

Surviving the Journey

Some Tips for Post Graduate Research Students from the staff of the University of Melbourne Counselling Service

Post graduate students doing research at the University of Melbourne have a wonderful range of resources available to them on the web and in print produced by their faculties, Counselling, UMPA, SGS, LLSU and other student services. These resources provide valuable information and advice on most aspects of the post graduate experience, particularly on managing the academic journey. Essential reading for those beginning the journey and those at various stages along the way.

Post graduate research students, of all ages, present to the Counselling Service with issues common across our client group, eg. mood problems such as depression and anxiety, grief stemming from bereavement or loss, relationship problems with families or partners, and the myriad of problems that affect people in general as they move through life. In addition these students are all going through the great human developmental cycle, experiencing issues related to their age and stage in life. Here we would like to focus on the particular elements of the post graduate experience that might trigger, or exacerbate, a range of psychological or emotional problems. Some of these elements are almost inevitable stages of the journey, but understanding that they are normal can often help lessen their impact. Being aware of other pitfalls, and ways around them, might enable you to take steps to avoid them, or help you get on your way if you are already struggling.

Recent studies in Australia and America with post graduate research students point out that it is the emotional aspects of the journey, ie. frustrations, anxieties and self doubts, that provide the greatest challenges. One study concludes that *“the majority of graduate students struggle with emotional fatigue.”* The students surveyed also believe that emotional qualities such as courage, resilience and passion are vital for successful completion. Academic ability is regarded as an assumption.

At the Counselling Service we are all psychologists or social workers who are very familiar with this post graduate journey, both from our own personal experience and from the constant contact we have with students and supervisors in counselling sessions, consultations and workshops. When we, as a staff, discussed what might be the most useful observations and tips to pass on to you, there was a striking level of agreement on what we saw as the significant issues. What follows is a brief reflection on some salient points.

Becoming a post graduate research student

All post graduate students undergo a transitional experience when they begin their course. This is common to all of you whether you come from overseas, interstate or are a local. It's true even for graduates of Melbourne. Whatever your age or stage in life, you are all out of your comfort zone for some time as you adapt to the new culture of the research student. We sometimes observe

mature age students when they return to campus to do a research degree revisiting and reworking some developmental issues that they would initially have come up against at an earlier stage in life. Often these are in relation to their identity.

Many of the frustrations experienced are linked to the clash between the expectations students bring with them about this new stage in their life, and the reality of the lived experience.

We see this especially in students' attitudes to their supervisors. Many students expect much more direction and assistance from their supervisors than they believe they are receiving. There is anxiety and uncertainty associated with taking on more responsibility for one's own learning than ever before, and often a strong desire for a more dependent relationship than the supervisor is willing to provide. In many ways this is not much different from the first year undergraduate experience. It's a normal process, and this time around you have your earlier undergraduate experience to draw on. Reflecting on this will help you get in touch with your own resources and the skills you have developed. Clarify your expectations with your supervisor. Check out how much contact, direction and assistance they are likely to provide. Clarify their expectations of you. Develop your skills in requesting and giving feedback. If this poses problems for you or your supervisor seek out some coaching and guidance from one of the many people here on campus to support you.

Choose your topic with care

Students choose topics for many reasons, but some choose one very closely related to their personal history. They may do this to increase their own or others' understanding of a particular situation, or to make a difference in some way. A medical or behavioural science student may choose to focus on a topic related to a physical or mental illness that either they or someone close to them has suffered, an arts student may research disturbing social or political issues related to their ethnic group or country of origin. Such students, with an intense interest and emotional involvement in their subject, can be very motivated, hard working and dedicated to the task, all positive attributes in a research student. But they can also suffer from emotional overload and feel shocked, anxious, powerless, and "caught up" in a situation from which they see no escape. They can experience "secondary traumatisation" and considerable frustration when they gradually realise the limitations of the impact that can be made with one thesis. If you choose a topic that has the capacity to affect you in this way, it is vital to protect yourself in every way possible by utilising all the support available to you, and to maintain perspective by pursuing a balanced lifestyle within which your research is strictly contained.

The size of the topic is another issue that can lead to feelings of being overwhelmed and an inability to bring the research to completion. The more you work in the area the more you become aware of how much work lies ahead. There is always another experiment to do, another area to be explored, a growing sense of helplessness. Be careful not to take on

something that is a life's work, not a thesis. The vision can be very different from the reality of what is required to achieve it. Remember it is only a step on your life and career journey. Choose something realistic and achievable.

Balance your lifestyle

This is a journey with stages. Individual students have different needs and these vary according to time and place on the journey. It's also one full of paradoxes. For example the difficulty at the beginning in finding a topic and getting started, and the reluctance at the end to finish up and let go of your baby. So much of yourself goes into the process. To survive it you need to give yourself permission to have a life. Not an easy thing to do especially if you are both working and studying and feeling under time and financial pressures. But again the paradox. Putting time limits on the research and writing on a daily and weekly basis, and allowing space for rest and recreation, will result in a better thesis and one that you might even enjoy producing. In some ways time spent away from the desk is as necessary as time spent at it.

It may seem simplistic to focus here on lifestyle factors, but good sleep patterns, a healthy diet and especially regular exercise have a huge impact both physiologically and psychologically. 70% of students in the study discussed by Repak reported that their major concern was how to achieve a "balanced life". Step back and look at how you are allotting your time. You will probably find that some readjustment is possible, and that there is some extra space to nurture yourself and your relationships.

Remember this is not the only thing in your life, nor the only area in which you can make a valuable contribution. So be kind to yourself and give yourself rewards as you go along. You are worth it. This point was highlighted by all our staff. Suggestions included having a list of small rewards up pinned up near you that were earned by a certain amount of work being done, a 10 minute walk around the block after every 50 minutes of (saved!) writing, and thesis-free days earned by reaching a particular milestone. There was a particular emphasis on edible treats either to get you started or help you along the way!

Challenge your perfectionism

Most post graduate research students are high achievers, and perfectionism is a common trait on this campus and most others. This means that not only do students have high expectations of themselves and others, but also that high levels of anxiety and self doubt can be triggered by the research project. Sometimes you can feel frozen and find it difficult to proceed with the task. At other times it is hard to contain the work. You can find it difficult to give yourself permission to bring something to completion as it never seems to be up to the standard you expect. It is so easy to feel yourself drowning in the task. Remember, knowledge moves on fast. You are not saying the last word on the subject.

So, prioritise your time and work. Work to a plan and to time lines that you have set in consultation with your supervisor and regularly reviewed together. Remember to leave yourself plenty of time to write up. We see too many

students who do not leave enough time for writing and then panic. It's so easy to put off the moment. Courage is what's needed here, and faith in all the good research you have done, probably more research than was necessary, but you need the quantity in order to cut back to the quality core. And you need the time to be able to do this. Remember Murphy's Law: the work expands to fit the time available.

Build up a support system

In the Vilkinas study "*only one survival strategy was identified by all students - the need for the support of others.*" We would endorse this. Support from supervisors, family, friends, colleagues and others. Yet again a paradox emerges as the majority in the study discussed by Repak say that what they rely on most is their "inner self." But this valuable self reliance that can often accompany perfectionism can also undermine you because it makes it hard to seek support, or to show vulnerability. This can lead to withdrawal and isolation and can result in a skewed sense of perspective. Doing a thesis is isolating enough in itself, without compounding it by cutting yourself off. Don't go it alone. In addition to whatever personal support you can call on, take advantage of all that is on offer through faculties, UMPA, SGS and student services. Meet up with other students' seminars and workshops, hear what others are experiencing, learn from those who have been there. And don't let your perfectionism and natural competitiveness hold you back from developing collaborative and supportive relationships with fellow researchers in your department.

The Marathon

One of our staff tells this story. "A friend of mine decided he wanted to run a marathon. He trained and trained then the day came and I was at the finish line to congratulate him and show appreciation for the effort he had made. When he got his breath back I asked him how he had managed to achieve this goal he had set himself. He said that during the marathon he chose not to focus on the finishing line and how far it was to get there. To have done so would have simply been too disheartening. "I just kept picking a spot 50 metres ahead," he said "and I ran to there. When I got there, I'd choose another point 50 metres ahead and I'd run to there. And I did that all the way."

Good luck with your marathon and take satisfaction from every 50 metres you achieve.

Tricia Vilkinas, **The Thesis Journey: Tales of Personal Triumph**, Pearson Education Australia, 2005

Nick Repak, **Emotional Fatigue: Coping With Academic Pressure**, <www.gradresources.org/articles/emotional_fatigue.shtml>