CAREERS

ALICE MOLLON/GETTY

COLUMN
Strength in numbers

Share veteran PhD students' experiences with new starters, says **Sarah Masefield**.

When I started my PhD in health sciences in 2016, I knew it was a risk. I had a history of depression, and I thought the programme might trigger a recurrence. What I hadn't expected was the extreme anxiety that I experienced. Over the Christmas holidays of my second year, I woke up every day with my heart racing and feeling sick, knowing that to reach my next deadline I had to spend another day trying to make progress with my systematic-review chapter. My only full day off during that period was Christmas Day.

Instead of seeking help, I stopped communicating with my supervisors because I felt incompetent. I worried that talking to them would expose and shame me more. I was not willing to carry on at the further expense of my health, and of my relationship with my partner. I decided that if something didn't change soon, I'd have to drop out.

Fortunately, I'd made friends with other PhD students in my department at the University of York, UK. We discussed our research projects and shared guidance from our supervisors and other students. Hearing about their anxieties and receiving their advice really helped.

My experience isn't especially unusual. The PhD experience harbours many risk factors for mental ill health, including feeling lonely and isolated, and doubting your own abilities. PhD students face regular academic criticism and encounter unexpected challenges: experiments don't work; and ethics applications and papers get rejected. Often, universities provide no dedicated, preventive mental-health support for PhD students. We struggle in silence, and our engagement in our research deteriorates. Some take a leave of absence or drop out.

COMMUNITY SPIRIT
In June 2018 I was still struggling, but I entered the university's Three Minute Thesis competition because my supervisors encouraged me to, and I was eager to please them. The competition challenges students to communicate their research topic and its significance to a non-academic audience in three minutes. ▶

⭢ NATURE.COM
How one scientist cycled her way through a PhD:
go.nature.com/2ya1cxy

▶ I reached the final, and managed to keep going despite awful microphone feedback. My fellow finalists were all very supportive of each other, and my friends and supervisors came to watch. For the first time, I felt part of a vibrant and supportive postgraduate research community and had confidence in my abilities. I was able to make decisions that advanced my research project.

Finding support from others who were going through the PhD experience in my department and elsewhere — in other words, finding a community — was what helped me most when I struggled with mental ill health. I decided to try to create the same for others.

I thought about what I would have told myself six months previously that might have helped. When I asked other students the same thing, I discovered that everyone had found something challenging and had a corresponding message and advice. I sounded out the other Three Minute Thesis finalists, and some friends, to see whether they thought a workshop to share this information would be valuable and whether they would contribute. They responded positively, and one also suggested producing written resources, such as a booklet or online resource. As a result, I founded the 'How to survive your PhD (and enjoy it)' initiative as a way for postgraduate students and early-career researchers at the University of York to share their knowledge and experience with those at earlier stages of their PhDs.

> *"Finding a community was what helped me most when I struggled with mental ill health."*

Its focus was information-sharing rather than mental health, but I hoped that it would offer a further benefit to students who might be struggling, by helping them to feel connected and highlighting opportunities for support.

GUIDE FOR SURVIVAL

I pitched the project to the university's researcher-development team and graduate research school, and to dedicated postgraduate colleges and student associations. I recruited volunteers across various disciplines, and from different faculties and departments; some were part-time students, some full-time. They represented all stages of the PhD journey, from first year to final year, and the first year of a postdoctoral fellowship. We identified common themes in the experience and developed a guide, web pages (see www.york.ac.uk/survive-your-phd) and two workshops that are open to all University of York PhD students through the university's researcher-development platform.

The guide and additional web content were written between June and August 2018, with contributions from 25 students and postdocs. I developed the content in collaboration with a committee of 10, whose energy and help made

the project possible. To ensure a single voice, the text was then written up by a PhD student with journalistic experience. Two others produced layouts and images, and the committee proofread text and agreed the final layout.

University bodies signed off on the guide and web content and funded the printing, but they did not influence the content. They put me in touch with the university's web-content producer, who developed the web pages on the graduate-school website for us.

We held the first workshop in October 2018, and the second in February 2019. The workshops were largely the same, although the second one included some extra content about the international student experience, and about managing caring responsibilities. We used 10 presenters in each, and 81 students attended, of whom 98% found the session useful and 85% felt more confident afterwards about surviving and enjoying their PhDs. Like me, the participants particularly appreciated the opportunity to talk about their anxieties, finding peer support reassuring.

We are now also developing 'survival' workshops on the viva, fieldwork and international PhD-student experiences, and we're creating a sign-up system so that students can register their interest as workshop speakers and coordinators. This will ensure rolling recruitment, so that the project always has enough people involved in it from the various year groups and departments.

WHAT YOU SHOULD KNOW

Here's what I want current and future PhD students, and universities, to take away from my experiences:

● Students and universities should be candid about the challenges as well as the benefits of doing a PhD.

● Students' knowledge of the PhD process can and should be shared with those who are starting their PhDs — and not just in their own departmental silo. University backing is needed to help get peer-support initiatives off the ground and keep them going.

● Students can go to their doctoral training and support services and ask them what support is available for mental health and well-being. They can ask for help developing peer-support workshops across the university (not only in a single department) and promoting activities to students.

● Universities should work with PhD students to provide environments that reduce the risk factors for mental ill health, that help students to recognize when their mental health is being adversely affected, and that put them at ease about asking for help. ■

Sarah Masefield *is an occupational therapist and has expertise in patient and public-involvement research. She is currently writing up her PhD research on the use of primary health care by mothers with preschool disabled children.*