Ups and downs of life as a PhD student

Myfanwy Hill reflects on her coping strategies and recognises her limitations. She has learnt why it is important to relax and recharge.

IN science, as in life, it’s all too easy to get stuck in a rut: a few things don’t quite go to plan, and all of a sudden this seems to snowball into what can feel like an abyss of never-ending failure. Scientifically speaking, this can be a mere technical challenge; things are failing because you’ve got something wrong in your planning or in your understanding of the system. You try to solve the problem, identify your error and try again . . . and this fails too! Usually I find such events motivating because I like a challenge. It’s not so very different from working up a tricky case, but, like that patient that just won’t get better, sometimes repeated failures can become quite disheartening.

After a peak of enthusiasm at the beginning of the summer following a somewhat stressful, but ultimately successful, first year report and viva examination, I descended into a slight scientific stupor over the summer months. I blame this in part on the excellent stress-free period for not asking other graduate students (particularly arts grad students) for too many details about their work, and a far poorer excuse for my own inactivity.

I think I might also blame, perhaps slightly more legitimately, a degree of burnout, and the apparent intellectual paralysis that I seem to suffer following an outlay of effort and stress. I have always been one who needed a proper break after exams.

As a child, I used to sleep for a full day at the end of the exam period and then return to my (now enviable) array of activities and studies with full gusto a day later. As an undergraduate there were enforced periods of relaxation over Christmas, or a half-week between the end of exams and the start of the summer EMS treadmill, but I was never very good at planning in proper detail. Unlike many of my friends, I didn’t go backpacking around Asia, or combine a spay clinic in Greece with a Mediterranean holiday. Instead, I did more EMS, both clinical and in various labs, and had holiday jobs to earn some money. When I qualified I didn’t go straight in and then trudged on operating sub-par for quite a while, before realising, too late, quite how unproductive I was. My failures were almost certainly a result of poor planning for my own inactivity.

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ning and technical challenges, but also of my slightly dulled faculties and slower reasoning.

Another lesson learnt, and, yet again, not a scientific one. Holidays and breaks are important, my batteries are not everlasting. I am not superwoman, I need to recharge, take stock and relax occasionally. With our profession’s mental health in the spotlight more than ever, it’s important to remember that we should be aiming for positive mental and physical wellbeing, not just coping or getting by. For me, this starts with being a bit kinder to myself and slightly more realistic.

Fortunately, the ebb and flow of success and enthusiasm seems to be par for the course when it comes to PhDs. So, I had a break, went to an awesome conference, which kickstarted my passion for science and enthusiasm for my project again, just in time for the start of a new academic year. I also have the slightly daunting but largely motivating prospect of a looming deadline in early November - my first big international conference - so I had better have some interesting data to present.

All in all, although I may not have produced as much work as I would have liked in the past few months, I’m glad I have recognised my limitations now and not further through my PhD, when an ill-timed burnout could have far more serious consequences.

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Myfanwy Hill

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