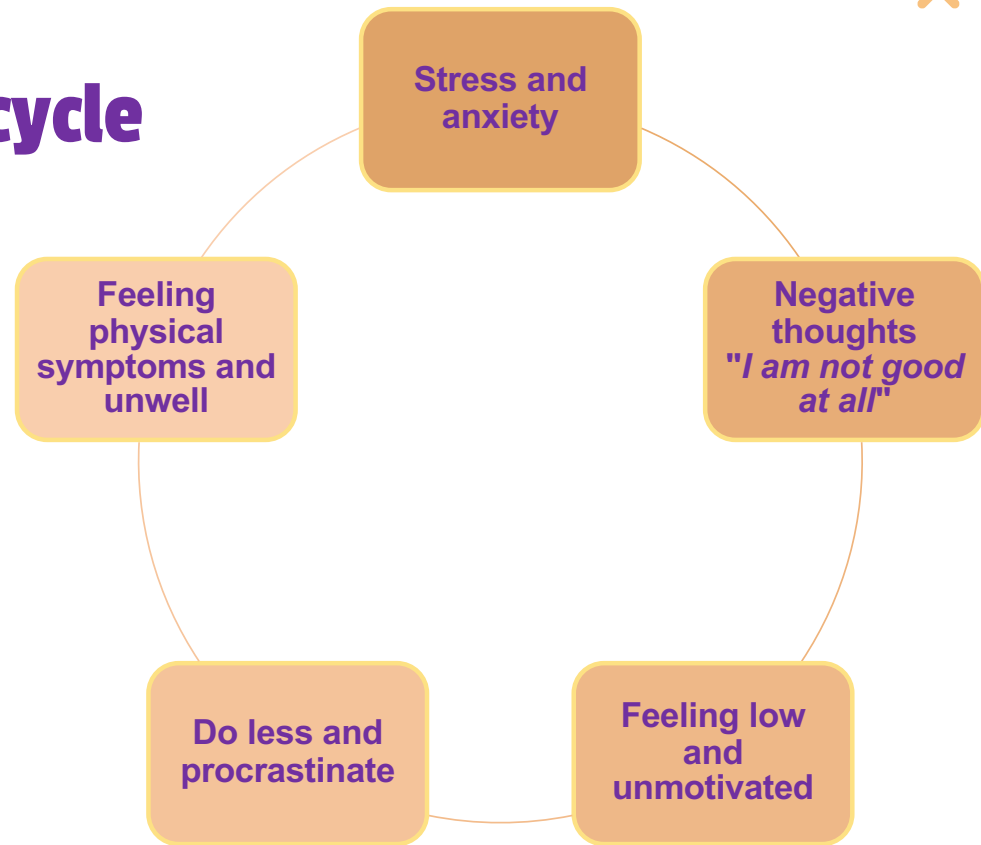
Isolation

Postdocs, especially those from other countries, may feel lonely because they are far from their families and face cultural differences.

Quality of research

Anxiety, stress, and depression can diminish cognitive abilities, leading to lower-quality research output

Understanding vicious cycle



Did you know?



Did you know that addressing mental health challenges can help?

Effective communication, a supportive environment, and mental health resources are essential for helping postdocs thrive despite challenges and pressures. Understanding these mental health issues is crucial for creating clarity and support.



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We will now...

...examine postdocs' real-life struggles and the emotional toll these stressors can have on their professional and personal well-being.



Overview of common academic stressors for postdocs' ✕

Career and financial insecurity

The ongoing quest for funding and job security, along with the stress of grant rejections, weighs heavily on postdocs. This sense of wasted effort can lead to a significant psychological toll.

Uncertainty

The unclear career progression and lack of permanent academic roles can cause stress and feelings of stagnation. The temporary nature of postdoc contracts intensifies the pressure to prove one's worth.

Publish or perish

The academic pressure to produce publishable results and secure funding often leads to frustration and anxiety for postdocs, who may work tirelessly on projects that ultimately get rejected or fail.



Lack of mentorship

Isolation

Adjusting to new countries and cultures can be challenging, often leading to feelings of loneliness and alienation, especially without a local support network. Visa-related issues can further complicate this stress and disrupt work-life balance.

Personal circumstances

Being impacted by long-term conditions, physical disability, or being a member of the LGBTQ+ community can also contribute to work-related stresses.



Let's reflect on moments when expectations did not meet reality or how failures and setbacks. How did it affect you emotionally, and what was the role of institutional support in these instances?

How have these stressors affected your mental health?



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Joint discussion





Navigating the emotional challenges of postdocs' project setbacks

- Rejection happens to every academic.
- Rejections may happen more to postdocs, creating feelings of hopelessness and discouragement.
- Subsequently this can affect postdocs' motivation and hope, which can lead to severe impact on their mental health.
- Academic rejection can also be personal, as it reflects on postdocs' ability, skills and suitability for a highly competitive career.
- Rejected papers and projects can reinforce postdocs' anxiety-driven impostor syndrome.

What can academic staff do to help and support postdocs?



Active listening and supportive communication

Summarising and paraphrasing what a person tells you demonstrates that you are listening to them. Use that to check your understanding.

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Normalise rejection

Rejection is best thought of not as a failure but as a necessary step toward success

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Help them to reflect and learn from the rejection

From each rejection comes a silver lining – if you let it.

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Help postdocs' with supporting success

Public awareness, teaching experience, access to training or networking, information on independent operating funds, where to find good mentors, and internal community services.

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Source: <https://www.psychologytoday.com/gb/blog/how-to-do-academia/202207/coping-with-rejection-in-the-academic-world>







A case study





Let's discuss how administrative and supportive staff can help postdocs navigate these emotional challenges



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Joint discussion





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**Give me a comfort
break - Please**



Comfort break 10 minutes

We will now talk about building supportive environment for postdocs'

...and provide you with some recommendations to create a transparent, clear, supportive academic environment that reduces stress.



Sara Wilson

Sara will share her experience of supporting Postdocs' and what strategies can help in your own work with postdocs'





Building a supportive environment for postdocs'

Communication

Pay attention to how your postdocs' communicate with you and the language they use

Provide personalised support

Every Postdoc is unique. Therefore one size fit a one-size-fits-all approach may not be helpful.

Engagement

Reflect on whether your postdocs' are engaged, not engaged or disengaged.

Seek further training



Emotional support or coaching, or mental health first aid will equip you with the necessary skills.

Inclusive environments

To help postdocs thrive, fostering a culturally inclusive environment that supports their diversity is essential.

Provide safe space

Provide safe environment where postdocs' can discuss their challenges



A wish list to improve postdoctoral life

Stabile employment



Fair compensation



Work-life balance



Source: Nxele, S.R. A wish list to improve postdoctoral life. *Nat Rev Bioeng* 2, 631–632 (2024). <https://doi.org/10.1038/s44222-024-00202-4>

A wish list to improve postdoctoral life

Mentorship and career development



Recognition and support for teaching



Transparent hiring practices



Source: Nxele, S.R. A wish list to improve postdoctoral life. *Nat Rev Bioeng* 2, 631–632 (2024). <https://doi.org/10.1038/s44222-024-00202-4>

**Remember that every
postdoc will be
unique**



Helping Postdocs' to thrive

In this section we will talk about what available sources of support exist for postdocs' and some interventions and ideas that may help you.

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What sources of help and support for your postdocs’ are you aware?



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Developing postdocs and their skills and wellbeing will depend on




How you support your postdoc to identify their existing skills



How you encourage your postdoc to identify the skills and experience they might need in future roles



How do you work together to find ways for them to develop those skills during their time with you?





Examples of instruments and interventions



Postdoc community and peer network

Improve the contacts among the postdocs more actively. This will also improve their visibility and connection with the universities.

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Nurture contacts with organisations and former postdocs'

Connecting with organizations that hire (former) postdocs will encourage them to reflect on their career prospects and paths.

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Career guidance in cooperation with postdocs

Providing career guidance by designing training modules, ideally in co-creation with the postdocs and postdoc employers themselves, for personal and professional development of postdocs, including mentorship programmes

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Source: van der Weijden, I., & Teelken, C. (2023)



Reframe success and quality

Place less emphasis on the number of publications and a greater emphasis on the other domains in which the postdocs are active (e.g. education, and impact)

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Fostering positive work-life balance and career stability

Encourage flexibility

Setting boundaries, flexible working hours, and taking breaks

Promote compassion

Empathetic and compassionate approaches are often crucial

International postdocs

Require more support in areas of visas, relocation, and clear support regarding rights.

Reduction of stigma

On an institutional scale, mental health needs to be equalised with physical health.

Reduce stigma regarding MH

Encourage postdocs and supervisors to make discussion regarding MH regular occurrence.

Three crucial elements:

- Leadership
- Professionalism
- Equity

Sources of support



Mental Health and Wellbeing Service

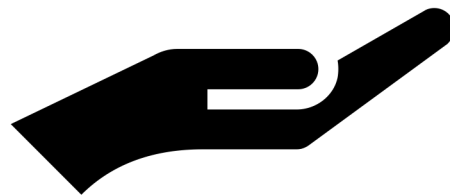
Staff can also access support for counselling, stress management and peer support

HR Support Services

HR can also assist with immigration, contract renewal concerns, career advice, and resources regarding work-life balance difficulties.

Financial

Know about funding opportunities, grants, and fellowships that can support postdocs during difficult periods.



Career development

Be aware of any opportunities for training, mentorship and networking

IAS

The Institute for Advanced Study offers postdoctoral support and resources.

Some resources:

Financial:

https://warwick.ac.uk/fac/cross_fac/ias/earlycareer/postdoc/

<https://warwick.ac.uk/fac/arts/ren/currentstudents/funding/postdoctoral/>

Mental Health and Wellbeing:

<https://warwick.ac.uk/services/wss/staff-wellbeing>

Career development:

https://warwick.ac.uk/fac/sci/lifesci/research/postdocs/career_development/

HR:

<https://warwick.ac.uk/services/humanresources/>



Evidence based recommendations

A point of contact

Dedicated Postdoc support office

Appropriate contract lengths

The contract length should reflect the duration of the project and the associated qualification aims.

Promote early independence

Combination of support with grant application, tasting PI role, and financial bonuses.

Support structures are needed

Support structures for postdocs with child care or elder care duties should be provided, as well as counselling offers for mental wellbeing.

Personalised fellowships

Personalised fellowships can contribute toward a step towards independence

Training and career support

Training at the postdoctoral level should focus on providing tools for problem solving and enabling personal and professional development and empowerment.

Training and CPD suggestions:

- **Scientific Writing (grants, publications)**
- **Peer review**
- **Leadership**
- **Lab Management**
- **Negotiation**
- **CV Writing**
- **Time and Project Management**
- **How to make an individual career development plan**
- **Communication and collaboration, effective networking**
- **Teaching and mentoring (tools and methods, learning mechanisms)**
- **Sex, gender and diversity dimensions in research**
- **Intercultural competence**
- **Ethics, integrity and workplace professionalism**
- **Open science and research data management**

Seminar suggestions:

- **Career Talks by alumni, PIs or speakers from different career paths with the opportunity to meet informally with postdocs (e.g., lunch or dinner)**
- **Invitation of external postdocs to present their research in the framework of a seminar series**
- **Integration of internal postdocs into the institute's seminar series**






Career support suggestions:

- **Online resources, like an Individual development plan (IDP) or application guidance**
- **Annual career discussion with PI and Evaluation/appraisal system for assessing professional performance regularly**
- **Mentoring programme, e.g. standard 2nd personal mentor (external, possibly from a different career area)**
- **Chalk talks and mock interviews for application training**
- **Access to PI candidate recruitment process (e.g., sitting in on presentations and subsequent jury discussions)**
- **Grant writing support by funding experts or internal peer review groups and successful grant application repository**
- **Postdoc funding opportunities overview (online)**
- **Career guidance sessions and Peer-mentoring groups**

Source: Best Practices for Postdoc Career Support in the Life Sciences - A Hands-On Guide for Research Institutions (2021)




Networking support suggestions:

- 
- **Postdoc Symposium (Postdocs presenting their research to each other) or Postdoc Retreat**
 - **Networking events together with PhD students and/or PIs**
 - **Providing postdoc organisations with a budget to organise their own events**
 - **Outreach events connecting postdocs to potential employers, like company visits**
 - **Joint event with alumni**
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Welcome Service suggestions:

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- **Support for postdocs arriving from abroad (visa, bureaucracy, etc.)**
 - **Orientation for all postdocs arriving at the institute (Who to ask for what and where to find contacts; also possible: buddy system for first 3 months)**
 - **Postdoc Handbook or other onboarding guidance**



Source: Best Practices for Postdoc Career Support in the Life Sciences - A Hands-On Guide for Research Institutions (2021)





How do you think Warwick can help Postdocs' to thrive?



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Joint discussion





Summary

- The inherent challenges of job insecurity, financial strain and lack of mentorship can dampen the experience and hinder career progression and impacts postdocs' mental health and wellbeing.
 - By prioritising employment stability, fair compensation, work–life balance, mentorship, mental health and transparent hiring practices, we can create a more supportive environment for postdocs to thrive and contribute meaningfully to academia.
 - Acknowledging postdocs to be specialised experts in a transient career phase within a highly competitive system is the most helpful guide to organisational efforts to support them.
 - Outreach, mentoring, and community support are crucial for fostering a positive academic environment.
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Our current Postdocs' Mental health research culture project ×

For more information, please visit The Warwick Invisible Disability website or via the following link:

<https://tinyurl.com/5evpuex7>

For any questions or enquiries please email us:

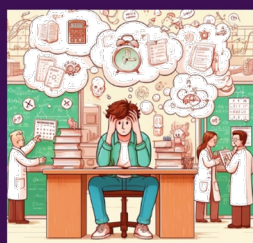
Email: ResearchCulture@warwick.ac.uk



Our previous PhD research culture project



A Series of Workshops for PGRs, Supervisors, and Administrative staff:



PGRs

This two-hour session was a valuable opportunity for all PGRs better to understand stress and anxiety during their postgraduate studies. The workshops were designed to provide practical and theoretical strategies that could be immediately applied to manage these challenges, offering a path to a more balanced and fulfilling academic journey.

[Download the presentation PDF](#)



Supervisors

This workshop equipped supervisors with skills to recognise and respond to students' stress and anxiety-related disorders. Topics included identifying symptoms, practical response tips, effective communication, creating a supportive environment, seeking student feedback, and using campus and community resources. Additionally, it emphasised the importance of staff well-being and strategies for prioritising their mental health.

[Download the presentation PDF](#)



Staff

Staff working with PGRs may struggle to identify mental health issues in students. This workshop covers mental health, stress, and anxiety disorders, highlighting symptoms and how to support PGRs. It offers practical strategies for starting conversations and emphasises the importance of staff prioritising their mental health.

[Download the presentation PDF](#)

Podcasts

[Introducing Invisible Disability](#), the podcast that sheds light on the unseen struggles of researchers. This series dives into anxiety and stress, its impact on work and well-being, and offers practical help from our expert in residence, Dr. Frane Vusio and Dr. Katy Richmond Mahoney. Tune in for an insightful and supportive conversation!

The first series of Podcasts with 19 episodes

[Invisible Disability](#) | Podcast on Spotify

This project has been selected as one of eight best practices over 100 projects within two years.

[Catalogue of Enhancing Research Culture Projects](#)

For more information, please visit [The Warwick Invisible Disability website](#) or via the following link:

<https://shorturl.at/R2nS6>



For any questions or enquiries please email us:
Email: ResearchCulture@warwick.ac.uk



Any questions?



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Resources:

- https://cdn.ymaws.com/www.nationalpostdoc.org/resource/resmgr/2014_AM/Mental_Health_Issues_Postdoc.pdf
- <https://kamounlab.medium.com/more-on-toxic-academia-does-investing-time-in-outreach-mentoring-and-community-activities-matter-1b3ebda05c97>
- van der Weijden, I., & Teelken, C. (2023). Precarious careers: postdoctoral researchers and wellbeing at work. *Studies in Higher Education*, 48(10), 1595-1607.