



## REFLECTIONS ON BEING A PHD STUDENT

**‘Doing a PhD is a lonely existence.’** - you will have been told this 76 times in your first week, and then four times a day before breakfast for the next three years. I’m not sure why people do it. I assume they mean well. Sure, you will be working under your own direction for a lot of your time - as you would in a lot of professions - and yes, it does mean you need to focus; but feelings of loneliness don’t have to be a constant part of the equation.

### Meet other research students

If you’ve just arrived, then your department should be putting on meet and greet sessions for you to meet other students and staff. The Graduate Students’ Association has lots of welcome events in September and the PhD Network does things throughout the year. There are various PhD Facebook groups you can search for, (I know, I know, I hate it too. But it’s what everyone uses). Just about every department has a list of researchers and their interests, so search for other people and make sure your profile is up-to-date. If no-one else is studying Georgian wallpaper in your department, maybe someone else across campus is looking at 18th-Century drapings? How about emailing someone at another university to meet for a coffee? Leeds is 25 minutes away by train. Today’s coffee date is tomorrow’s collaborative project. I also expect a wedding invite and demand that any children are named after me.

### Avoid other research students like the plague

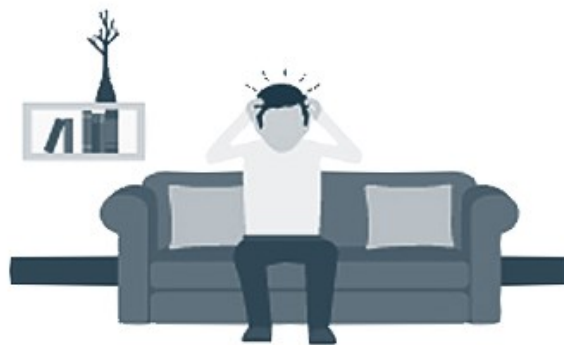
Just kidding. Although not completely... If anxiety is a problem for you then it can be good to be friends with, and talk to people who aren’t living the PhD life. Get enough of us in a room and conversation naturally turns to: TAP horror stories; writer’s block; failed job applications; rogue supervisors; late nights; and demanding undergraduates. There is a supportive, communal, ‘let’s get through it’ element to this, but if you soak up other people’s anxieties like a sponge, it can be extremely draining. There are lots of local interest groups in York and apps and websites like Meetup can help you find and set up your own, but I think it’s important to have some ‘off campus’ life, even if it just means banning ‘shop talk’ for a lunch break. Good luck with that.

### Don’t keep comparing yourself to other people

Difficult, I know, but important. Tim passed his upgrade in a record twelve months? Nadia gets invited to the head of department’s home for Pimms every month? Great, good for them; they’ve probably worked hard and deserve it. But it doesn’t make *you* an inferior person. People tend to be proud of their successes and highlight them - social media wouldn’t exist without that human need - but you aren’t aware of everything else that is going on in their lives. Plus, different courses have different structures and different expectations. A lab-based PhD in Biology is very different from an English PhD in literary criticism. Come your graduation no-one, including you, is going to care how you got there. As long as you and your supervisor are happy you are on track, try not to worry.

## You might not be on track and your supervisor might not be happy

Doing a full-time PhD should be like having a full-time job, but with more tea breaks. Except, if you have a full-time job and a depressive period, your boss is likely to notice. Having lengthy periods of being completely non-productive and seeing your supervisor every three months (and hey, you could probably set that meeting back if you tried) is a recipe for disaster. Having the odd day here and there where you feel unable to do significant amounts of work is fine; and holiday time is essential. But, if you are feeling unwell for more than a week then **you should tell your supervisor and discuss applying for a leave of absence**. You know I'm serious when I bold something in the middle of a paragraph. A leave of absence stops the clock on your studies and takes some of the pressure from you. It does not make you a failure; it is a break from a potentially stressful situation until you feel like you can continue. What might make you feel like a failure is 'turtling' and hiding from your work; which could have serious repercussions on you submitting on time, or at all. There are lots of places on campus where you can get more advice on this - Student Support Services; your department's head of graduate studies; the Graduate Students' Association; and YUSU, to name a few - so please talk it through with someone.



## You will be criticised. You have to be.

Getting a doctorate is a big achievement, but it is several orders of magnitude tougher than getting your undergraduate or master's degree. Your avuncular, softly-spoken supervisor who reminds you of a grandparent might become an argumentative, picky, critic during your TAP meetings or upgrade. They don't have multiple personalities, they are just testing your ideas and methodologies because it's in your best interests. You are being prepared for your viva where you could be asked much tougher questions or criticised on a more fundamental level. They aren't allowed to jump in and defend you during the viva, so they need to make sure you can do it before it gets to that stage. Nevertheless, some people are shocked by being challenged, and to some people being criticised on any level can be an overwhelming experience. If you think you might fall into this category discuss it with your supervisor in advance.

Of course sometimes supervisory criticism can go too far and be beyond the bounds of professional standards. If you feel this is the case, then it's important to seek advice; talk to others in your department; research alternatives; and seek advice from the Graduate Students' Association. Just because you might be especially sensitive to criticism doesn't mean you should ignore it when it is truly gratuitous.

## Failure is possible, but not inevitable. Sometimes failure isn't failure...

Okay, so...not everyone who starts a PhD completes it. This probably won't be you, but it might be. Recent stats put the completion rate at around 73% after seven years across all UK institutions. That varies drastically depending where you do it and even which department you do it in. The completion rates for a part-time PhD are quite a bit lower - I don't want to depress myself by linking to them, but trust me when I say they are not great.

Reasons for not completing are complex and numerous; but, essentially there are three traditional main 'exit points': the review at the end of your first year; your upgrade; or your viva. At any of these points you could be told that your work does not meet the requirements expected. There are numerous options available at all of these stages, depending on the quality of what you've submitted. At the first two points you could be asked to resubmit or at all stages you could be recommended to change course to, for example, an MPhil or masters by research. Despite popular belief, these are actually highly regarded qualifications that come with real certificates which don't have 'FAILED PHD' embossed on the front. No one will know your starting intention and you are not required to tell anyone on your CV that while you have a qualification that a fraction of the population has, it could have been slightly higher. If you are offered an alternative award, I would recommend accepting it rather than leaving with nothing. You may not feel like it at the time, but it could be a decision you regret.

Of course, you can choose to withdraw from your studies at any point, if you feel like it is the best thing to do for *you*. Doing so is a sign of strength and your ability to prioritise your well-being. It is not a sign of failure. I would however suggest that you talk to your supervisor, family, friends, doctor, before making any big decisions. Take your time and don't make hasty decisions after a small wobble.

A couldn't write about failure without linking to this article about a successful academic listing his career failures. It helped me put things in perspective.

### 'Impostor Syndrome' is a real thing and you're far from the only one!

I've talked about criticism and failure, but an important part of the PhD psychosphere is feeling like you don't belong. You might not feel smart enough, confident enough; like you have the right accent, gender, skin tone, theories, background etc. Whatever it is, or it might be a lot of things, it can be a crippling problem. It can be especially acute if you suffer from anxiety issues or low self-esteem. The usual advice is to acknowledge that almost everyone feels that way, it's just some people are better at hiding it than others. It's important to take a step back and consider that you wouldn't have made it this far if you weren't seen as capable.

The sociologist in me would also suggest that we challenge the notion that this feeling is always 'in your mind'. Some academic spaces are less welcoming to some people than others. I don't think this is a controversial opinion. If you feel up to it, it can be liberating to challenge the status quo and make things easier for the people that follow you. Sometimes that can just be through being present and successful, sometimes you might feel like speaking out, and there are numerous ways you can do that at York - board of studies, research committee meetings, the Graduate Students' Association, organising your own diverse conferences, etc.



For more information about mental health and mental health services in York, visit Mind Your Head's website:

[www.mindyourheadyork.org](http://www.mindyourheadyork.org)