

Alarming Increase of Depression and Anxiety Among the PhD and Post-doctoral Researchers

Author
Enago Academy

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PhD and post-doctoral researchers are feeling exhausted, overworked, and are worried about their future. If this is how you are feeling, you are not alone. The stress and pressure of academic life can be relentless, leading to depression and anxiety. Disturbingly, it is becoming common for young researchers to battle with mental health issues. This is especially prevalent in life sciences and engineering. Why is this happening?

Why are Researchers Struggling?

The American author Zig Ziglar summed up what people thrive on well: “*Research indicates that employees have three prime needs: Interesting work, recognition for doing a good job, and being let in on things that are going on in the company.*”

Researchers tend to be passionate and enthusiastic about their work. They want to make a meaningful contribution to their field. Therefore, the above quote describes them well. The [factors that contribute to stress](#) and lead to anxiety and depression are listed below. It comes as no surprise that researchers, by nature, try too hard and [fall victim to these stresses](#).

1. **Extended hours:** As you know, academia comes with a considerable amount of responsibility. As you progress up the academic ladder, your responsibilities increase. You must balance teaching, admin, and research. You spend evenings and weekends working to keep up.
2. **Mentorship Relationship:** Many researchers feel unsupported by their PIs. Some PIs expect a lot from their researchers, or PIs themselves are overwhelmed and therefore unable to offer the required
3. **Future:** Uncertainty about your career prospects for the future can be frustrating and worrying.
4. **Financial uncertainty:** Often, in academia, researchers are underpaid and funds are available for short time periods, leading to financial insecurity.
5. **Frequent evaluation:** The constant reports to faculty and funders put extra pressure on researchers.
6. **Competitive atmosphere:** Resources are scarce. Therefore, the competition for funding is enormous. Postdocs and PhDs are under more pressure to be productive.
7. **Management style:** Researchers are at higher risk of mental health issues if their lab culture is bureaucratic. People are happier when they are part of the decision process, especially at D. and postdoc level where one expects to run with a project.
8. **Mental wellbeing of University staff:** Emotional and physical exhaustion among the PIs, negatively impact the students under them.

Stress intensifies as things become urgent towards the end of your project. Your submission deadlines are looming, and your funds are coming to an end. It can be overwhelming to complete a project as well as plan your future at the same time.

Symptoms

[Signs that your mental health is in trouble](#) include:

- Disrupted sleep
- Depression
- Cognitive impairment
- Mood changes
- Working long hours at night
- Emotional outbursts
- Eating disorders

Mental Wellbeing Studies

The stats are high. [Research](#) on the mental health of Ph.D. students showed that 32 % are likely to develop depression. A [2016 survey](#) found that 41 % of PhDs and postdocs were anxious, and 39 % were depressed. This is not new news, in [2013](#) and 2014, similar studies found that about [one-third of postdocs](#) were struggling with their mental health.

Mentors can Help

If you are a PI or a supervisor, you understand first-hand the pressures that your researchers are under. Here are [some tips to help your students](#):

1. This is a great prevention strategy. Mentors should be aware of their student's mental health and educate them about the risks and signs of anxiety and depression.
2. **Training:** Mentors could benefit from training on this subject so that they can identify a student who is struggling and assist them.
3. **Career Advice:** Future employment opportunities are worrying. Therefore, mentors should inform students of the low prospects of securing an academic position. Furthermore, they should advise them to research alternative career paths as possible options at the start of their project. It becomes too stressful to find employment when your deadline is approaching.
4. **Compassionate and kind leadership:** Listen to your students and put yourself in their shoes.
5. Be inspirational to your researchers. This will help create a happy team.

Keep Your Mind Healthy

We all know what we should be doing to [keep physically and mentally healthy](#). Let me remind you.

1. Get enough sleep.
2. Exercise regularly, relieve stress.
3. Eat healthy food.
4. Connect with friends and family.
5. Get professional help to resolve stress and anxiety.
6. Make time for things you enjoy.

Get Help – Speak Out

It is time to get help if you start thinking about harming yourself, you feel overwhelmed about things that you usually cope with, you rely on drugs or alcohol to feel better, you still feel down even if something good happens, you are unsure why you are feeling down or you struggle with daily tasks.

If you are struggling, consult your healthcare practitioner or University counseling program. Chances are you are [one of many academics](#) suffering from a mild mental disorder. When researchers do eventually get help, they wonder why they waited so long. It is amazing to know how much better you will function with your daily tasks.

Remember, there is life outside the lab!

[Academia can be a rewarding](#) career. You just need to know what you are in for, manage your stress and remember your life outside the lab. Most of all, understand that you are not alone, a lot of researchers are feeling the same, but possibly not talking about it. Postdocs who have [spoken up](#) about their struggles have had many responses from researchers in similar situations. If everyone who struggled with mental health issues spoke up, we would realize how prevalent it is. This would go a long way toward fighting the stigma associated with mental health struggles.

Have you noticed that you or your colleagues are struggling with mental wellbeing? Help us fight the stigma by speaking out in the comments section below.

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