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COLUMN

Harness the power of groups

PhD students can use writing meet-ups to beat isolation and depression, as well as to boost productivity and motivation, says **Karra Harrington**.

Feelings of depression, anxiety and isolation are so common during a PhD programme that some have dubbed the experience ‘the PhD blues’. As a PhD student and practising psychologist, I wanted to try to reduce the impact of the blues on my fellow students and on me.

I decided to plan a regular meet-up with my student peers, in which we could write up our theses together. My hope was that it would establish deep social connections and help us to cope with some of the challenges of our PhD programmes.

I had attended Shut Up and Write! writing groups, which involve short ‘sprints’ of writing with breaks in between. Everyone works

silently during the sprints and socializes during the breaks. These groups helped me to manage my productivity and motivation — but I had no sense of connection with my fellow writers. Often, participants would check e-mails or take a walk during breaks. And different people attended each session, which made it hard to get to know each other and to build connections. Any conversations were superficial and perfunctory.

For my group, I wanted to use the breaks to create supportive networks and to share ideas on how to overcome challenges. Ultimately, I wanted to create a community in which participants could learn from and support each other while also feeling productive

and making progress on their theses.

I first needed to find participants. I reached out to students involved with the Cooperative Research Centre for Mental Health, an Australian research consortium based in Melbourne that aims to further mental-health research through collaboration. Students in the consortium work across research areas, institutions and geographical locations. Such diversity meant that relationships developed among students who would not usually interact regularly. It also meant that we could use the sessions to expand our networks and gain fresh perspectives on common challenges.

I launched the meet-up almost two years ago, and it has been a huge success, with ►

► a regular attendance of six to ten students every month. Our sessions are done in person and through videoconferencing, and include two to three hours of writing, as well as discussions on how to find mentors, structure thesis drafts or balance family life with completing a PhD. I facilitate each session, and group members raise topics according to their needs and interests. Members say that they feel accountable to the group, and that this motivates them and limits procrastination. They also check in with each other between sessions.

INTERACTION ZONE

Bringing together students from different institutions, and creating a space in which they could interact, was challenging. The videoconferencing helps members who can't get to campus — they feel engaged with their peers and less isolated. The meet-ups help me, too: I often have limited contact with other people during my working day. A regularly scheduled time to meet with others and discuss my science gives me a break from the isolation and is something to look forward to every month.

It took some time to build trust in the group so that everyone felt comfortable participating in the discussions. As facilitator, I keep discussions on track and relevant, encourage quieter group members to speak up and provide opportunities for those participating through videoconferencing to contribute. These efforts help to establish a sense of fairness and equality in the group.

The consistency of attendance by core group members is important because it helps participants to build relationships, thereby fostering a sense of safety and trust within each session. Group members say that they value having opportunities to connect with other PhD students and share their experiences, and that the group has helped them to maintain their motivation and sense of well-being.

Along the way, I've realized the importance of setting clear expectations using ground rules. Our ground rules are based on respect and confidentiality, and include speaking one at a time, listening to each other, not talking during writing sessions and maintaining confidentiality on all issues that we discuss in the group. All group members agree to stick to the rules, and the facilitator helps to enforce them.

As our group continued to meet and members started to open up about challenges that they faced, we found that the ground rules became even more valuable, because they helped to promote a sense of safety and encouraged useful exchanges between members. I found that it was also useful to make the group's purpose — to manage productivity and well-being — explicit from the start. On signing up to join, members know immediately what to expect. We use the Pomodoro Technique, which involves blocks of writing, breaks for discussion and goal setting, to manage our productivity. At the start of each session, we share our individual goals with each other; and



during the discussion breaks, we check with one another on our progress towards our goals.

For some group members, this was a new way of working and it took some time to get used to. But the fact that we made it clear from the start why we had adopted this way of working helped new members to understand and to agree to try out these techniques. Members say they've found that the group helps them to set aside quality writing time, and that the structure of the sessions enables them to make progress on their thesis even when they are struggling with motivation.

The peer-mentoring aspect gives everyone a space in which to ask questions and to share what they know. A group member might, for example, seek advice about conference net-

working while also providing guidance on a data-analysis technique. By creating opportunities for members to ask for support and advice, the sessions help everyone to feel more hopeful and to identify proactive steps that they can take to overcome challenges. The opportunity to help others and to share knowledge provides everyone with a sense of empowerment and the ability to recognize their own strengths and expertise.

Our discussions help to normalize the challenges of PhD studies and remind us to celebrate our successes. We wanted to share the benefits of the group with other PhD students, and so we've developed our model into a programme called Write Smarter: Feel Better. We have created guidelines for group sessions and training materials for group facilitators.

These cover things such as how to build trust, and how to help the group reach agreement on ways in which members should interact with each other. Australia's University of Melbourne and Edith Cowan University are now testing the programme, with evaluations planned for completion by the end of this year.

At both universities, PhD students volunteer for the role of facilitator. We worked with the universities to develop strategies to support PhD students in this role; these included providing first-aid training in mental health and arranging for a university staff member to be a support contact. Importantly, although the universities offer support, the sessions remain led by PhD students and for PhD students.

Creating this meet-up group has been one of the most rewarding aspects of my PhD experience. I have learnt so much from organizing and facilitating the sessions, and now have a solid peer network. I have been able to gain insights on my research and career that I wouldn't have had if I had stuck to working on my own or only with lab peers. To paraphrase Maya Angelou, my goal is not only to survive, but to thrive — with passion, compassion, humour and style — and my meet-up is helping me to do exactly that. ■

Karra Harrington is a PhD candidate at the Cooperative Research Centre for Mental Health in Melbourne, Australia.

CORRECTION

The Careers Feature 'It takes more than a vow' (*Nature* **558**, 149–151; 2018) erroneously referred to the National Technical Institute for the Deaf as the National Technical School for the Deaf.