

# PhD Wellbeing

A guide to feeling and working at your best

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LAURA COX | LUND'S DOCTORAL STUDENT UNION | LUND UNIVERSITY





# PhD Wellbeing

A guide to feeling and working at your best

Dr Laura Cox



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# Introduction

Hi there! Welcome to the third edition of the **PhD Wellbeing** booklet. This new version goes together with a few other resources and is now designed as more of a shortcut to PhD-specific content and further help. As with previous editions, this resource is about how you can actively feel good during your PhD and prevent or address common problems.

The other resources that connect to this booklet include:

- the *Careers: A guide to navigating and planning post-PhD life* booklet
- the *Collaboration: A guide for working together better in academia* booklet
- the **Wellbeing in Academia Canvas Portal**
- the **Wellbeing in Academia Self-Assessment Tool**.

More information about each of these will be mentioned throughout the booklet and you can find downloads and links to all of them at [www.drlauracox.com/resources](http://www.drlauracox.com/resources).

As you might have gathered, my name is Laura Cox, and I am a recent PhD graduate from the Department of Psychology at Lund University, having defended in September 2024. Before my PhD, I trained and completed qualifications across the spectrum of mental health, from addressing mental health problems to helping people not just recover but also to actively feel great and reach their full potential. I moved from England to Sweden in February 2020 to start my PhD and I experienced a variety of challenges during my own doctoral journey. These prompted me to apply my previous training to the PhD context and learn more about the support systems available at Lund University, and in Sweden more broadly. From this, I also became highly involved in PhD representation and took on leadership roles at faculty, university-wide, and national levels.

The initial version of this booklet was written during my final year as a PhD student, and during a transition from co-chairing the Social Sciences Doctoral Council (SDR) to becoming Director of Internal Affairs in Lund's Doctoral Student Union (LDK) for 2023-2024. A second version of the booklet was released in Spring 2024 and included the results of a university-wide Wellbeing Survey conducted in December 2023.

In October 2024, much of the material in the earlier versions was expanded in a **Wellbeing in Academia Canvas** portal, which is available for all researchers across Lund University. The Canvas contains multiple modules including information and tips on wellbeing, practical steps to address specific situations, survey information and Q&As. As the Canvas material is applicable to all researchers, this Wellbeing booklet has therefore now been condensed to specifically address the *PhD* experience. It retains and builds on a peer-to-peer perspective and provides quick insights and a roadmap to relevant support for PhD students.

Being a PhD student is a unique experience and will be different for every individual. Even if you are in the same subject, or even the same research group, you may respond to opportunities and challenges in vastly different ways. The advice and steps in these resources are intended to go together with personalized support, which I have been providing since December 2024 in my capacity as **PhD Wellbeing and Career Mentor**. This has been made possible due to the development of the role and the allocation of funding by Lund's Doctoral Student Union (LDK).

I have had the honour of working with dozens of PhD students in the last eight months and have started to notice patterns in what comes up. Although I had a sense of common themes from the literature about PhD Wellbeing, the survey results and from my own experiences, it has been very interesting to see how similar issues arise across different types of PhD students and across faculties.

This third edition brings together everything I know so far from working with a variety of PhD students in my current role, from working as a PhD representative at multiple levels, working as a researcher, clinician and coach in the field of psychology, and from my own experiences. As I have mentioned since the first edition, I am also still learning, and I simply aim to pass things on, so that you hopefully don't have to spend as much time doing the same. I hope you find something useful in here for you and I hope this booklet helps get you the exact support you would like as fast as possible.

As I say throughout the booklet, please feel free to contact me via email ([support@ldk.lu.se](mailto:support@ldk.lu.se)) or through connecting on LinkedIn.

I wish you all the best with your PhD!

Laura Cox, September 2025



# General Wellbeing

Wellbeing refers to ‘the state of being healthy and happy’ (Cambridge Dictionary, 2024) and can be influenced by many factors. Some are more obvious and have a clear, direct effect on what we do and explicitly think (for example, having a specific experience such as a loss or injury). Others can be far more subtle, and it can be hard to pinpoint exactly what is not quite right, for example the influence of light, nutrition, hormonal health, movement, and levels of social interaction. Check out the Wellbeing in Academia Canvas portal for more information and tips on all of these.

Our general wellbeing is also not fixed; it can fluctuate over time and in different situations. There are some core foundations that are important to strengthen as far as possible, but wellbeing also involves a process of considering **environmental** components (such as poor work environments, political instability, geographical conditions), as well as **internal** processes and habits.

This booklet won’t cover every aspect of wellbeing, but it will introduce some key ideas and offer some insights about wellbeing in the specific context of academia and the specific situation of being a PhD student. There are further resources that will be mentioned throughout if you would like to dig deeper into anything in particular, and you are welcome to get in touch if you would like references.

## Wellbeing in Academia

Academia is ‘the part of society, especially universities, that is connected with studying and thinking’ (Cambridge Dictionary, 2024). It encompasses both the practices of developing new knowledge through **research**, and the transmission of existing knowledge and skills through **education**. It can also refer to the working culture amongst academics, including the typical assumptions, expectations and behaviour within academic professions. As a PhD student in Sweden, you will likely be engaged in academia in three core ways: as a researcher, as a teacher, and as a student.

As mentioned in other resources connected to this booklet, I believe that academia – and research in particular – has incredible potential to be one of the most enjoyable and sustainable career options that exist. Indeed, those who (for the most part) have a

good work environment and the tools and skills to manage the nature of the work do experience high levels of satisfaction and say they wouldn't want to do anything else.

At its best, academia can involve lots of freedom and flexibility, inspiring discussions and collaborations with colleagues, profound and meaningful projects, production of work that can shape others' thinking and leave a legacy, and connection with later generations. Depending on your field and individual situation, it could take you all over the world or be a lifelong nest in one place.

However, whilst all of this is technically possible, the reality of academia can be very different and there are some problematic attitudes and poor practices that hinder how enjoyable many people are able to find it. There can be unnecessarily harsh and unhelpful criticism, exploitation, over-competitiveness, unfairness, and isolation. At its worst, working in academia can result in people feeling very alone, inadequate, over-worked, and unable to enjoy other parts of their life. It is incredibly important to know what to do if you notice this happening, and this booklet aims to help you identify if that is the case and offer quick and accessible advice on how to turn things around.

## Wellbeing as a PhD student

Now that we've covered general wellbeing and wellbeing in the context of academia, I would like to turn to the specific context of being a PhD student. There are a few things that set PhD students apart from others even within academia.

Firstly, a PhD is the final step of the education ladder, but the very first official rung on the research ladder. It's a strange position of expertise in relation to being a student but also being a novice in the wider world of research. It can feel very contradictory at times, and it is understandably difficult to feel properly grounded in either world. It does come with a lot of benefits as well though (hello, student discounts!) and it is quite unique and interesting to be student, teacher and researcher all at the same time. My hope is that with these resources and personalised support, you'll be able to get the most out of this special position and really enjoy it throughout.

Secondly, a PhD is a time-limited but extended period – unlike a master's degree, you need to sustain motivation and focus for more than a couple of years, but unlike senior

researchers, you don't have a permanent contract. You also have a specific goal to achieve – completing your credits, your thesis and your defence – and it's important to remember this and not get sidetracked. In terms of your life in general, you are likely to grow and develop a lot in 4 years, and that's a huge consideration particularly for international PhDs who start to build a life in Sweden but don't have the long-term stability of permanent residence. Although it's not strictly the PhD itself, migration concerns and putting one's life on hold are often based on the position and limited by the timeline of the PhD. These can understandably affect wellbeing and decision-making, especially as the national context is continually changing.

Thirdly, while there are many other people completing a PhD alongside you, it is extremely easy to feel alone unless you actively engage in PhD groups and departmental events. Given the time consideration mentioned above, many PhD students respond to stress and pressure by burrowing down and *only* focusing on the exact tasks at hand until they consume everything. This can result in not connecting with other PhD students or the wider academic community, which unfortunately – and counter-productively – actually hinders progress.

Finally, the PhD is defined by close supervision from just a couple of senior academics. When this works well, it can be fantastic experience of direct mentorship, highly specific guidance, and deep teamwork. However, people don't always get along and the pressures within academia can lead to tensions within supervision relationships. There are also power dynamics and cultural clashes that can be hard to navigate, and PhD students are often taken advantage of. In combination with the earlier points, it can be hard to know what to do when something goes wrong in the supervision relationship – especially given that problems can worsen over the long journey if not addressed, and if the PhD student becomes very isolated. This booklet briefly covers the supervision relationship from the PhD perspective, and the **Collaboration** booklet goes into more depth about working relationships in academia.

# Why your wellbeing is important for the quality of your work

Of course, your wellbeing is important regardless of what you are doing in life. The purpose of this section though, is to highlight how research is different to other types of work and why wellbeing (especially mental health) is so crucial to its success.

Research belongs to a job category referred to as ‘**knowledge work**’, defined as professions whose main capital, or value, is the thinking its professionals do, including their expertise, and critical thinking skills.

Academic work heavily depends on the *quality* of our thinking (or cognition), including our ability to process, assess, and skilfully use vast amounts of information to shape our thinking, and our behaviours to engage in original thinking and express it clearly. While many other jobs definitely involve a lot of cognitive work, this is often not the main component in the way it is in research. For example, a carpenter may have an excellent idea, but it is their work with their physical tools that makes it happen. In a PhD, your brain *is* the tool – sorting, shaping, and refining new knowledge.

While you can technically do research under massive amounts of stress and chaotic thinking, the whole process will be much more effective and pleasant if this primary tool – your brain – is functioning at its very best. However, your brain doesn’t just sit disconnected from your entire body – it is intimately linked with your physiology and other things going on in and around you. That’s why I’m talking about ‘wellbeing’ rather than simply mental health – it’s important to take a wider approach and acknowledge how everything is connected.

When we take the two aspects I’ve discussed so far into account: the temporary yet extended nature of a PhD and the importance of your mind as the tool in the research process, it is quite easy to end up putting a lot of pressure on yourself. In addition, PhD students are highly dependent on their supervisors who also have a



variety of other things going on beyond being a supervisor. And, as mentioned, a problematic relationship with a supervisor can add on to the more challenging parts of the PhD and heighten levels of stress. The position of the PhD as simultaneously at the top and bottom of two arenas can also contribute to feelings of ‘imposter syndrome’, which is covered in the Canvas portal.

If you would like to look more deeply into any of these areas, check out the **Foundations of Wellbeing** and **Academia & Wellbeing** sections of the Canvas portal (pictured on the right). These include tips on physical and mental health in general too.

If you find yourself feeling quite isolated from other students and unable to reach or talk to your supervisor about stresses and challenges for any reason (including them being part of the problem), it is crucial that you reach out for some support earlier rather than later. These problems can quickly spiral and can lead to a vicious cycle of not being able to work effectively, beating yourself up for not working as effectively, and then being even less able to work effectively, and so on. It is unfortunately not uncommon to experience some sort of difficulty in the PhD journey, and the line between healthily pushing your limits to grow and crossing over into going too far is quite a thin one. Please make sure to read the later section on figuring out how to identify where you are with your wellbeing and feel out this boundary, and please do get in touch for some support in learning and establishing your limits. You might also want to use the **Self-Assessment Tool** at regular intervals (e.g. every few months) to see check in with yourself on both challenging and positive aspects.

## A few ingredients for a great PhD...

There are a few concepts that can be useful in considering what is needed for healthy PhD experience. It is quite likely that will have come across, or felt, these to some extent before, but it can be helpful to keep them in mind and revisit them throughout your journey. They can be a little elusive at times, especially when the pressure gets high. There are established measures for each of them, and you can find questions for flow and self-efficacy in the **Self-Assessment Tool**. You can also learn more about each concept in the **Wellbeing in Academia Canvas**.

**Flow:** Flow is a deep state of productivity and enjoyment, where the level of **challenge** in a task is optimal in relation to the level of **skill**, producing a state of complete absorption. The concept of flow was first introduced and developed in the 1970s by Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi (pronounced ‘chick-sent-me-high’). A PhD is a great opportunity to get to know your relationship with flow; you are likely to have a mix of being interested in your topic (and therefore have the possibility to enjoy the work), a level of freedom and time to navigate how to go about working with it, and a level of challenge in getting to the standard of knowledge and skills you’ll need in order to be able to work as a researcher on your topic.

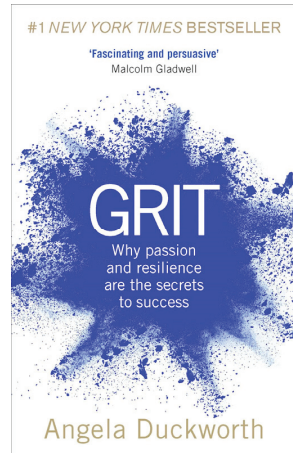


Take some time to try different ways of working, and reflect on your experiences – what conditions help you to ‘get in the zone’? What makes it hard for you to focus? How can you recreate your conditions and adjust them as you and your work develops?

**Self-efficacy:** Self efficacy is defined as ‘an individual’s belief in his or her capacity to execute behaviours necessary to produce specific performance attainments’ (Bandura, 1977, 1986, 1997). As with flow, our relationship to our work can depend quite a lot on the skills needed, engagement with the task and the space to develop our capacities for research tasks. Self-efficacy is an important concept as it relates to our *belief* about our abilities, not necessarily the abilities themselves. The academic environment is a particularly critical one, and recognition and praise for good work can often be lacking. Getting to know and improve your own view of yourself can be an important resource for withstanding external challenges to your confidence.

**Grit & Resilience:** Resilience refers to our ability to adapt, recover or withstand adversity. A related concept is ‘grit’ which refers to ‘courage and determination despite difficulty’ (Cambridge Dictionary, 2024). The book *Grit* by Angela Duckworth covers these concepts in more depth and explores them in relation to success.

While I do believe resilience and grit are valuable concepts, I would like to express a caveat in the context of academia. Research itself is a healthy challenge, and it of course should push you to grow even further intellectually and personally – it won’t always be easy, straightforward, or enjoyable, but that doesn’t mean it’s not worth persevering.



However, some work situations in academia are genuinely unhealthy and can even be abusive, and while resilience is a factor in how we cope, I do not think it should be used as a concept for tolerating poor work conditions. Staying does not necessarily mean you are more resilient, and leaving (for example by changing supervisor) does not mean you are weak. It’s important to know when and how to draw the line and doing so can be a sign of strength. Resilience and grit can then be useful concepts in how you adapt beyond leaving the situation and how you make the most out of the challenges you faced.

**Growth Mindset:** A related concept to all of the above is that of mindsets. You may have heard of the concepts of ‘Growth’ and ‘Fixed’ Mindsets, introduced by Carol Dweck in 2006. In brief, a *fixed* mindset is one where intelligence and abilities are viewed as limited and pre-determined (one is either good at something or not), while a *growth* mindset views failure and challenges as opportunities to develop and learn, with abilities as adaptable over time. In the context of a PhD, a fixed mindset could look something like ‘I’m not good at writing papers, so I’m not cut out for research’, while a growth mindset might approach it more as ‘Writing in this context and for this audience is new to me, but it can and will develop over time. I can build this skill by asking others how they learned to write academically, reading more on this topic, and writing often.’ Developing a strong growth mindset can help you persevere through intellectual and emotional challenges in completing the complex work of a PhD.

Together with a good understanding of and familiarity with flow, you can create conditions where you consistently develop in a noticeable and enjoyable way.

# Common Themes in PhD Wellbeing

## The supervisor relationship

The **Collaboration** booklet goes into more depth about navigating the supervision relationship in general, however in this section I would like to offer some key tips for how supervision can relate to PhD wellbeing:

- Keep in mind that **your supervisor has their own stress, career goals, and possibly conflicts**. This can help you to not take things personally, be mindful of how this can affect the work and the relationship and be aware of how it can trickle (and sometimes pour) down on you. If you feel it is beyond what can be reasonably expected, make sure to reach out for support yourself and seek advice on what can be done about the situation.
- Remember that it is completely okay (and encouraged) to **focus on your own work and the requirements of the PhD**: you don't have to take on extra tasks, side quests, and things your supervisor can manage themselves.
- In relation to the above, remember that **there can be a power dynamic** at play in most supervision relationships. This does not have to be the case, and it should not result in you being at the mercy of your supervisor. Whilst they have a greater level of research expertise and are meant to help with guidance and direction in the research and PhD trajectory, they should not have control over *you*.
- Remember that getting the PhD position is a result of *your* efforts and *your* skills, and **you aren't indebted**. Gratitude and excitement for the PhD in general is natural, but it can be part of tolerating bad work conditions and can relate to the above point about power dynamics in supervision.
- Finally, while supervision might feel one-directional (i.e. your supervisor towards you), in reality, **they often need you too**. Having successful PhD candidates is part of your supervisor's CV, and the publications you get together are part of their publication record as well. PhD students are generally 'at the coalface' doing the groundwork of data collection, analysis, and article

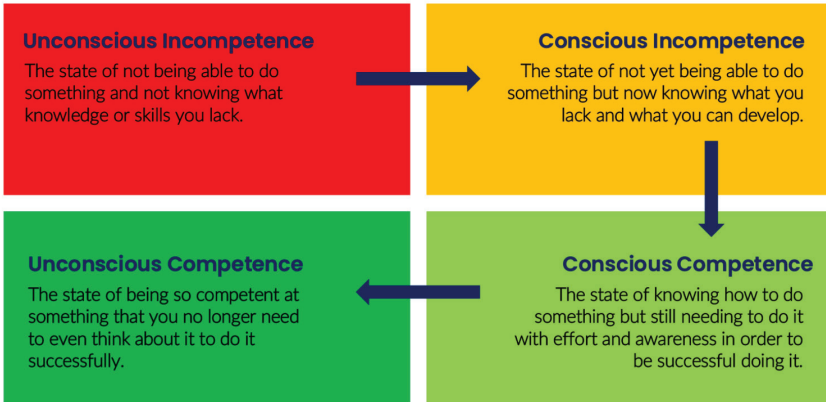
drafting. This actually means that you are far more needed than it might seem, and you absolutely have a right to ensure your work conditions reflect this.

## Managing milestones

Another defining component of doing a PhD is the fact that it is a prolonged journey with a few key milestones. Unlike the days of writing assignments and taking exams in school and earlier degrees, most of your work will be around the research itself and drafting the final thesis (whether that is a monograph or compilation of publishable works). In Sweden, this is over a 4-8-year period (with some variations due to prolongation or reduced pace – see the **PhD Handbook** in the Key Resources section for more on this), with milestones mainly in the middle and at the end.

It differs from place to place, but in general this will be a **halfway seminar** and a **final/80% seminar** before the defence. The **public defence** is of course the major piece in actually completing the PhD, but the key turning points for the work development are these earlier seminars. People respond to these in different ways; it can be an exciting step and opportunity for important feedback, but it can also be a stressful time.

It's inevitable that the way you feel about your research and as a researcher will shift throughout the PhD, and that's a good thing: it's meant to be that way as it is a process of training and developing into an independent researcher. It can be helpful to keep in mind that the middle parts of this process can be difficult though and the Conscious Competence Learning Model (De Phillips et al., 1960) is a helpful one to understand what might be going on. The process of mastering something involves both knowing what is needed to develop and building familiarity with new knowledge and skills. If you're just beginning, remember that you might not know what you don't know. If you're further in, think of how much you've learned so far.



## Beyond the PhD: Personal development and the future

Both the intensity of completing a PhD and the time needed for it mean that you and your life will likely develop quite significantly throughout the journey. How noticeable this is will depend a lot on the types of challenges you face, the stage of life you're at and how much you get involved in different things.

Examples of big things that might happen over the course of a PhD: moving, getting into a relationship, having a child, buying property, getting a pet, losing a loved one, learning a language, break-ups, learning to drive...and much more. This all beyond even the PhD itself, where you might have important developments such as getting published, meeting people who will be lifelong friends, taking on positions and projects, changing supervisor, crucial conferences and events, and taking courses.

A PhD is honestly quite a special experience. It would be quite surprising (and sad) if we were to finish it exactly the same as we started it. One of the most satisfying things at the end is looking back at how much you've developed: intellectually, relationally and emotionally. Here are a few tips to make the most of it:

- Zoom out and remember that your PhD is a *chapter* of your life, not the entire thing. Think about what you want to get from this experience, what you want afterwards, and whether your PhD as it stands is aligned with those things.

- Take advantage of the freedom and possibilities within the PhD itself: Remember that you can get prolongation for getting involved in other activities (e.g. teaching and representation) – give yourself more time, more funds, and more connections by taking up these opportunities.
- Set yourself up for security: Make sure that you have started paying into A-kassa (unemployment insurance) at least a year before the end of your PhD contract, and plan accordingly for defending in good time to make use of it if needed. See the **Careers** booklet for more on this and prolongation.
- If you are a non-EU international PhD student, think carefully about permanent residence and citizenship if you are building a life in Sweden. Keep in mind that waiting times can be very lengthy, and that changes are underway. Stay up to date by attending workshops and joining forums.

These are obviously big topics, and they can be difficult to navigate on your own. As with everything else, please do get in touch for a chat and support by emailing [support@ldk.lu.se](mailto:support@ldk.lu.se) or booking an appointment.

## Identify where you are currently with your wellbeing

There are a variety of models that can be helpful in clarifying where problems often begin, or which component of wellbeing it would be useful to start at. Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT) for example posits that cognitions (or thoughts) and behaviour are key components that are set off by a trigger and in turn affect and are affected by emotions and physical symptoms (Beck, 1995). A similar one is the SPACE model developed by Edgerton and Palmer (2005) – which also incorporates the importance of social context, alongside physiology, action, cognition, and emotion. These components can be very helpful to talk through with a CBT-trained practitioner or coach, and this often involves mapping out your thoughts, feelings, and responses in an interconnected diagram. You might also find it beneficial to write a ‘problem statement’, which summarises a problem you are experiencing and how it is affecting you. There are many templates online for this, and you can get in touch with me if you’d like some help.

Table 1 below provides a basic scale ranging from thriving, stress/coping, worry and low mood to burnout. Have a read and think about which area you currently relate to the most – you don’t have to be experiencing everything in that zone, but if there are things in one column that you are experiencing more of than the others, that’s the one you could identify with. Note that the graded colours intend to show the gradual progression from one end of the scale to the other: A person doesn’t go straight to burnout overnight – there is prolonged stress and a shift in ways of thinking about the self and PhD work.

It’s best to address problems early on to prevent further difficulties. **Seek help immediately if you feel like you identify with either of the last two columns.** Note: the final two columns are just a guide and are not diagnoses. In addition, the ‘worry and low mood’ one is using these terms in their broadest sense rather than the clinical definitions, and they are not only part of the progression to burnout – these could be due to other life events and equivalent seriousness to burnout rather than a step before it. The **Wellbeing in Academia Canvas** includes sections with more information about mental health problems, and you can explore any symptoms you might be experiencing using the **Self-Assessment Tool**.

There are other ways mental health problems can develop that are not covered by these resources and require individual assessment, for example eating disorders, psychosis, obsessive compulsive disorder, post-traumatic stress disorder. If any of these might apply to you, please seek support from 1177.se, Kry or a private psychologist if you aren't already.

Table 1. Zones of PhD wellbeing

THRIVING	STRESS/ COPING	WORRY AND LOW MOOD	BURNOUT
Finding work highly engaging and enjoyable	Some tension (e.g. around deadlines) but manageable and still satisfying	Finding work draining or anxiety-provoking	Major loss of motivation and faith in work
Feeling connected with colleagues	Feeling busy but still able to stop and connect with others	Doubting yourself and your work	Feeling incompetent and worthless
Sense of accomplishment	Sense of progress if not accomplishment, and still upholding health habits	Feeling stuck and worried, problems with maintaining habits	Little progress or feeling that progress is not satisfying/enough
Healthy and consistent routine and work production		Distancing from colleagues and withdrawing from the university	Loss of health-promoting activities, just surviving the day
Productive communication			

## Strengthen your inner wellbeing detective

It can sometimes be really easy to determine what is impacting your wellbeing and other times, it can be far more subtle. Habits around important physiological foundations of wellbeing (such as food, sleep, and exercise) can have huge effects but can often be difficult to keep track of and maintain. This booklet and the **Wellbeing in Academia Canvas** have highlighted some important areas, but beyond this, it is important for you to become your own 'wellbeing detective' and notice what impacts you. Try building

an awareness of exactly what helps you have a good day (e.g. speaking to other PhD students, focusing on staying hydrated, doing something active, eating certain foods).

If you're currently thriving with very few issues, you might want to think about what is helping you with that and how to uphold the habits, communication, and progress that are supporting your wellbeing. If you're experiencing difficulties, think about what might be needed to address those – are you able to make some adjustments yourself or do you need more support?

## Top Tips for Optimal PhD Wellbeing

### 1. Get connected

Social connection is one of the things that is fundamental to being human. This applies across contexts but can be especially important in completing a PhD. As mentioned earlier in this booklet, PhD students can find themselves in an incredibly difficult position of being disconnected from other PhD students, only interacting with demanding supervisors, and working constantly. It can feel impossible to break out of such a situation, and social connection – particularly with other PhD students – is crucial.

So how could you go about this? Make sure to turn up to PhD group meetings and events at as many levels as you can – within your research team, your department, your faculty and your wider doctoral council or union if possible. As I'll cover in the next point, the more connected you are across levels, the better able you'll be to contextualise your own PhD situation and reach out for help when needed. Not only that, but the social connection in itself will also help you feel and function better. Most of all, avoid focusing on the work to the expense of everything else – it might seem counterintuitive, but turning up to that afterwork with others might actually be more important to your PhD than just spending those hours plugging away at the same thing you have been doing all week. Meeting other people can give you a fresh perspective and help you get unstuck, as well as giving you an energy boost.

The other PhD students in your department and faculty are absolutely crucial to your wellbeing, both preventatively and when things are difficult. Building bonds as peers

helps you to share the challenges of research, understand your position in the university and academia better, and increase your awareness of opportunities and resources available to you.

It can be difficult when you first start to know who you can approach and how to build connections in the group. You can start by finding out who the PhD representative in your department is, joining any shared communication (e.g. a Facebook or WhatsApp chat), and joining any PhD student meetings in your department. Next up is your Faculty Council, where you can meet PhD students from other departments in your faculty – for example through monthly meetings, co-working days, winter parties, summer picnics, and writing retreats. Councils usually have an email address that goes out to all PhDs, so you should receive invitations when they occur. There is also the wider Doctoral Student Union (LDK) that is an overarching organization bringing together seven of the eight faculties at LU. You can visit the LDK website (<https://www.lundsdoctoralstudentunion.com>) to learn more about LDK and faculty councils, and follow Lund's Doctoral Student Union on Facebook and Instagram to stay updated. If you are in LTH, you instead have a doctoral guild (Dokt) within TLTH, and you can visit [www.dokt.se](http://www.dokt.se) to learn more.

## **2. Get to know your work environment properly**

As hinted in the previous point, a major thing you can do to help yourself is to get to know the framework and the layers of your work environment. It can vary, but usually it will be something like this:

### **Figure 1. Your work environment**



- You** Your closest environment – you experience everything that is going on in your PhD and outside of it.
- Your Immediate work environment** These are the people you see and work with each day. They are your closest experience other than yourself, and they are most familiar, even if things aren't ideal
- Your wider work environment** Beyond yourself and your supervisors/research team, there is the wider department - you might not see these people all the time, but they are important, so it is worth getting familiar with them
- The broader context** These are the components of your PhD that you're not likely to know much about unless you actively engage. If you do, it can be extremely valuable, and you can see how much more there is to it all.

If you want to get more active and engaged in the systems around you and even be part of improving them, you can take up a representative role yourself and meet students from other councils, groups outside the university (e.g. SULF and ST), and other university staff (for example prefekts and vice deans). Doing this will give you more information and connections, as well as extension of your contract.

The value of building these connections in your career is discussed more in the **Careers** booklet, but it is worth mentioning here. The skills you can build and the connections you can make as a representative (at any level, but especially at faculty and LDK level) can help you develop a stronger profile for further employment whether you're looking to stay within academia or transition out. In addition, it can be extremely rewarding to contribute to helping your fellow PhD students, refreshing to take on tasks that clearly have a more immediate impact, and empowering to know where you stand in the wider environment.

### 3. Familiarise yourself with all your support systems

There are several support options at each level, and it can be very helpful to know exactly what to use, when to use them, and how to make the most of the support that is available. I would primarily suggest getting to know more about your **head of department (prefekt)** and **director of PhD studies** as these are the people in your direct environment who will be able to make changes in your PhD (such as changing supervisor if needed). In addition (and if you have any doubt at all that they will help

you), it is very important to be aware of the **doctoral ombud (DOMB)** who also works within the university environment but is independent of the university itself. They can help advocate for your needs and give you advice on what to do regarding your rights and obligations.

Beyond this, you can and should familiarise yourself with **PhD representatives** within your department, faculty and wider university, and **trade unions**. Many things can be resolved internally, but if there are any complications at all, make sure you understand how to access external help from trade unions and confederations. Please email me if you are unsure.

In general, it is also good to be aware of what your departmental and faculty **HR** are able to help you with and to be in touch with them. You also have a number of **occupational health** options available to you and it's wise to get familiar with how to use them. Some of these are preventative, for example friskvård and ergonomics advice, and some can support you when difficulties come up, e.g. counselling for work-related issues. You can find out more about the Occupational Health Service and the DOMB (including informative Q&As) on the **Wellbeing in Academia Canvas**. Finally, remember that you can always get in touch with me ([support@ldk.lu.se](mailto:support@ldk.lu.se)) for help in knowing what support you could use at the moment, as well as anything I can do to help you.

#### 4. Nail the key components by planning effectively

One great thing about doing a PhD in Sweden is that there are technically really only a few things you *have* to do, and they are quite clearly laid out in the Higher Education Ordinance and general study syllabus (*allmän studieplan*, or ASP) outcomes. This means that even though they aren't necessarily small or easy, they are relatively simple and clear.

Although the exact requirements might vary between departments and the general learning outcomes are much more in depth, these will generally be:

- completing a certain number of **course credits**
- writing a **doctoral dissertation (monograph or compilation)**
- the public **defence**

You likely also have things like:

- a requirement to present your research in at least **one international conference**
- Mid-way and final **seminars**
- A requirement to publish a certain number of papers (e.g. at least one sole author/first author if you are doing a compilation thesis)

This section is not to minimise or downplay the magnitude of these things – as mentioned above, they are not small or easy and they require planning over many months and across the multiple years of the PhD. You also have your own individual study plan (ISP) and various subgoals (such as ethics applications, data collection, writing articles) as part of them. However, I do recommend writing these main points out and putting them on a personal timeline. By doing this, you can see when you'll likely clear these major hurdles, and you can figure out how to break down the steps needed to do so. Please get in touch if you would like some help doing this.

Finally, I include this point to emphasise that even though it can feel like it, you often don't actually *have* to do a lot of the stuff PhD students tend to end up doing. I know it's much easier said than done, but essentially, I would just like to remind you to focus on what is actually in your role description and not get burdened and worried by a lot of other things that you are absolutely free to say no to.

## 5. Get to know yourself and your work more deeply

When embarking on the PhD, it can be easy to get overwhelmed with the magnitude of the journey and forget how you used to do things. It can be really helpful to revisit some of your old techniques for studying, for example: how did you prepare for exams in school? Reflect on what you found most useful and think about how you could build on this within the context of managing literature, data and writing during the PhD. Give yourself some time to figure out what works well for you in *this* context – try out different ways of reading and notetaking, and notice what seems to work well. You can then build on this and make habits to let your mind know that it's time to kick in and focus.

If you would like some examples: I tried a whole bunch of different methods for gathering papers, reading and making notes early in my PhD. I felt very interested and

excited to dig in, but also very overwhelmed, and I kept feeling like I wouldn't know where to go back to after reading hundreds of articles. On a trip home to England, someone reminded me that the way I used to revise for exams was to make posters and plaster them all over the house. I wondered if that could work for my reading, and it actually became a crucial technique for everything I did for the rest of my PhD. By the time of my defence, the walls of my home office were covered in posters with references, legislation and ideas, as well as pages of my own articles and my kappa. I found it very satisfying and helpful to have everything laid out, and it helped me keep track of where I was conceptually and where I was going. Similarly, for my writing process, I learned that a mix of LoFi music, a tealight candle and a cup of tea are my best mix for getting 'in the zone' when working from home. Not sure why, but it works very well and now my brain knows it's focus time whenever I have those three together.

It can also be really helpful to talk to others and find out how they do things. You have a wide variety of knowledgeable and helpful people around you – even if they're not in your direct circle, they are out there! It is well worth just meeting and chatting to people as early and as frequently as you can and being curious about how others manage the process of research.

## **6. Understand the culture of academia and look after each other**

The academic environment may have a lot of the right ingredients for being an incredible workplace, but the reality of academia can unfortunately be rather different. As mentioned earlier, harsh feedback is often far more common and automatic than positive feedback, overworking is often normalised, and incentives/rewards are minimal compared to other professions. In addition, it is often viewed as normal to struggle and feel awful in pursuit of 'the cause' and that it's even a rite of passage to suffer in pursuit of a PhD. This does not have to be the case though, and it's important for us to come together as a whole PhD population in order to shift this type of thinking and push for a better working environment.

If you're in a good work situation at the moment, you can help others by looking out for anyone who seems isolated or struggling. It is hugely important to keep trying to make contact, and keep inviting and encouraging people to come to social gatherings,

even if they don't always come. They may be too overwhelmed 9 times out of 10, but that 10<sup>th</sup> time might be enough to make a shift.

If you are the one who is struggling, remember that **nothing changes if nothing changes**. I know it can feel impossible to break out of your current state or go along to something when you have no energy and so much else to do. However, I would like to emphasise that going to that fika or afterwork with others might be more pivotal for your wellbeing *and* your work than you might realise. Taking just a bit of time to do something else and see others will give you energy and input, whereas just powering through won't necessarily get you any further or help you feel better.

## 7. Budget time for the unexpected

Research doesn't always follow the time you've laid out for it. This is particularly the case in a PhD, when there is a lot of learning that has to happen alongside the work itself. That's also part of the point of research; digging deeper into unexplored areas takes time and some figuring out. There can also be major external events that completely change what's possible in your research, for example the COVID-19 pandemic. In such situations, it can be hard to tell how long the situation will go on for, and you may need to adapt considerably (in my case, including the pandemic as a main part of my PhD!). Tips 4 and 5 are there to help you make the most of the time you have and keep track of it, but you can also actively budget in some time in your journey for learning and exploring. That is one of the perks of research, in that you actually have quite a lot of flexibility and doing a PhD is the one time you get to have time to only focus on learning and exploring. If you would like to expand the time available even more, check out the next tip.

## 8. Get prolongation and experience

Building on the previous point, there are many ways you can set yourself up for more security – for example extending the length of your contract using prolongation, so that even if you're making good time with your PhD, you have the space and time to work on things for the future as well (e.g. grant applications). Prolongation is basically displaced time – if you spend time doing something other than your PhD that is serving the university, you still get that time paid but instead of being upfront at that moment,

it is added to the end of your contract, so you keep receiving salary proportional to the time you put in earlier. This is really great as it's also the time when your salary is at its highest, due to *etapplyft* (the salary raises you get at stages throughout the PhD). It's also the period when you could use the time the most effectively in terms of preparing for the future.

In this point, I mainly just want to encourage you to make use of the system you have here in Sweden, where you do have the opportunity to adjust your PhD timeline, get experience and connections, and it's all actually part of the same package. You don't have to go far to find different types of opportunities that could be very relevant for you. There are more tips on this in the *Careers* booklet as well, including more information on the types of positions I would recommend depending on what you would like to be doing in the future.

## Key Resources

**The Thesis Whisperer:** <https://thesiswhisperer.com/>

The Thesis Whisperer is a blog written by Professor Inger Mewburn, director of researcher development at The Australian National University. New posts are released on the first Wednesday of each month on academia, literature and PhD life, and the blog is over 13 years old. You can find helpful articles, book recommendations, software suggestions, worksheets and materials, networks and workshops on the website.

**Voices of Academia:** <https://voicesofacademia.com/>

Voices of Academia is a blog and podcast specifically focused on mental health in academia, and includes a variety of perspectives, or 'voices'. It aims to cover marginalised experiences and promote wellbeing using different strategies, and create community. It may be a helpful space to find others experiencing the same things as you, and you can also write posts yourself.

**The PhD Proofreaders:** <https://www.thephdproofreaders.com/>

The PhD Proofreaders is another great site with lots of downloadable resources and advice pieces about productivity and succeeding in a PhD. They have a weekly newsletter, free writing guides, workshops, writing retreats, and for more in depth support they also offer proofreading, coaching, courses and mock exams.

**Vitae:** <https://www.vitae.ac.uk/>

The Researcher Development Framework developed by Vitae is a useful resource for reflecting on your development throughout the whole PhD, and your development as a researcher overall. See the **Careers booklet** for the 2025 model and information on the earlier 2010 version. The Personal Effectiveness domain in the original model and its components can be a particularly relevant section for considering your Wellbeing and self-management, and how these link to your PhD.

**The PhD Handbook:** <https://phdhandbook.se>

The PhD Handbook is an online resource for PhD students across Sweden that was developed by SFS-DK (the national doctoral committee). The website includes a lot of very helpful information and links specific to PhD life in Sweden, and it is a good one to keep coming back to throughout your PhD journey.



# PhD Wellbeing Checklist

## Overall:

- I have **read the PhD Wellbeing booklet**
- I have found and signed up for the **Wellbeing in Academia Canvas**
- I know how to book an appointment or **get in touch for personalised support**

## General Wellbeing:

- I have **registered for a local healthcare service** (vårdcentral/Kry) and know how to use them
- I **know the signs and symptoms of mental health problems** and the differences between them
- I **understand the importance of hydration, sleep, nutrition, and movement on my wellbeing** and I have a routine (or a plan) to meet these needs

## Wellbeing in Academia:

- I understand the concept of **knowledge work** and how it can be especially challenging, and why mental health is so important for it
- I understand the concept of **psychological flow** and have some ideas on how this could look for me
- I understand that there are some unhelpful attitudes in academia, and that there is a **difference between a healthy challenge and suffering poor conditions**
- I understand that I don't have to tolerate poor behavior of colleagues and **what measures I should take to break out of situations that compromise my wellbeing** should this be needed

## My specific work environment:

- I have **talked to my supervisor about expectations** and what to do if I don't feel good during my PhD
- I know **who to contact at my department** if I need help
- I understand the **framework of support options** at my university
- I have learned about what **trade unions** can do (and ideally have become a member of one), and I know how to get help from them and/or Saco-S

## PhD-specific:

- I know the **requirements of my PhD programme** (e.g. number of course credits I need to complete, key milestone seminars, and type of thesis)
- I understand **what my ISP is**, and why it is important
- I understand **what prolongation is** and what qualifies for it
- I know **how to report activities and leave** (e.g. sick days, vacation days, and parental leave)
- I have thought about **how I work and learn best**, and how to communicate this





