Expecting Researchers to Tough it Out is Bullshit:
6 Ways to Actually Improve Mental Health

Good mental health for a researcher these days is almost a luxury. This is bad for both the researchers themselves but also for the fields they work in. **A stressed, tired, burnt out researcher is not going to be as productive or insightful as one that is healthy, well rested and eager to start each day**. I suspect if we could more easily measure this, the difference would be startling.

The problems for researchers are numerous. Here are a few examples of things that have a negative impact on mental health:

1. Ongoing difficulties or failings in the lab — part of science but still discouraging
2. The impact grant failure has on job security and career options
3. The impact grant failure has on project and options
4. Supervisors that do not measure up
5. Expectation of extensive working hours, late nights and weekends
6. Lack of work/life balance
7. Feelings of isolation
8. Feelings of imposter syndrome
9. Inadequate training in areas such as self-care and communication
10. Hostile or discouraging commentary regarding work
11. Increases in workload created by 'senior' colleagues unloading undesirable tasks
12. Lack of effective career guidance
13. Lack of effective mentoring
14. Lack of recognition
15. A lack of free and experienced mental health clinical support
16. Ohh yeah, and given researchers are all human beings, there are things from outside work that will also have an impact on how well they work. Work affects life and life affects work.

One of the key attributes about early career researchers in particular that is often forgotten is that not that long ago they were PhD students. Doing a PhD more often than not will have a significant impact on your mental health. So this means a person is transitioning from one depleting environment to another, often without a significant break. This continues throughout the career of a researcher.

If we wanted to get the best out of our researchers, and we could design the environment from scratch, I suspect it would look nothing like the current one.

Of course there are always a few standout institutions that break the mould. You can usually spot them because their researchers are doing extraordinary things.

The bottom line is, if you want high efficiency for your dollar, you need your people to be happy, healthy and willing to contribute. Anything else is sub-optimal.

How do we make the environment better?

I've been working in a research environment for almost 30 years. I have interviewed thousands of researchers. I have trained them. Mentored them. Funded them and once upon a time I was one of them.

There are some relatively simple measures to create better working environments. These will lead to greater efficiency and happier people.

Change #1: Work Hours — Stop Glamorizing 90 Hour Weeks

For a start, I would be very directive about limiting the working week wherever possible. The number of times I hear researchers talk about how many hours they put in, like it's some kind of victory, astounds me. I want to see an environment where researchers say "look what I achieved and I only worked 40 hours this week". Working 70–90 hours a week is not sustainable and absolutely does not lead to good mental health and efficiency.

To achieve this though **we need to change the narrative around working hours**. We need to reward achievement with shorter working hours. We need to focus on health and wellbeing and demonstrating that these lead to better outcomes. I want to hear people being proud of leaving work at reasonable times to see friends and family and relax. This change needs to come from everyone. Workplaces should have open discussions with staff about this — make it clear that you will no longer be seen as a hero for working more hours than everyone else.

Some experiments will necessitate that a person be in the lab on a Sunday. That's all fine. But then you should expect them to be out hiking on Tuesday. It's about flexibility and being mindful of wellbeing.

Change #2: Move from Compliance to Support

During my first postdoc role, like most people I started writing a grant for a fellowship. Talk about stepping into field of mental health landmines.

I was somewhat disillusioned by the kind of feedback I knew was around and I was positive if I had a chance of success I needed something more. So I asked some colleagues, "who is the meanest bastard when it comes to grant feedback"? I got a name. A Professor named Tom Healy. He was a chemical engineer. I was a physicist so there was a field discrepancy. But to be honest I knew my physics was solid. I wanted feedback on the grant in its entirety. I asked Tom if he would do it and instructed him to 'take the gloves off'. He kindly agreed.

Tom didn't disappoint me. His advice was exceptional. It ranged from grammar to strategy. There was more red ink on my first draft than I thought you could fit on a page. I changed everything. I took all the advice. I was a good writer but I checked my arrogance at the door. This guy was better at grant writing than I was.

The second draft got less of a beating from Tom. There was still a lot of refinements. I started to feel confident.

When I gave Tom the third draft he didn't take long to read it. He gave it back to me with no corrections. I was surprised. He simply wrote on the front page 'submit'. I felt proud. It was a hard lesson, but I had found a teacher who could help me and I learned a bucket load. Needless to say I got the grant. In fact, I got two that year. I have a very distinct memory of when I found out. I was at the Melbourne Town Hall about to run an event for over 100 people. My former PhD supervisor came up to me 2 minutes before the start and told me. Some serious emotional regulation was required in those minutes I can tell you.

Grant writing can be a very damaging process for the mental health of researchers. So much depends on it.

Many institutions have programs of support that to me feel more like programs of compliance than anything that will actually help. Grant review processes through research offices are commonly like this. You get your font size checked but nobody actually has the capability to tell you whether or not your application is actually good.

Other academics might read the science. Finance people will check the numbers. Research offices will check the compliance aspects. What you need is for somebody with more strategic research skills to provide feedback on whether or not the application actually has a hope in hell of being funded.

Some institutions are starting to hire external consultants to assist with this sort of work, but this is just the beginning. What we need is a structured program around all the components that go into writing excellent grants and making these programs available to all researchers from day 1. **Institutions that invest in strategic, well communicated grant applications will achieve more.**

Compliance is important, but only if the application is good. Feeling empowered with the grant writing process is hugely beneficial to one's self-esteem and wellbeing.

Change #3: Support New Parents

It is very common for researchers to become new parents. In the case of women there is ample data to demonstrate that this can push people off the career conveyor belt and they struggle compared to male counterparts as a result. Of course the problem does not just affect women or heterosexual couples. Policy changes need to take these complexities into account if they are to be equitable and effective.

One of the struggles faced by new parents is that they simply do not have enough time to do what is required to maintain a solid research track record. Grant programs will often have policies that require assessment to be 'relative to opportunity'. Personally I think this is totally ineffective and nothing more than box ticking in reality.

What we need to do is give time back to new parents.

The idea that an academic researcher would spend 5 days a week actually doing research is nonsense. In many cases they will spend 1–2 days with teaching duties, 1–2 days with admin and only 1–2 on actual critical to career research work. So why can we not just support them so they only focus on the part that is critical to a research career? Why can we not provide assistance to do teaching and admin tasks? Help them with grant writing and supervisory duties. Have them do nothing but research. Have them do only the things that grants reviewers actual measure. Only the things that future employers of them as researchers care about.

Let's do some numbers for a moment. Let's say I have 25 new parents that I want to support. Each of them requires a research assistant for 2 days a week. That's 10 full time people I would need to employ. I give every new parent this support for an entire year. I pay my research assistants (with costs) $100,000 each. So I spend just $1m per year keeping my 25 new parents in the game, whom I have invested in heavily. I'm seen as an extraordinary employer. My staff are happy, healthy and competitive.

We need to cater to all type of parents. Some will need day care centres so they can come back full time, others will want to spend more time at home and need a different kind of support. The cost is low. The positive impact is high.

Change #4: Provide Upskilling that Actually Matters

Most researchers have some very serious gaps in their skill set. Institutions often have the same types of gaps in their most senior researchers so it's no wonder certain skills are not passed on to junior colleagues. Capability in communication, strategy, self-care, time management, planning, supervision etc. are all core to being a well-rounded and effective researcher but rarely are these part of formal training. Even when courses are offered they last for a day or 2 at most when ideally these things can take weeks to months to teach properly.

If we start looking at what an overall skill set should be for researchers rather than just using a cookie cutter approach to mimic those of the past, then it's likely our researchers will do a lot better. For one thing, **the current environment is very different from what people experienced 20 years ago — so training them in the exact same way just doesn't cut it**. We need to adapt to the new realities of being a researcher and give people the skills they need.

Change #5: Help Them to Connect

We also need to help researchers to connect with their counterparts at other institutions and form communities of support and knowledge sharing. **For a world that is so connected, the level of disconnection is astounding.**

Building strong cohorts can be done in many ways. In some cases, regular activities and support programs can help. No matter the method, these need to be active processes that are driven and funded by institutions to make sure people are not 'left in the dark'.

In 2019 my partner and I ran the student retreat for the Walter and Eliza Hall Institute of Medical Research (WEHI) in Australia. WEHI is the top medical research institute in the country and takes student wellbeing very seriously. The event drew together 120 students (honours, masters and PhD) to work on communication, empathy and self-care. The program was specifically designed to build the cohort experience and to provide participants with the tools to engage more effectively.

These programs work, but they require dedicated institutions that understand that enhanced wellbeing leads to enhanced productivity.

Change #6: Value all Research Funding Equally

Funding rates in Australia for research are abysmal. A quick look at the National Health and Medical Research Council (NHMRC) website will show success rates well below 20% for many programs and in some cases approaching 10% in 2019 for some schemes. Similar problems exist around the world. The situation is hardest if you are an early career researcher.

In a room of 50 people, about 5 will be deemed worthy of funding. Of course the 50 people are not average — every single one of them has been granted a PhD and has been employed in a relatively hard to get research position.

I encounter many of these people in the training programs I run and it's not like you can just hang out with the crappy ones so you can stand out. These are seriously bright and well-trained individuals, many of whom work in very interesting areas that have great potential for impact.

There is something seriously wrong with this funding system. The idea that this is the best we can do is ludicrous. More importantly, given this is a key part of the environment we have set up for researchers, a failure to recognise the mental health impact of such a system is unacceptable.

Researchers dedicate an enormous amount of time and effort to applying for these grants. In my view, given the extremely low likelihood of success, I believe this time is disproportionate. We need to support and enable researchers to seek other forms of support through donors, industry, and non-traditional sources. The reverence given to traditional agencies is misplaced. The only way to resolve this is to better value other funding sources. We must celebrate all forms of research income equally. In fact, when it comes from philanthropy we should celebrate it even more than from competitive schemes. Research funding agencies are there to serve researchers, not the other way around. Sadly at the moment these programs tend to be a source of angst not celebration.

A Time for Change

The list above is by no means exhaustive. I do however consider these items to be core to creating a positive environment for all researchers.

The current situation for research is untenable. We can do all the surveys about wellbeing that we want, but the problem is well known. Organisations can continue to 'investigate' these issues or they can just get on with doing something about it.

Other industries are moving forward in terms of employee wellbeing. My observations from interviewing researchers over the last 27 years indicate that the research sector is in many ways going backwards. Enough is enough**.**

We need to stop mortgaging people's mental health under the delusion of quality and efficiency. Healthy and happy people are by far the most innovative.

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