

How to be a better scientist and still have a life..

To further enhance the current support available for postgraduate students within the Biology Department, a wellbeing workshop was organised by Dr. Karen English (Biology Athena SWAN Chair) and supported by the EDI office and the Graduate studies office at Maynooth University. Presented by Hugh Kearns, author of “52 Ways to Stay Well During Your PhD”, this workshop was designed to offer advice for postgraduate students on how to achieve a work-life balance, overcome Imposter Syndrome and most importantly, learn techniques that will help you get the most out of your research career.

I am currently in the second year of my PhD programme and like many others, I have also experienced those feelings of self-doubt, being over-whelmed or sometimes even lacking motivation when it comes to tackling the large workload associated with being a postgraduate student. This workshop was extremely beneficial for me, as it made me realise that no matter what level you are at in your research career, Imposter Syndrome is extremely common. Following on from this, Hugh also talked about how it's normal to not always have a high motivational drive when it comes to doing everyday work. Tips such as making a realistic to-do lists that you can 'tick off as you accomplish', breaking your work down into smaller pieces and just starting your task rather than waiting for the motivation to come (action before motivation) will help you to maintain a steady level of productivity.

Postgraduate study is often associated with long working hours; early mornings, late nights and even working on weekends. Hugh made it very clear to us that this isn't always necessary in order to be productive, as you can get much more done in just 2 'real' hours in comparison to 10 'fantasy' hours (where you are checking your phone constantly, going to make a coffee or helping your undergraduate students). As he put it, multi-tasking isn't doing many things at once, it is switching between several tasks quickly, resulting in less time spent focusing on an individual task. Whether you are doing a masters, PhD or post-doc, it is a marathon and not a sprint. It is vital to create boundaries, learn when to step away from your laptop and enjoy some relaxation time without feeling guilty.

Something that really hit home during this workshop was that many people in academia are like me: perfectionists. Usually seen as a strength because it means you pay close attention to every detail, being a perfectionist may also cause some problems to arise – especially when it comes to writing. Truth is, that paper you are working on or that chapter of your thesis you are writing will never be 'perfect' in your eyes – there will always be something you want to re-word or tweak. A knock on effect of this, is that you will never want to send it to your supervisor or peers and thus, you will never receive the crucial feedback you need to improve. After this workshop, I have started to become comfortable with doing a rough draft of my writing project and immediately sending it to my supervisor, whereas I used to ponder over the document for days trying to perfect it. This way, I now approach the writing process with this mindset: the quicker I make those mistakes, the quicker I can fix them. That previously 'wasted' time is now used to openly discuss my writing with my supervisor and get valuable feedback early on.

Throughout your postgraduate journey, you will have many successes – big and small. Hugh made me realise how important it is to celebrate all of these 'small wins'. So if you finally got

that tricky experiment to work, you gave a presentation to your peers or you just had a productive week, getting together with your friends for coffee or a nice lunch on a Friday makes the world of difference. Doing this also tackles another common problem postgraduate students may come across: isolation and loneliness. Celebrating these small victories allows you to get out of your own work bubble and socialise with your peers – you never know, they might have a simple answer to something you're currently stuck on in the lab!

Along with motivational quotes and extremely-relatable, witty memes, Hugh regularly posts useful resources on his twitter (@ithinkwellHugh). These include a variety of templates, such as ones for planning your week and even how to get the most out of your lab meetings. Overall, this wellbeing workshop taught us to see the positive in everything (even those failed experiments), that it is normal to sometimes feel unmotivated and lost, and most importantly, that you are not on this journey alone. I now know that you are not your PhD, and that having a life outside of the lab will help you to become more productive and happier in the long run.

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