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**Your PhD journey:  
Getting the Best Start**

**Year 1 PhD Cohort Day**

***Trainer’s Name***

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**MAPPING YOUR SUPPORT SYSTEM[[1]](#footnote-1)**

Take a large sheet of paper (A3 or bigger) and on it draw a map of your support system. By this we mean all the people, systems and activities that contribute to your sense of well-being. This may include people and activities who are important in your life; things you watch, listen to & read; hobbies; creative pursuits; exercise; political activity; relaxation strategies; university student support services; etc.

Begin by drawing a picture or a symbol in the middle of the paper to represent YOU. Then around this symbol, draw other symbols, pictures, diagrams or words to represent all the things, people and activities that are positive, supportive influences in your life and help you to function effectively.

Try to represent the nature of your connection with each of these supports. How important are they? Draw each symbol of a size that illustrates their importance to you.

Are they near or far away from you? Do you use these supports often or hardly at all? Is the link strong and regular, or irregular and distant? Position each symbol on the page to illustrate where each person or activity lies in relation to where you are.

Think about the nature of these supports. Are they supporting you from below, like foundations? Or are they like balloons that lift you up? Place them on the page accordingly.

When you are satisfied with your initial map, select a colour you haven’t already used and write words or draw symbols on the page to represent things that block you from fully accessing the supports you have identified. Reasons might include: friends and family live far away; don’t want to burden my friends or show them I feel weak; don’t want my parents to worry; don’t want my tutor to know I’m behind with my work; haven’t got time; etc.

When you have finished, choose someone in the group with whom to share your picture. Explain to them what the pictures & symbols mean and what your support structures are like.

**Giving feedback to someone about their support:**

* Listen while your partner explains their map to you. Ask questions if you need clarification.
* Tell them what your overall impression of their support map is.
* Ask which of all the supports they have put on their map is the most important to them and why?
* Then ask them if their map contains the kind of support they want/need?
* Do they think they have enough support? If not, what ideally would they like to add? How could they go about finding it?
* How could they go about reducing the blocks they’ve identified as stopping them from fully accessing the support systems available to them?

[ONLINE: If running an online session, this activity can be done individually and/or as homework, with the feedback questions rephrased in 1st person]

**YOUR STRESS CONTAINER**

Draw your own stress container.

Think about:

* What are your sources of stress?
* How many of these are within your control?
* What does your stress signature look like / what are the signs you’re at breaking point?
* What are your unhealthy coping mechanisms?
* What are your healthy coping mechanisms? Are you still doing those or have you neglected them recently?

**GOING FORWARD – NEXT STEPS**

* Write down 3 ideas that you have got from today that will help you thrive on the next stage of your PhD journey.
* Put a reminder in your diary for 3 months’ time to check whether you have done these.

1. Activity developed by Barbara Lawton in January 2019 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)