



# courage

## wellbeing project

### **Case Study: Resilience Training as part of Personal and Professional Development – Bullet Journaling**

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#### **Setting the scene**

One strand of the Courage Project was to develop, pilot and evaluate resilience training (i.e. training that would develop skills in managing stressful and challenging circumstances) as part of personal and professional development of PGRs at the University of East Anglia, University of Suffolk and Norwich Bioscience Institutes. This case study presents Bullet Journaling as a tool for systematically managing your time in a creative and mindful way.

#### **Action taken**

Bullet Journaling is a system of organising your time and life using such a Journal in a systematic way and it is analogue and pen and paper rather than digital. The system and the way it is set up is most useful for people who feel that they need to organise their lives a bit more, have a way of dealing with stressful deadlines and a more mindful way of living from day to day. The system lends itself particularly well to big long term projects (like a PhD) enabling users to have a systematic way of breaking down complex projects and tasks and deadlines so that they become manageable and achievable in the short, medium and long term.

The Courage project enlisted the guidance of the Norwich Business School PGR Local Support Team Leader, Liane Ward, who has personal experience of using a Bullet Journal, to pilot the use of Bullet Journals as a tool for managing time, in a mindful and creative way, for PGRs. Bullet Journals provide a practical tool to help with mindfulness, stress management, mental health and wellbeing. Initially, two introductory workshops were run, with a total of 60 PGRs, many of whom were just starting their research degrees. Each person was provided with a free bullet journal to use and keep, so that those who wanted to make use of this tool could immediately set up the system and start to plan their year or month and tasks. An introductory session was also run as part of the Courage Festival (September 2019) and at the start of the New Year in January 2020.

Monthly UEA Bullet Journal Groups were then set up, with a space booked for all UEA Bullet Journalers to attend to review last month's journals, set up journals for the upcoming month and share ideas and learning with a community of users.

The introductory sessions were well attended, however retention at monthly Bullet Journal Groups was limited. Scheduling a time and day that was suitable for PGRs to attend was the main difficulty. We consulted PGRs and arranged the sessions based on this feedback but attendance remained low.

## **Key impacts/ outcomes**

The feedback was positive from the introductory sessions. One PGR described the introductory session as:

“A pressure free environment... People journaling and socialising is (was for me) more of a relaxed and less stressful experience than forced interactions”

Using a Bullet Journal alongside postgraduate research was viewed as a useful tool to manage time. As an example one PGR described:

“It gave me time to relax and process what I had achieved each week and what I wanted to achieve. I was also able to tailor my daily planner based on what I was focussing on at that time (e.g. I could log what I had read, but then later on I could change that to focus on my goals when writing up), so it's more flexible than a bought diary.”

A somewhat surprising consequence was the way in which the bullet journal groups provided a means of peer support and a place for open and honest discussions about mental health in academia. As described in PGR feedback:

“A bullet journal group as well is a great way to not only share ideas, but also to meet people from various school and to talk about how journals can help. I've also found it to be a great way of normalising talking about mental health struggles.”

A bullet journal was described as a useful tool to help PGRs pay attention to their mental health and wellbeing as a tool that can be used to help track mood and habits:

“I have tried to use trackers in the past, but I struggle to maintain them. But I do benefit from looking at previous months and it's almost like a visual representation of my mental health journey over the past year. I can see months where I was struggling, and my bullet journal is very

rushed and basic. I've also been able to log changes in habits, and then look back and see that after I made those changes, my mental health improved”

Bullet Journaling is a good exemplar of a shoulder-to-shoulder approach, that provide a simple way to break down barriers and start conversations with new people, whilst having the primary focus of the event on the practical activity. In the smaller monthly groups, the conversation often focused on difficult PGR experiences and mental health. Having something else to focus on whilst having these conversations appeared to take away some pressure and created a safe and supportive environment for these conversations to take place.

The Courage Project provided free journals to people who attended the introductory sessions, as an example 60 journals were purchased for around £225. Having free journals and a resource of pens and washi tape to use likely helped with engagement and also enabled a practical session where people could start to use and benefit from the journals immediately. This method could be easily translated to other university contexts, there is a vast online community of people who use regularly use Bullet Journals and share videos and tutorials.

**Appendix:**

Link to Courage Festival YouTube Video – where introduction to Bullet Journaling workshop took place, with free journals provided: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-LBkOg7hfqU>

**Image 1: Courage Project A5 journals – given for free at Introductory Bullet Journal Training sessions and used as part of the practice and introduction to using the journals**



**Image 2: PGRs attending Introduction to Bullet Journals training session**

