Supporting the mental health of early career researchers (ECRs) during the pandemic –Advice for ECRs

Contents

1. It's OK not to be OK

Problem: Being an ECR is stressful, and the pandemic may cause or exacerbate anxiety, impostor syndrome, or other mental health issues. These topics are not commonly discussed in research groups. As a result, many ECRs feel that they are the only ones experiencing these feelings, and that they alone are responsible for handling them.

Solutions

General considerations: It is OK not to be OK! Experiencing mood fluctuations and overwhelming feelings in these times is normal for everybody. No-one can constantly maintain a good mood and top productivity, especially during a pandemic.

Although we recognize mood variations are normal, it's important to be aware of how often you experience "lows", and how much they affect you and your life (not just work- e.g. relationships). If these feelings have a troubling or lasting negative impact, there are a few ways to get help.

Option 1: *Reach out to colleagues, peers or friends for support.* Sometimes, just talking to a friend or someone in your support network can go a long way, and help you realize that you are not the only one feeling this way. This also helps to build mutual trust and support.

Option 2: *If it feels like you can't cope by yourself for a sustained period, specialized services or professionals can help you deal with ongoing issues.* They can also equip you with tools or support for daily challenges. This could be in shape of a counsellor from your institution, a therapist you visit regularly, or even the social psychiatric service of Berlin for moments of crisis. Many of these options are free or paid by health insurance and are available in multiple languages.

Resource:

Many institutions offer free **counselling services** for staff and students. Scheduling a session with a professional can help you identify your current needs and decide how to move forward:
[MediCoach at Charité](#) (also for MDC ECRs)
[Psychological Counselling at FU Berlin](#)
[Psychological Counselling at HU Berlin](#)
[Psychological Counselling Services at studierendenWERK Berlin](#)

The social psychiatric service of Berlin (***Sozialpsychiatrische Dienste)*** offers support in all districts of Berlin from Monday to Friday, 08:00 – 16:00. Find the closest center to you:
[https://www.berlin.de/lb/psychiatrie/hilfe-in-krisen/sozialpsychiatrische-dienste- der-bezirke/](https://www.berlin.de/lb/psychiatrie/hilfe-in-krisen/sozialpsychiatrische-dienste-der-bezirke/)

Berlin Krisendienst offers phone support 24/7. You can also visit their centers without an appointment on weekdays from 16:00 – 24:00 and during weekends and holidays from 08:00 – 16:00. Find the closest center to you:
https://www.berliner-krisendienst.de/en/

Scholar Minds, an ECR-run group working to improve mental health for researchers, has produced a great step-by-step guide on where to find help, and what to expect when seeking out psychotherapy or self-help groups in Berlin.
https://www.ecn-berlin.de/mental-health/where-to-find-help.html

https://www.ecn-berlin.de/mental-health/ways-to-psychotherapy.html

If you feel that you are in immediate danger of harming yourself or others, please call 112 or visit the nearest emergency department.

2. Redefine research goals and expectations with your supervisor/mentor

Problem: Disrupted routines, closed schools and social distancing mean that the research world has been turned upside down. Some labs are fully or partially closed, and many ECRs have been dealing with unexpected research delays. Uncertainties associated with vaccines are also a source of stress. In some cases, such as ECRs with care responsibilities, research may have stopped completely.

Solutions

General considerations: Work with your supervisor to adjust your project to a continuing pandemic timeline. This may include reviewing what was possible in the past year, exploring 'plan B' or 'C' for your research question, switching research activities during lab or clinic closures, or planning an "exit strategy" for when labs reopen.

Option 1: *Set realistic and achievable short-term goals.* Break down large tasks into manageable steps for the coming days or weeks. Goals should be SMART (specific, measurable, assignable, realistic, time-related) and roles should be well-defined. Keep your supervisor digitally updated on progress (for example, using an electronic lab notebook). Reduce unnecessary emails and meetings by planning to meet after tasks X, Y and Z are complete. Signed written agreements can confirm shared expectations regarding tasks, milestones and time management.

Option 2: *Document how your time or workflow has changed, <u>especially due to care responsibilities</u>.* Months or years from now, it will be difficult to remember the details of how pandemic related disruptions affected your productivity and timelines. Make note of exactly how your research plan or day-to-day routine has changed. This may be important for future funding and promotion applications.

Tips:
Keep track of **how much time** you had to take off for *unavoidable* reasons (childcare, care of another family member, illness, etc.)
Document whether you worked **full or part time.** If you worked part time, what percent of a full-time position was it (e.g. 50%, 75%), and for how long?
Note if you were doing a lengthy Facharzt/Fachärztin (medical specialization or comparable) **qualification** alongside your research and couldn't do research full time.
Funding agencies may consider this information when calculating your "academic age".

Option 3: *Remember that productivity is not everything.* You may not be able to finish everything that you planned, and this is ok. Acknowledging that a change of plan is needed may help you restart. Importantly, set goals for self-care and make time to work on your mental health and wellbeing.

3. Ask for clarification to reduce uncertainty

Problem: The pandemic has heightened uncertainty in almost all aspects of academic research, from lab/clinic closure to funding and degree requirements. Unclear expectations from supervisors can lead to ECRs having to choose between their health and safety and maintaining pre-pandemic productivity. Uneven vaccine rollout or unpredictable opening and closing of labs also causes uncertainty. These problems may be especially acute for ECRs with care responsibilities, or international ECRs with visas tied to funding or work contracts.

Solutions

General considerations: While some sources of uncertainty may require one-on-one conversations with your supervisor, others may be relevant to many team members. Sometimes raising concerns on behalf of a group is easier than asking your supervisor about your specific situation. Be aware that your supervisor may also be dealing with uncertainty and ask how this affects the situation.

Option 1: *Set up or join an ECR network to share information or explore solutions.* ECRs everywhere are dealing with the challenges of doing research during a pandemic. Setting up a meeting for ECRs in your group/institute or joining a campus-wide circle can give you the opportunity to exchange ideas and strategies about shared problems. Creating or joining an ECR/peer group can allow you to highlight common problems and brainstorm solutions before approaching your supervisor. This also lets your supervisor know when concerns or challenges affect many team members and makes it easier for those who are less comfortable broaching issues with a supervisor to have their voices heard.

Resource:
During our virtual brainstorming event, we prepared a companion [fact sheet](#) with resources for ECRs who want to organize peer networks.
Dragonfly Mental Health, a researcher collective working on improving academic mental health, also has a [video](#) on organizing peer mental health networks.

4. Set healthy boundaries between your work, life, and self-worth.

Problem: Working from home can take a toll on mental health. Problems include disrupted routines, constant pressure (or lack thereof) to work, distractions, the lack of a dedicated office space, friction with partners or roommates and isolation. These issues are especially pronounced for ECRs with caregiving responsibilities. Lost productivity can exacerbate anxiety or other mental health issues related to "impostor syndrome", or the belief that one is not good enough to be a researcher.

Solutions

Option 1: *Experiment with different schedules.* Everyone has different demands on their time. Try breaking up tasks into smaller "packages". Experiment with "non-traditional" working times, such as starting in the early morning for a few hours, taking a break, and returning to work later in the evening. Incorporate approaches that allow you to work in a healthier manner (e.g., total time on project work, social interactions, breaks interspersed throughout the day) into your normal routine.

Option 2: *Set a "hard" boundary for the end of the day.* Many life activities have moved online during the pandemic, making it difficult to transition out of "work" mode at the end of the day. Implement small rituals to help draw a line. This could include things like closing your laptop, taking a short walk, or moving to another space in your home.

Option 3: Combat impostor syndrome. Almost everyone has felt like an impostor at some point in their lives – it is part of being human. You are not your work. Engage in non-work-related activities that you enjoy or that add to your self-confidence such creative projects, journaling, sports, or online learning. Explore ways to bolster reflection and self-confidence such as journaling, mindfulness, or speaking with a mental health professional.

Resource:
Scholar Minds has collected a series of online resources related to improving the mental health of ECRs, including apps, videos, or online lectures. Please note: these tools are not a substitute for professional guidance (please see Resources in item 1).
https://www.ecn-berlin.de/mental-health/self-help-resources.html

5. Build up a support network

Problem: Social distancing means that ECRs are more isolated than ever before and forces ECRs to conduct their research without normal interactions with colleagues or supervisors. This can lead to frustration, uncertainty, and lab conflicts. These issues are especially acute for ECRs who may be new to the lab or city, and who do not yet have a support network.

Solutions

General considerations: Explore options with your peers and colleagues for pandemic-safe interactions. While you may not be able to completely replace the spontaneous exchange of ideas on a day-to-day basis, you can provide different opportunities to interact, socialize and solve problems.

Option 1: Create opportunities for spontaneous interactions. Create a corona-safe space for team members to interact with one another in a relaxed context. This could be a group chat for breaks ("I will have a coffee in 10 minutes, does anyone want to join online?"), a virtual Open Space, or scheduled "drop-in" sessions.

Resource: The websites *Wonder.me* and *Gather.town* offer free lightweight platforms for spontaneous interactions and video calls in small groups.

Option 2: Organize a "buddy" system. If team members do not know each other well, semi-structured systems may make it easier to socialize. Try creating a "buddy" or "round robin" system whereby participants are randomly matched with one another. Switch conversation partners at regular intervals (e.g., biweekly). Keep meetings low-pressure - participants should be able to set up meetings that are convenient for them and skip weeks that are particularly busy. Consider including "geographical" factors when matching, so that participants can meet in their neighborhood for a socially distanced walk. This also reduces screen time.

Resource: Here is a customizable survey template to collect information for a buddy system:
https://docs.google.com/forms/d/1WvxBUPkDs6CEga3t-SxOprJiFtrdK7HzU1_qAWfe_qg/edit?usp=sharing
The output is collected in a spreadsheet. Buddies can be created by assigning each participant a number and creating a random sequence of numbers for pairs using online generators,
e.g.: https://www.calculatorsoup.com/calculators/statistics/random-number-generator.php

Option 3: *Set up or join an ECR network.* ECR networks, described above in section 3, can also be great for socializing.

For those interested in joining peer networks on mental health in academia, there are several initiatives in Berlin where you can learn about systemic challenges, discover resources, or meet like-minded peers:

Scholar Minds: https://www.ecn-berlin.de/mental-health/scholar-minds-184.html
Dragonfly Mental Health: https://dragonflymentalhealth.com/
Charité PhDNet: https://twitter.com/charitephdnet?lang=en
MDC PhD Representatives: https://twitter.com/mdcphd?lang=en
Mental Health Collective of Max Plack Institute PhDnet: https://www.phdnet.mpg.de/168253/mental-health-awareness-week-2021
Mental Health Working Group of the Leibniz PhD Network: https://leibniz-phd.net/category/mental-health/

Option 4: *Work to de-stigmatize mental health.* Take care of yourself first and foremost. However, if you feel able, and believe that poor mental health is affecting those around you, you can work to reduce stigma. This can create space for others to share their concerns or find support. While it may seem odd and uncomfortable, talking to others you trust at work can be a great way to remove stigma surrounding mental health. In small groups, you might ask each person to briefly share how they're doing (e.g., "I have experiments all week and I'm looking forward to having data"; "My child is sick so it's been a difficult week", "My brain is fried from too many meetings"). Start by sharing yourself and acknowledge that you also sometimes feel tired and overwhelmed. Offer a "pass" option for people who aren't comfortable sharing. If you are part of a journal club, consider discussing an article on mental health. This could be field-specific or a general look at mental health in academia.

Resource: The Wellcome Trust and Canadian initiative "Bell Let's Talk" have both put together toolkits for discussing mental health in group settings. Additionally, here are three "conversation starting" papers on mental health in academia:
Evidence for a mental health crisis in graduate education
Mental Health in Academia: What about faculty?
Ten simple rules towards healthier research labs