

# How are you, academia?

**MIND MATTERS is a campaign of the IMP, IMBA, GMI and the Max Perutz Labs with the aims to raise awareness about mental health in academia, destigmatize mental health issues and getting help, inform about professional help services on campus and encourage mental health self-care.**

Looking back at my four years as a PhD student I had a lot of happy moments. I got to know great peers that became my friends, I was able to attend stimulating extra courses focusing on science communication and leadership skills, I got to know fantastic scientists and their exciting work, and eventually published an article in a good journal myself.

Unfortunately, there also is the other side of the coin. The past four years have been the mentally most intense and challenging years in my life so far. I have struggled with the extensive pressure put on me by the academic system and by myself, always wanting to deliver results and quickly move my project forward. This resulted in working massive hours of overtime, neglecting time with my friends, my partner and time I would have needed for myself. Eventually, due to the persistent stress, I even got physically sick.

My personal encounters with mental health challenges, alongside the narratives shared by my colleagues, compelled me to take action. In collaboration with an exceptional team of dedicated volunteers, we established a month-long campaign aimed at fostering discussions surrounding mental health within academia and encouraging getting professional help and practicing mental health self-care. This newsletter is one part of our campaign and will accompany you weekly for the next month with infos related to mental health and our upcoming events.

One out of every 8 people worldwide experience mental illness <sup>1</sup>. In fact, those within academia - PhD students, supporting staff and principal investigators alike - are disproportionately impacted by mental

*„mental health: a state of complete physical, mental and social well-being“*



health struggles: Postgraduate researchers are six times more likely to experience anxiety and depression relative to the general population <sup>2</sup>. 46% of post docs want to seek work-related mental health support <sup>3</sup>, and 24% of the academic staff is suffering from psychological distress <sup>4</sup>. Why is this?

### What factors impact mental health at the academic workplace and how can we positively influence our wellbeing?

According to the WHO mental health is not just the absence of mental illness, but also "a state of complete physical, mental, and social well-being" <sup>5</sup>. In other words, mental health is the combination of psychological well-being and the absence of mental illness.

Our mental health and wellbeing is negatively influenced by factors of distress originating outside, but also from within the workplace <sup>6</sup>. For example, personal factors originating outside the workplace constitute of our genetics, previous life experiences and traumata. Generally, workplace related risk factors are job content, workload and pace, and how much control we have about our project. Specifically in academia, we are confronted with exceptionally high demand and pressure ("publish or perish"), resulting in chronic overwork and issues such as imposter syndrome.

Our social support network and coping skills as well as our personal health and resources influence our mental health in either direction – e.g. good coping skills can help promote our mental health during a crisis. The same goes for mentorship, which plays an important role in academia and therefore greatly impacts our mental health, for better or for worse.

### What can I do to improve my mental health and wellbeing, and what can be done at the workplace to promote good mental health?

To start with, work factors can also positively impact our mental health. Performing meaningful work, and being valued for the work we do increases our health and wellbeing. The same goes for being able to make decisions on issues that affect you and being adequately trained for the job at hand – all criteria that working in academia is able to satisfy. Additionally, we get social support in academia, peers and support services can help us share, cope with and overcome personal problems.

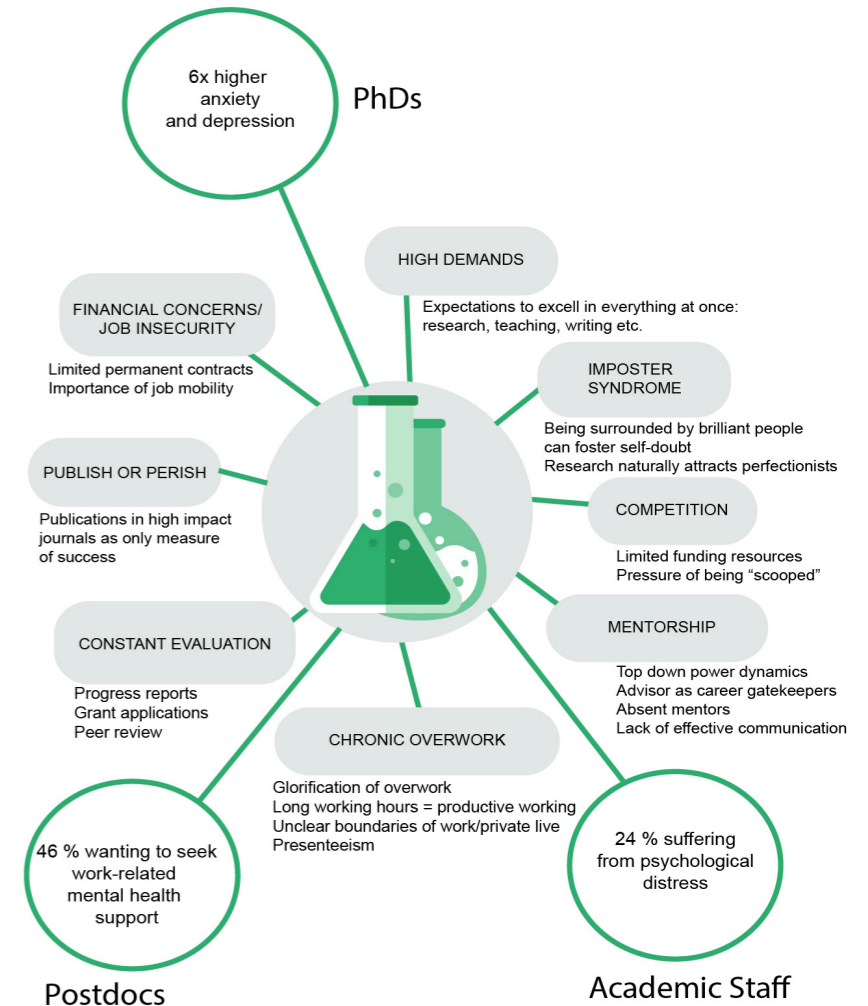
A more challenging issue for academia that is partly (but not solely) due to the nature of scientific projects themselves is having a job or project that is well designed and organized in terms of work schedules and time off – which is essential for our well-being. In the end, it becomes clear that mental health is the personal responsibility of the individual, but owing to the considerable effect that the academic workplace plays in our lives and in our well-being, workplace factors have the chance to make a big difference for the mental health of all academics.

In our commitment to promote mental health awareness in the upcoming weeks, we would like to encourage you to take a proactive step towards understanding your current state of mental health. For this we have linked some online self-assessment tools below. Taking a test will not provide a diagnosis, but can help you identify potential areas of concern early on.

**We would also like to invite you to celebrate the world mental health day with us – we prepared an exciting event. Join us on Tuesday, the 10th of October, at 13:30 in the IMP lecture hall!**

The first session will be an information session about getting professional help on and off campus. After coffee and cake, we will hear an engaging talk by our keynote speaker Aljoscha Dreisörner (see below), followed by a panel discussion focusing on fostering good mental health for all employees in academia (questions and thoughts welcome!).

Check out our flyer for more details!



▲ Factors influencing mental health in academia.



▲ Dr. Aljoscha Dreisörner is a postdoc at the research platform The Stress of Life (SOLE) from the University of Vienna

**Keynote talk, 10. 10. at 16:00**  
**Mental health in academia**  
**by Dr. Aljoscha Dreisörner**

Mental health issues and low well-being in academia are extremely common with estimates showing that up to 42% of academic employees report physical and psychological health symptoms <sup>7</sup>. Academics are under pressure to obtain funding, publish articles, and provide teaching and supervision, which may result in high workload and job-related stress <sup>8</sup>. Furthermore, the profession entails frequent rejection, anxiety due to fixed contracts or uncertain job outlooks, burnout, and loneliness <sup>9, 10</sup>.

**Since many of the reasons for poor well-being or mental health problems in academia can only be changed by the system and over time, academic employees need to be able to cope with these challenges in the here and now. In this talk, we will explore challenges to mental health in academia as well as solutions and interventions that academics can use to take care of their well-being.**

## ONLINE ASSESSMENT TOOLS

### Maslach Burnout Inventory (MBI):

[https://staedteverband.ch/cmsfiles/test\\_de\\_maslach\\_burnout\\_-\\_d.pdf](https://staedteverband.ch/cmsfiles/test_de_maslach_burnout_-_d.pdf)

This widely recognized tool assesses burnout—the emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and reduced personal accomplishment experienced by individuals. The MBI helps identify burnout levels among academics, shedding light on the factors contributing to emotional exhaustion.

### General Health Questionnaire (GHQ):

[https://global-uploads.webflow.com/600754479f70f-b2c4d356be6/643ca41544135a6b3b4e1f8f-General%20Health%20Questionnaire%20\(GHQ-12\).pdf](https://global-uploads.webflow.com/600754479f70f-b2c4d356be6/643ca41544135a6b3b4e1f8f-General%20Health%20Questionnaire%20(GHQ-12).pdf)

The GHQ is a well-established screening tool used to identify psychological distress in various populations, including academics. It covers a wide range of mental health issues and provides insights into an individual's overall well-being.

### Perceived Stress Scale (PSS):

<https://www.das.nh.gov/wellness/docs/percieved%20stress%20scale.pdf>

The PSS measures the perceived levels of stress in an individual's life. It is widely used to identify how academics perceive and experience stress, offering valuable insights into their mental well-being.

### Academic Stress Scale (ASS):

<https://psychologyroots.com/academic-stress-scale/>

Specifically designed for academics, the ASS evaluates stressors unique to the academic environment, such as publishing pressures, teaching demands, and career expectations.

### Depression, Anxiety, and Stress Scale (DASS):

<https://maic.qld.gov.au/wp-content/uploads/2016/07/DASS-21.pdf>

This tool assesses the severity of symptoms related to depression, anxiety, and stress. It's valuable for understanding the broader spectrum of mental health challenges academics might face.

### Self-Compassion Scale (SCS)

<https://self-compassion.org/self-compassion-test/>

This tool is widely used psychological assessment tool designed to measure an individual's level of self-compassion, which involves treating oneself with kindness, understanding, and acceptance in moments of difficulty or personal shortcomings.

## FURTHER READING

Nicholls H., Nicholls M., Tekin S., Lamb D., & Billings J. (2022). The impact of working in academia on researchers' mental health and well-being: A systematic review and qualitative meta-synthesis. *PLoS ONE*, 17(5): e0268890. <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0268890>

**A comprehensive systematic review summarizing literature about mental health in academia.**

## BLOGS

**Voices of academia.** Improving mental health and wellness in academia by giving you a voice.

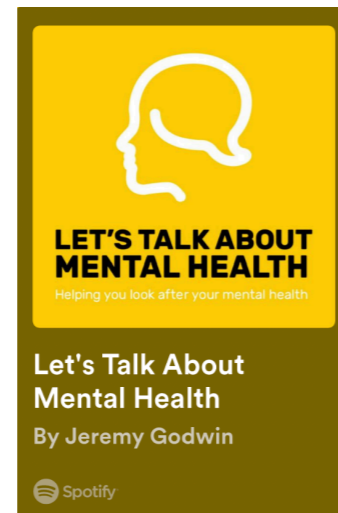
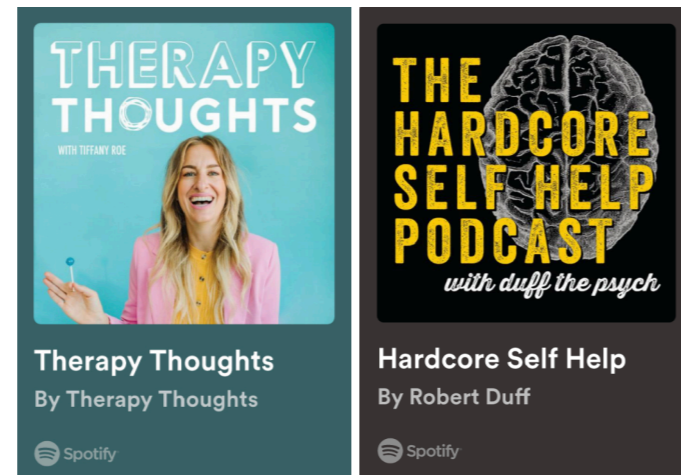
<https://voicesofacademia.com>

**NAMI Blog.** National Alliance of Mental Illness.

<https://www.nami.org/Blogs/NAMI-Blog>

## PODCASTS

On your way to work, during a break or while doing manual work, a podcast is always fun - why not listen to a mental health podcast?



## OUR UPCOMING EVENTS

Check out our weekly **posters** and **newsletters**, and get inspired by our fantastic **speakers**:

- **10.10.** Aljoscha Dreisörner

Over Zoom:

- **18.10.** Desiree Dickerson

- **24.10.** Thomas Reinbacher

- **30.10.** Britta Hölzel

- **07.11.** Nina Junker

**For more information, check your inbox and the info screens regularly!**

We are looking forward to seeing many of you at our events!



## LIST OF REFERENCES

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3. Woolston, C. (2020). Postdocs under pressure: 'Can I even do this any more?' *Nature*, 587(7835), 689–692. <https://doi.org/10.1038/d41586-020-03235-y>

4. Catano, V., Francis, L., Haines, T., Kirpalani, H., Shannon, H., Stringer, B., & Lozanski, L. (2010). Occupational stress in Canadian universities: A national survey. *International Journal of Stress Management*, 17(3), 232–258. <https://doi.org/10.1037/a0018582>

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6. Wynne, R., De Broeck, V., Vandenbroek, K., Leka, P. S., Jain, A., Houtman, I., McDaid, D., & Park, A. (2014). Promoting mental health in the workplace: Guidance to implementing a comprehensive approach. <https://ec.europa.eu/social/BlobServlet?docId=13879&langId=en>

7. Kinman, G., & Jones, F. (2008). A life beyond work? Job demands, work-life balance, and well-being in UK academics. *Journal of Human Behavior in the Social Environment*, 17(1–2), 41–60. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10911350802165478>

8. Levecque, K., Anseel, F., De Beuckelaer, A., Van der Heyden, J., & Gisle, L. (2017). Work organization and mental health problems in PhD students, *Research Policy*, 46(4), 868-879. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.respol.2017.02.008>.

9. Day, N. E. (2011). The silent majority: Manuscript rejection and its impact on scholars. *Academy of Management Learning & Education*, 10(4), 704–718. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/23100441>

10. Jaremka, L. M., Ackerman, J. M., Gawronski, B., Rule, N. O., Sweeny, K., Tropp, L. R., Metz, M. A., Molina, L., Ryan, W. S., & Vick, S. B. (2020). Common academic experiences no one talks about: Repeated rejection, impostor syndrome, and burnout. *Perspectives on Psychological Science*, 15(3), 519–543. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1745691619898848>