

Possible causes for work-related stress during the PHD from a psychological point of view

I would like to reflect on possible causes that might contribute to work-related stress during the PhD.

At the psychological counselling services we know that during the PhD people can experience a lot of pressure. As an introduction, I would like to give you a short impression of our counselling sessions and the difficulties PhDs regularly tell us about. I will also show you the proportion of PhDs who seek help at the psychological counselling services. However, I will not present any statistics or scientific studies about psychological disorders of PhDs.

Of course a variety of factors can cause stress and pressure during the PhD. I won't go into the institutional situation and the – undoubtedly existent – difficulties for your dissertation that are related to it.

I would like to put the focus of my presentation on some psychological aspects of your situation as a PhD. From our experience especially in the relationship between PhD and Supervisor a lot of expectations and needs arise, which can lead to stress and the experience of pressure. Some of these expectations can lead to misunderstandings and even conflicts. In these situations it's not easy to differentiate between reasonable needs and more irrational or not adequate expectations – from both sides.

Of course there are reasons for psychic pressure during the PhD that do not only originate in the relationship with the supervisor. I will name a few of them.

In the end I would like to show you where you can find support if the need arises.

Psychological Counselling Services UZU/ETH

In the last year we have seen around 1200 people for a first appointment at our counselling services. Around 160 of those were PhDs. Here you can see the first counselling appointments in 2017, divided by degrees. 18 percent of those who applied for a first interview from the university were PhDs. The ETH clientele consisted of one fourth PhDs.

With which questions do the students and PhDs come to us? On our website we highlight that we can be approached with any problem. The main topics in our appointments are study-related problems and relationship issues. Often, these fields go hand in hand: if someone is personally burdened, they also encounter greater difficulties to concentrate in their studies. Explicitly, we list on our homepage these problem areas as our offer:...

To demonstrate, I would like to tell you about the counselling of a doctoral candidate whom I have seen for two appointments.

Leo, a young doctoral candidate, appears to be in a low mood at the first appointment. He seems to be very worried.

He tells me that he suffers from work-related stress, sometimes even from panic attacks. He lives in constant fear that he can't manage his job. In reality, everything runs smoothly with his PhD. He has worked on it for two years now and thinks he could finish it in another one and a half years - which is even less than originally estimated.

Additionally, he tells me that his doctoral advisor is young, enthusiastic about his work, and understanding. So far, he has never criticised Leo's work. But since Leo is his only PhD at the moment, the supervisor seems to expect a lot from Leo. After his first year, Leo was able to approach his supervisor. As a consequence the supervisor crossed several tasks off the list. Nevertheless, Leo is constantly worried.

He adds that at the moment he only lives for his work. He doesn't have time for relationships, hobbies or visits to his family who lives in another city. His parents try to support him but they don't really know what it means to make a PhD. One of Leo's brothers, who also works on his PhD, seems to have similar problems.

When we meet for the second appointment, Leo feels a bit better. However, we can see that it's only because in the meantime he had to teach. Since he didn't have the time to work on his PhD he could avoid the topic. He's afraid that soon he'll feel down in the mouth again. We try to find out why he puts so much pressure on himself. By digging a bit deeper, we can see that he emulates his siblings who are both working on their PhD. On a conscious level, his parents have never demanded high performance from him, yet Leo had the feeling everybody was always expected to achieve a lot in her family.

Leo says that he would never dare to leave work earlier. From his point of view, this would mean to show weakness. We try to find out how he could distance himself from work a bit better. Leo finds this useful but we agree that his situation isn't cleared yet. Leo is interested in continuing his sessions with a psychotherapist who works in a private practice.

I've chosen this example because you may be familiar with this kind of situations. If someone puts themselves strongly under pressure, the work environment can sometimes – despite sympathy and understanding – provide only limited help. Often a longer counselling or a psychotherapy are necessary to resolve the underlying and inner-psychological conflicts.

What conflicts could these be? We would now like to have a closer look at this question.

I don't intend to go into theoretical detail now. But for those of you who are interested in it – in this question, I mainly refer to the psychoanalytical theories of Sigmund Freud and Judith Le Soldat. These theories prove their value in my practical work again and again.

Working relationship between professor and doctoral candidate

As I have said, especially the relationship between PhD and Supervisor can comprise many conflicts from a psychological point of view. For both sides this working relationship is of great importance. But because it has to do with a relation of mutual dependency in the widest sense it can be problematic, similar to the relationship of the biological parents during adolescence. Like then, the situation of the doctoral candidate is often formed by strongly opposing wishes: on the one hand, they seek approval and on the other hand, they have a strong desire for emancipation.

I presume that both the doctoral candidate and the supervisor are generally interested in having a good relationship. But as I mentioned, many obstacles can arise.

What does this mean? There is much at stake in the project of the PhD candidate for both parties. Unconscious wishes and fears play a role. For instance, the doctoral candidate can have the idea that his personal wishes might jeopardise the relationship. These wishes and fears thus need to be warded off. That's when the doctoral candidate might begin to suppress their own wishes because they evoke anxieties. This might lead to physical or psychic symptoms or a behaviour that appears initially incomprehensible and can lead to misunderstandings.

So, it's useful to be more aware of the wishes and worries that play a role in this relationship. This can help to establish a good relationship and may contribute to the productivity of the work itself. As I mentioned, this is not as simple.

I would like to give you a few examples of such expectations and fears that can impede the building up of a good relationship.

Especially at the beginning of a doctoral thesis, too high expectations towards the support of the supervisor can become an obstacle. For example, there may be the expectation that the professor should praise one's work excessively. This expectation per se is of course not bad or unusual. It only becomes problematic if it dominates everything and distorts the view of somebody's work. To make a concrete example: A doctoral candidate expects that his professor compliments everything he does without him doing much work. A reason for this behaviour may be caused by his personal history; by him never feeling appreciated enough by his parents. Now, he finally wants to arrive with his accomplishment.

Of course it can also be the supervisor who wants the doctoral candidate to be somebody who could fulfil all his hopes. To a certain degree also this expectation is normal and necessary. Possibly, both parties need to reduce their expectations throughout the course of the work.

In addition, mutual unconscious fears can get in the way of work. If we think of Leo: he might have put herself too much under pressure due to his internal unconscious perception that his supervisor isn't after all fundamentally well-disposed towards him. As I have said: this sort of idea doesn't necessarily have something to do with the external reality.

It is innerpsychologically determined that we are afraid of criticism or much worse negative reactions of others when we are successful. Such notions prevent the development and free expression of our own opinion, and can lead to passivity and prohibit creativity. These fears can become particularly distinct towards the completion of the doctorate and the obtaining of the title.

What does this mean referring to the situation of doctoral candidate and supervisor? Normally the PhDs profit a lot from their supervisors while they're working on their thesis. But inner-psychologically it isn't that simple: unconsciously, the doctoral candidate might be afraid of being too aggressive by taking too much from his supervisors' knowledge or abilities. He's maybe afraid that he could even damage the supervisor. Additionally he has to overcome his feelings of guilt.

On the professor's side, comparable with a parental position, mixed feelings might arise: on the one hand, there are the expectations towards the chosen doctoral candidates to perform well. On the other hand, with time a certain unease can grow if someone becomes too strong and successful. In the sense of: the doctoral candidate only wants to rob me of my knowledge and then leave with it. It is absolutely not simple to endure to let others profit of one's knowledge without fear of loss.

Further specific situations

Here I listed some further factors that can be connected to work-related stress during the PhD.

Depending on the phase of their project they are in, different needs of doctoral candidates persist. At the beginning PhDs have to find out how they can work independently and yet ask for support when it's appropriate. As mentioned before, the supervisor is often idealised too much in this initial phase.

In the middle phase of the doctorate this can already feel very different. Here, it is much more about perseverance. Possibly, the different opinions cause conflicts. You as the PhDs may feel like you need your supervisor increasingly less.

Towards the end of the doctorate, the PhD candidate primarily wishes green light for the completion of his project. Often, doctoral candidates are relieved to know that the professor will be sympathetic to them also after the completion of the thesis.

At the beginning of their dissertation, PhDs are increasingly younger. This can mean that along with the work other vital questions, such as in relationships, have to be solved, which may require time and space. The majority of the younger PhDs also had little or no possibility to get work experience in another environment.

Also, the rising number of female doctoral candidates brings new requirements and questions into the academic field of work: how can female PhDs include themselves into the so far male-dominated research? How can the wish for compatibility of family and research be taken into account?

Possibly you have already experienced that the cultural backgrounds can also cause misunderstandings. An international student initially often needs more support at the beginning. He does not have the same preconditions due to his previously made personal and scientific experiences.

The last point is that the environment maybe notices if someone – like for instance in Leo's case – begins to ignore the intrinsically necessary need for a healthy work-life-balance. He or she possibly works more and more, while becoming less and less productive. Here it can be important to approach the person concerned. It might be helpful to tell them that in the long-term view, they only harm their productivity.

Support

Where can you turn to with questions and difficulties? Of course the HR of the University is at your disposal, especially when multiple people or a whole team are involved. So far, the University does not have an own ombudsman's office. If you are employed by the University, you may contact the ombudsman's office of the canton of Zurich in case of need.

With more individual or personal questions you may of course approach the Psychological Counselling Services. It can also be helpful to point out our services or the courses offered by the Graduate Campus to one of your colleagues, if you suspect them to face problems or difficulties.