

# University of Portsmouth case studies

## Case study 1

*Mental health issues that are not to do with doctoral study but may have an impact on it.*

Clara is a first year PhD student who is experiencing symptoms of depression following several negative life events, and has just started seeing a University-based counsellor. As part of her monthly supervision meetings, Clara is meeting with her supervisor to discuss her progress, and over the course of the discussion, Clara discloses that she is experiencing difficulties, and is looking to her supervisor for support.

**Please read the case study and discuss the following questions:**

- Should the supervisor assume that because Clara is experiencing difficulties, that doctoral level study is not suitable for her?
- After Clara's disclosure:
  - How would you have approached the meeting?
  - How would you have supported Clara?
  - How could the supervisor be more supportive of Clara, after her disclosure?
- What are the boundaries within the supervisor-supervisee relationship?
- Should pastoral support be the role of a third supervisor and/or pastoral tutor, or as part of the role of a primary supervisor?

<b>Supervisor:</b>	Hi Clara. So, shall we discuss how you are progressing with your data collection? As you know, you are coming up to your major review.
<b>Clara:</b>	Yes. I've been progressing, but things have been going more slowly than usual.
<b>Supervisor:</b>	Why is that?
<b>Clara:</b>	There are some external factors in my personal life that are impacting on my motivation.
<b>Supervisor:</b>	Such as?
<b>Clara:</b>	I've had a few horrible experiences happen to me recently and I've been really low. I've just started seeing a counsellor to help me work through things.
<b>Supervisor:</b>	Right. Do you feel that it is impacting on your ability to progress?
<b>Clara:</b>	Not all the time, but at the moment yes.
<b>Supervisor:</b>	Well, to be honest, I'm not sure this is the right career path for you in that case. You can't let what happens in your personal life impact on your ability to progress with your doctorate. I didn't let it do so for mine.

## Case study 2

### *Mental health issues that link directly to, or result from, doctoral study*

Dimitri is a second year PhD student who is experiencing an intense period of data collection. Dimitri is spending all hours delving into hard-copy archival records in the local library, and online, in the local 24 hour University library and shared departmental student study space. Over time, Dimitri has not been sleeping or eating properly, and is increasingly isolated due to the nature of his research. Dimitri has been missing friends and family back home, as he is missing significant occasions for work and cannot afford to travel back home. Dimitri's supervisor has seen him in the shared study space when he walked past, looking tired and ill, and has decided to have a quick chat to check-in.

### **Please read the case study and discuss the following questions:**

- How would you approach a student who you were concerned about?
- How could the supervisor in the encounter with Dimitri best support them?
- What are the elements of doctoral study that would impact on individual mental health?
- What are the boundaries within the supervisor-supervisee relationship?
- Should pastoral support be the role of a third supervisor and/or pastoral tutor, or as part of the role of a primary supervisor?

<b>Supervisor:</b>	Dimitri! I saw you here last thing at night and then now, first thing in the morning. Did you sleep here [laughs]?
<b>Dimitri:</b>	[visibly tired]. I've been working here for most of the night, and have had a few hours of sleep. I wanted to get going early, as I'm anxious to ensure I have what I need to finish.
<b>Supervisor:</b>	A few hours? Have you had anything to eat either?
<b>Dimitri:</b>	I had something to eat yesterday.
<b>Supervisor:</b>	When was the last time you had a proper break?
<b>Dimitri:</b>	I can't remember. I can't take a break, I need to get this done, to finish on time.

### Case study 3

*Mental health issues that are not to do with doctoral study and do not have an impact on it*

Skye is a first year PhD student, undertaking a part-time distance degree. Skye was diagnosed with Generalised Anxiety Disorder at 17 years old. At 31, they feel that they have the resources to support their mental health, and feel that it does not impact on their studies (and vice-versa). Skye's friends and family are a good source of support. Skye and their supervisor are in one of their regular meetings, and Skye discloses the existing diagnosis.

**Please read the case study and discuss the following questions:**

- What is the supervisor assuming in this case study?
- How would you approach the meeting, following Skye's disclosure?
- What do you think the impact of an existing mental health diagnosis may or may not be on doctoral study?

<b>Supervisor:</b>	How are things going? We were discussing the direction of your literature review and ethics application previously.
<b>Skye:</b>	They're going thanks - I've been searching databases and collecting information, but I find it a bit isolating sometimes.
<b>Supervisor:</b>	Yes it can be. How are you coping?
<b>Skye:</b>	Yeah, I'm making sure I'm spending time with my friends and family. I used to hate being in these sorts of situations [isolated] previously, due to my anxiety.
<b>Supervisor:</b>	Your anxiety?
<b>Skye:</b>	Yeah, I've had anxiety since I was 17. It doesn't have too much of an impact now, as I have a handle on it. I have good days and bad days, but it's ok.
<b>Supervisor:</b>	Are you sure? Does your anxiety not influence your work? Will it slow progress?
<b>Skye:</b>	Sometimes, but overall, it's ok.
<b>Supervisor:</b>	What about the isolating nature of the work though, as you mentioned, you used to hate it? What about that?

## Case study 4

### *Discussion of failure in a healthy manner*

Yasmina, a third year PhD student, has just received an email from the Social Research Association (SRA) notifying her that her abstract for their December conference has been rejected [a first time experience for Yasmina]. In a meeting with her supervisor, Yasmina discusses the outcome.

#### **Please read the case study and discuss the following questions:**

- How did the supervisor deal with Yasmina's experience of failure and comparison?
- How would you support a student with dealing with failure, in a healthy manner?
- How would you support a student who is comparing themselves to others, when this impacts on the way that they feel/approach their work?

<b>Supervisor:</b>	Have you heard back from the SRA yet? They should have notified you by now, in my experience.
<b>Yasmina:</b>	Yes, I received the outcome today. Rejected.
<b>Supervisor:</b>	Oh no! I'm sorry to hear that. What did they say, did they provide feedback?
<b>Yasmina:</b>	<p>The organisers said that whilst my research had merit, they had received a number of excellent abstracts and unfortunately could not accommodate my work in their programme.</p> <p>It frustrates me because Wren [another student in Yasmina's cohort] has had their abstract accepted, but not me. I feel like such a failure.</p>
<b>Supervisor:</b>	<p>Well. Firstly, well done for going for it, you did receive great feedback despite the outcome. Secondly, submissions can be a bit brutal. When I was a student, I had received rejection after rejection, and felt similarly to you. My advice would be to keep trying, we can look at your abstract and look at other conferences for you. Lastly, with Wren, I understand that it's difficult to not look at others and compare yourself. I did the same thing. However, it just makes you feel rubbish. What I learnt is that their success does not equal your failure - you've done brilliantly so far [having already presented at a few conferences] and will continue to.</p>

## Case study 5

*Approaching a topic that impacts on doctoral mental health sensitively*

David is a second year South Coast Doctoral Training Partnership (SCDTP) PhD student. As part of the SCDTP, David is required to develop a range of skills, such as working with others. Due to an ongoing difficult social situation at the University and existing mental health issues (related to previous social trauma), David is anxious about this part of the training and privately, is worried about the impact of his career and coming across to others as someone who avoids social situations. David's supervisor is aware of the ongoing difficult social situation and mental health issues. David is in a planning meeting with his supervisor, discussing how to approach the requirements of his doctoral funding.

**Please read the case study and discuss the following questions:**

- How well has the supervisor supported David?
- How could you, as David's supervisor, best support David and respond, taking into account your background knowledge of your supervisee?
- What further support would you need, if any, to best support David?

<b>Supervisor:</b>	Hi David, what would you like to discuss today? I know you mentioned wanting to look at the training requirements as part of your funding.
<b>David:</b>	I'd like to look at the areas I already have strengths in and seeing where attending further workshops would improve the skills I have. So, a training needs analysis?
<b>Supervisor:</b>	Ok, let's have a look at the experience you already have and take it from there.
<b>David:</b>	Well, I'd like to start off with a strength. I'm quite pleased with my ability to work with others. For instance, I'm involved in a few research groups within the University.
<b>Supervisor:</b>	Hm. I'm not sure I've seen this in the same way that you do. To me, this is an area for improvement. Sometimes you can come across as a bit of an isolated individual. I only see you walking alone across campus, looking tense [David feels misunderstood and slightly hurt by the inference that he is a loner].