



Queen Mary
University of London

Mental health and Wellbeing in PGRs: Guidance for supervisors

TRAINER'S NAME



Housekeeping



Workshop aims

- To understand pressures PGRs are under and the risk to their mental wellbeing
- To be able to recognise signs and symptoms of common mental health problems, when a PGR is at risk or when there is a mental health crisis
- To understand when and how to intervene and provide support
- To encourage you to think about your own mental wellbeing

Workshop outline

- Looking at what mental health is; common mental health problems
- Understanding pressures PGRs are under and possible impact on their mental health
- Understanding the supervisor's role in protecting the mental health of their supervisees
- Signs and symptoms to look out for
- Students at risk
- How to intervene
- When and where to refer
- Looking after your own mental wellbeing

What is Mental Health?

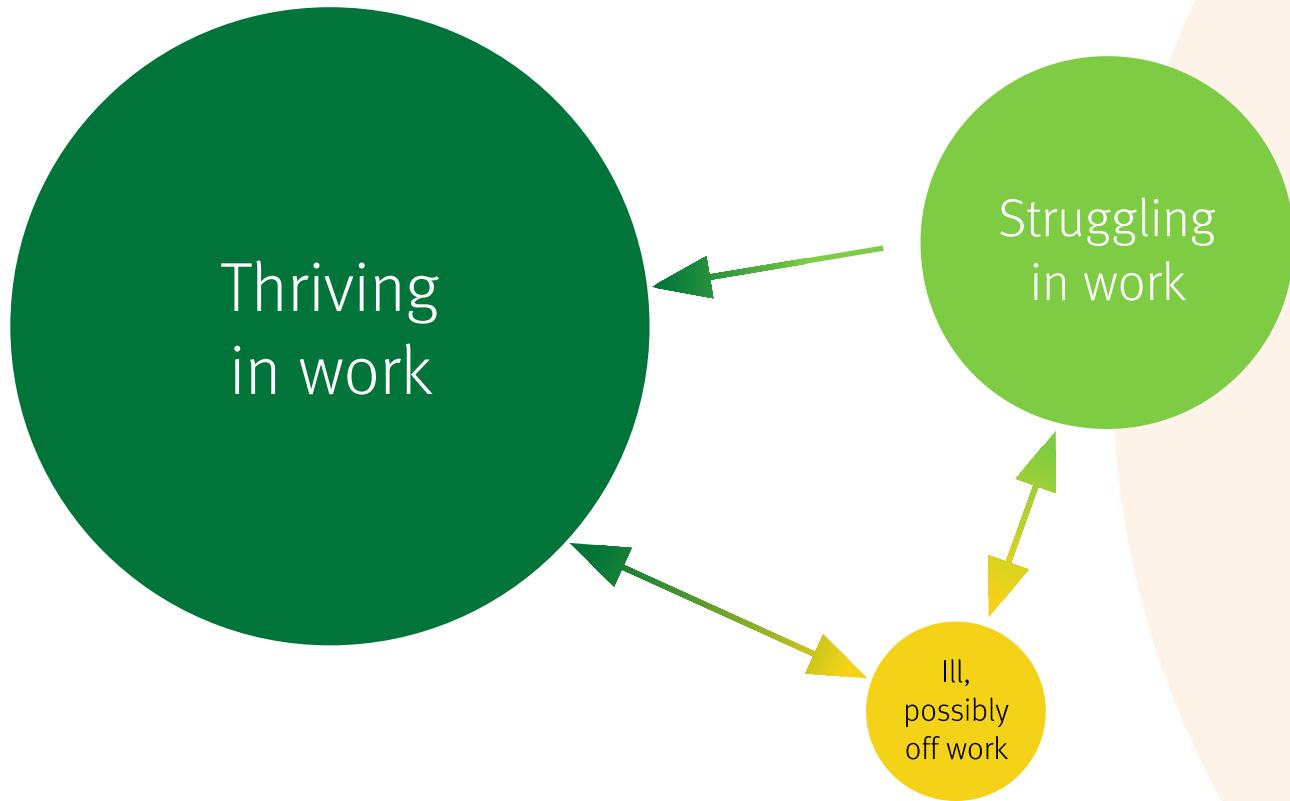
- We all have ‘mental health’ in the same way as we all have physical health
- Mental health is on a continuum
- We can move along this continuum at different times in our life

...and why it's so important

Good mental health is

“A state of wellbeing in which every individual realises his or her own potential, can cope with the normal stresses of life, can work productively and fruitfully and is able to make a contribution to her or his community.”

The World Health Organisation (WHO)



Common mental health conditions

- **Anxiety disorders**
 - generalised anxiety disorder, and obsessive compulsive disorder, phobias
- **Depressive disorders**
 - depression and bi-polar disorder
- **Trauma and stress disorders**
- **Psychotic disorders**
 - Schizophrenia, schizo-affective disorder
- **Personality disorders**
- <https://www.mind.org.uk/information-support/types-of-mental-health-problems>

Important to remember

Mental ill health affects different people in different ways, including its duration:

- **Temporary** – experienced for a short time and recovers after treatment
- **Fluctuating** – sometimes the person experiences the condition and sometimes they don't
- **On-going** – the person experiences the mental health condition all the time, but controls it through a combination of medication, talking therapies, self-help and practical support

Discussion:

What particular pressures do you think PGRs might be experiencing?

- Personal/academic isolation
- Balancing conflicting demands – family/work
- Financial pressure/visa issues
- Culture shock (academic culture or coming from abroad)
- Time pressures/lack of structure in the PhD
- Supervisor expectations (eg working on weekends)
- Competitiveness of academia
- Frustrations with things such as faulty equipment

These in themselves not MH problems but can lead to ...

- Stress
- Anxiety/panic
- Low mood/depression

Discussion: What is your responsibility as a supervisor?

- To encourage (and model) good self-care from the start
- To be prepared to listen if they come to you
- To be aware of when your supervisee is struggling or has any declared disability, including a MH condition
- To keep an eye on your supervisee – ask how they are
- To open up a conversation if you notice there is something wrong
- To know when and where to refer

Discussion: How can you tell if a student is becoming unwell?

- Changes in mood
- Changes in behaviour
- Changes in the way they think

Signs to be aware of

- Extreme moods and oversensitive
- Feeling tired, flat and tearful all the time
- Consistently hyperactive
- Irritable/Angry
- Changes in sleep
- Changes in eating patterns
- Peers expressing concern about their mental well-being
- Talk of 'not wanting to be here anymore'

Common mental health problems

What to look out for



Symptoms of anxiety

- Restlessness
- Feelings of dread/ fear
- Sweating
- Trembling
- Palpitations
- Impatience
- Easily distracted
- Dry mouth
- Churning stomach
- Sleeplessness



Symptoms of depression

- Lack of enjoyment
- Disturbed sleep
- Poor/increased appetite
- Reduced concentration
- Irritability-oversensitivity
- Feelings of guilt/shame
- Lethargy
- Low motivation
- Social Withdrawal
- Thoughts of suicide

What's the difference between a PGR at risk and a PGR in crisis?

Discuss in small groups

A PGR in a mental health crisis

→ Seek immediate help

It's happening now and needs to be dealt with at once

- Actively suicidal
- Displaying symptoms of psychosis
- Behaving in a way that they are a danger to themselves and/or others
- Panic attacks

Responding to a supervisee in crisis

- Is the supervisee an ***immediate danger*** to themselves or others? Call the emergency services
- If they have come to you, listen attentively; this has the potential to help students feel calmer and more in control
- Is the supervisee already engaged with other internal or external support services eg University Counselling Service, psychiatric services, NHS?
- Not sure what to do? Consult with a colleague and/other a member of the counselling team [include whatever support is available at your institution]

In the moment...

- Reply
- Show that you are taking them seriously
- Be direct
- Offer options rather than single suggestion
- Try to engage them in making a plan for getting immediate help
 - eg making an appointment to see their GP

A PGR who is 'at risk'

 Listen & Signpost

Where there are serious concerns but they do not need to be acted on immediately eg:

- A Student who is engaging in 'risky' behaviour
- A student is expressing suicidal feelings but says they don't plan to act on them
- A student has recently taken an overdose

Responding to a supervisee at risk

- Risky behaviour can be understood as a coping strategy that often alleviates or distracts from intolerable stress or emotion
- Respond to risk in ways that reduce the potential for harm to occur, and enable the student to manage and contain their risky impulses

Responding to a supervisee at risk

- You do **not** have to make it better or fix it or manage it! Your role is to be there for support and to not ignore
- Who else needs to be involved in your supervisee's support? If they have a diagnosed MH condition (or you think they might have), refer them to appropriate support services at your institution
- Don't take responsibility. This is generally unhelpful and often contributes a sense of powerlessness. Giving them responsibility encourages self-belief and resilience
- Is your supervisee well enough to be continuing or would a break be beneficial (annual leave, sick leave, interruption)?

Important points to remember

- Tell students from the start about the limits of what you will or won't do with what they tell you
- **You cannot offer unlimited confidentiality to any student; be clear about this**
“Maybe a chat will help and I'll keep it private unless I think you or somebody else is in danger”
- Make clear statements on communication channels

Important points to remember

- It is essential to track your support and actions taken by keeping factual notes (free of value judgements) in line with University and local guidelines.
- Record actions taken in cases of risk
- Always discuss concerns with colleagues/senior staff or support staff

[Add slides with resources and support available at your Institution – eg counselling, training, online resources, relevant health and safety regulations]

Useful skills for Active Listening

- Paraphrasing
- Listening and attending
- Summarising
- Asking open questions
- Encouraging students to be specific
- Reflecting feelings
- Clarifying thoughts
- Focus on key issues
- Challenge or control when appropriate



Open questions

How? What?
Where? Who?

React

'That sounds stressful...'

You don't have to be completely neutral – it helps to show you understand



Short words of encouragement

'Yes', 'Go on...'

Summarise

'So you're feeling stressed about your report...'

Shows you've listened, and understood



Reflect

Reflecting back words or phrases can encourage people to go on / expand

Clarify

'Tell me more about...'
Avoids glossing over important points



Barriers to active listening and what you can do

- Worried about the time you have
- Preoccupied with something else/getting distracted
- Feeling out of your depth/overwhelmed
- Being too close to what they are talking about
- Bringing in your own personal experiences
- Rushing in to offer solutions

Ask yourself

- How do I manage when I'm distressed?
- How easy is it for me to ask for support?
- Can I talk about my feelings with relative ease?
- Do I trust people to listen to me without judgment?
- Can I tolerate someone being upset without trying to fix it?
- How aware am I about my prejudices?

Things to consider

Supporting distressed people can be rewarding as well as challenging.

In order to remain effective, it is important that you pay attention to your own needs and ensure you don't become overwhelmed

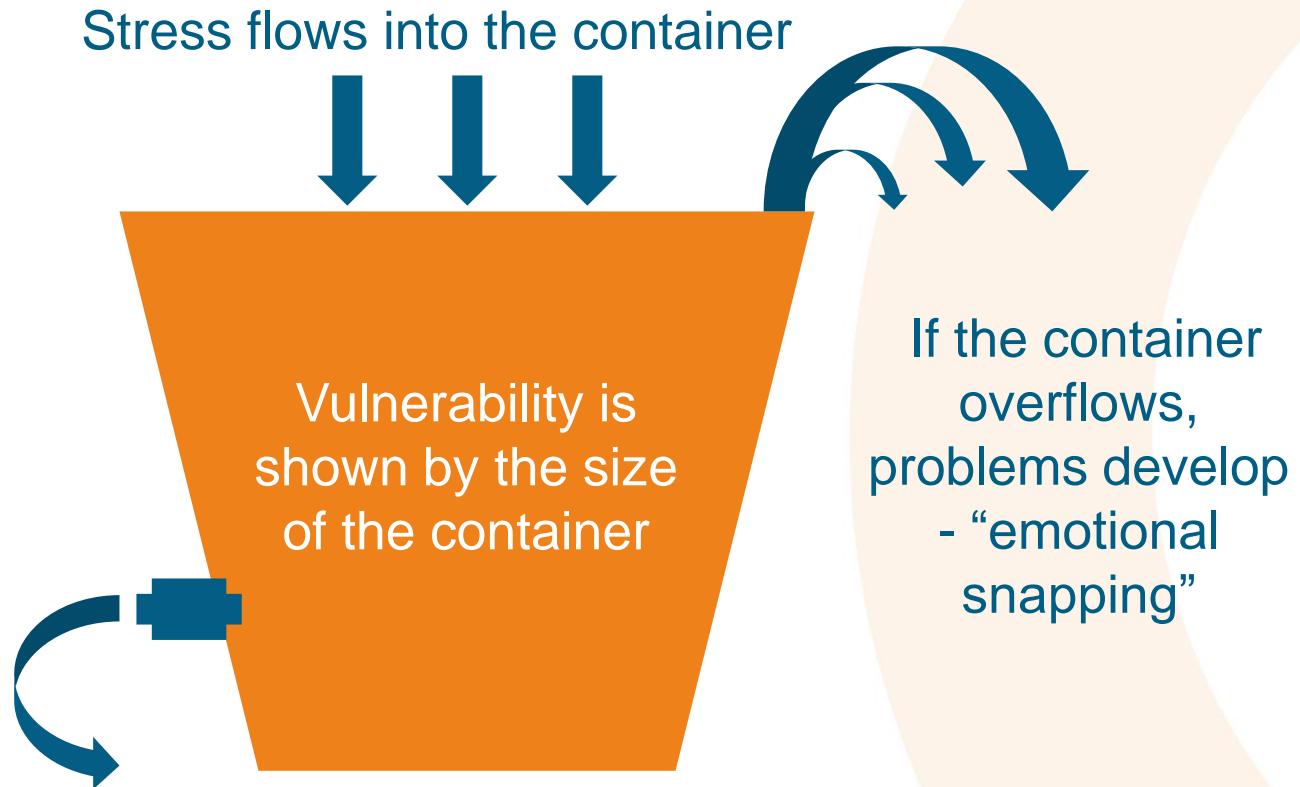
In order to support a distressed person, you need to be able to have some ability to reflect on yourself.

Looking after yourself

Don't forget to attend to your own mental wellbeing – just because you are a supervisor, does not mean that you are immune!

Supporting others with MH problems can be difficult – make sure you get some support for yourself

Activity: What is your stress container?



Helpful coping strategies = tap working lets the stress out

Unhelpful coping strategies = tap blocked so water fills container and overflows

Stressors:

Helpful coping strategies:

Unhelpful coping strategies:



Keeping well (with the Clangers)

Connect
Learn
Be Active
Notice
Give
Eat well
Relax
Sleep



Photo: Kent news and Pictures



[Add slides with resources and support for staff, eg Employee Assistance Programme, counselling, wellbeing training, peer support]

Further training

Charlie Waller Trust offers additional free, open-access e-learning modules on how to support student and staff mental health along with notes for facilitators who may wish to run these sessions:

<https://chariewaller.org/what-we-do/online-learning-materials>

**Questions?
Comments?**



ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This workshop was originally developed in January 2019 by Penny Aspinall, [Charlie Waller Trust](#), and was partially redesigned by Fryni Panayidou, Queen Mary University of London, in 2020. The development of the workshop was co-funded by the Office for Students and Research England Catalyst Fund project at Queen Mary: [Supporting PGR mental health and wellbeing](#).

