Isolation, stress, anxiety, and what to do when you feel like quitting

Coping with feelings of isolation

Thesis writing is often an isolating experience and can have adverse impacts on a researcher’s mental and physical wellbeing. Lack of collegiality is a significant concern for many HDR candidates.

Here are some tips for dealing with feelings of isolation:

- Read our advice on connecting with the academic community.

- Keep up to date via Grad Post, SUPRA’s weekly newsletter. Opt-in to receive Grad Post when you join SUPRA, or contact us to be added to the mailing list.

- Attend SUPRA events. At our free monthly Wine & Cheese and Free Lunch events you may find other HDR candidates who are keen to set up social networks and events. Team up and share the workload of organising meet-ups and forums specific to your cohort.

- Reach out to SUPRA Council. Council members are happy to hear any concerns or ideas you may have about building community, and SUPRA can support events for postgrad students.

Managing stress

Undertaking a Higher Degree by Research can be very stressful. Acknowledge this; but try not to glorify self-sacrifice, or engage in punishing self-talk, or other self-punishment behaviours. Feeling guilty that you’re not working hard enough is a commonly cited problem.

Certain levels of stress can be motivating, but high and prolonged levels of stress can have serious psychological and physiological impacts. Try not to ignore your stress; manage your stress levels by consulting appropriate support services like your GP or a counsellor. If you can’t get to a face-to-face appointment with a counsellor, get immediate support from a phone counselling service, like Lifeline.
Depression

The challenge of completing a high-level research project in a relatively brief period of time can sometimes cause HDR candidates to feel unhappy, helpless or lacking in hope. If these periods of low mood become prolonged and you’re no longer sure why you feel the way you do, you could be experiencing depression. ReachOut has a clear and comprehensive explanation of the symptoms of depression.

Depression is not something you can ‘snap out of’, so seek support from trained health professionals. If you have been experiencing any of the symptoms listed by ReachOut over the last month, make an appointment with a GP to discuss making a mental health plan.

Anxiety

Beyond Blue has found that anxiety will affect, on average, one in four people in Australia, making it the most common mental health issue in Australia. Complete the anxiety checklist, and follow Beyond Blue’s advice for finding the right support for what you’re experiencing.

Support for your mental health

Studies have shown that the majority of HDR students will experience a significant mental health issue or event during their candidature. Over half to two thirds of PhD candidates experience psychological distress, and around a third are at risk of a common psychiatric disorder. One in ten contemplate suicide. If you’re experiencing psychological distress, seek appropriate help now.

Remember:

- Counselling or psychological services are confidential. They won’t disclose to the University that you are consulting them.

- If therapy with one counsellor or psychologist isn’t working, don’t give up: use the resources available on our website to find a suitable health professional.
When you feel like quitting

Many HDR students consider discontinuing their candidature. Common issues HDR students face include: losing motivation to complete a thesis project; changes in professional or personal needs; and new priorities in life. Discontinuing candidature is a significant step, and you should discuss your thoughts and concerns with your supervisors, postgraduate coordinator, other research colleagues and mentors, as well as loved ones and friends, before making your decision. You might also consider consulting a counsellor, who may be able to help you process why you’re feeling like you can’t continue. They can also suggest strategies for dealing with people in your life who are pressuring you to decide one way or another. A careers counsellor can also assist you to evaluate what you want from your working life.

To further help you address any concerns about your career choices, consider the benefits of an alternative academic (‘Alt-Ac’) career. Below are a few places to start:

- [Inside Higher Education](#) – ‘Alt-Ac’ careers
- ‘Alt-Ac’ hashtag on Twitter
- [Slate](#) – ‘Alt-Ac’ to the rescue

You can also contact us – our caseworkers can help you to figure out what you might want to do, or to discuss any issues moving forward with your decision.

Last updated 5 June 2020