

# Mental health during the PhD

## A guide to dealing with mental stress risks at Leibniz institutions

### Preamble

Guiding researchers along the path to a doctorate entails a particular responsibility. The Leibniz Association is committed to taking this responsibility seriously. Despite recognising the positive nature of the general openness of scientific careers, the Leibniz Association acknowledges that this openness can also be associated with uncertainty and, as has been shown, with particular types of mental stress. Of course, these stress risks are not restricted to qualification phases in the academic system and present a fundamental challenge in all employment situations. This guide is therefore of practical relevance when it comes to looking after the health of all employees at Leibniz institutions.

Based on the know-how of the Leibniz institutions, this guide is intended to provide advice on dealing with these kinds of stresses at system and individual level.

It builds on the Leibniz Integrity principles to which the Leibniz Association committed itself in the Guiding Principles for our Actions (9/2019). Mental stress risks to doctoral researchers at Leibniz institutions call for a culture of particular attentiveness and care. This culture is to be implemented in three **areas**: **raising awareness**, **prevention** and **counselling**. The associated **measures** must be aligned with the existing working conditions and, in particular, tailored to the specific needs of the different stages of the PhD journey.

### Areas

**Raising awareness:** The aim is to promote a general awareness of mental health at all institutions, to break down the taboo surrounding mental health problems and to create conditions and structures that promote the mental health of doctoral researchers. Through increased awareness of the early signs of stress, at-risk individuals can be directed to consulting services early on, to prevent stressful situations turning into a crisis in the first place. Discussions that address stressful situations, and training on the challenges of the doctoral phase have a preventive impact and strengthen the resilience of doctoral researchers. Specific measures in this area include training for managers who are responsible for supervising PhD researchers, and information events for doctoral researchers.

**Prevention:** To help prevent mental health problems during the PhD, it makes sense to focus on the groups that are particularly at risk, e.g. doctoral researchers with children and international doctoral researchers. The Leibniz Association therefore recommends that these individuals in particular should receive intensive support along the PhD journey and that measures should be put in place to relieve some of the strain.

Beyond particular target groups, there is a need for preventive measures to strengthen the mental health of all doctoral researchers. It is therefore a good idea to make future PhD

researchers aware of stressful circumstances associated with PhDs in the run-up to the doctoral phase, and to discuss the causes openly. At the same time, doctoral researchers need to be protected against permanent overloading. To support PhD researchers and help them manage uncertainty and the pressure to succeed during the doctoral phase, further training courses should be developed, e.g. in the curriculums of graduate schools. Training courses on subjects such as time management and working methods can give doctoral researchers practical tools for self-organisation that may help to prevent them becoming overburdened and developing mental health problems as a consequence. Coaching sessions in the middle and towards the end of the PhD can prepare doctoral researchers for any upcoming upheaval and provide guidance for individual career planning.

HR managers at the institutes should make sure that doctoral researchers take regular holidays in line with working hours regulations and make full use of the relaxation time to which they are entitled. It is advisable in this context to monitor how many days leave have been taken (a traffic light system, for example, can indicate quickly and easily how many days leave have already been applied for or taken during the current year). In addition, a positive vacation culture, practised by the managers to set an example, is very important. If a manager sets an example by regularly taking leave and seeing relaxation time as important, doctoral researchers can see that a successful scientific career and regular holidays are not mutually exclusive.

**Counselling:** The Leibniz institutions should give all doctoral researchers the chance to take advantage of counselling services as a preventive measure e.g. during highly stressful times, but definitely in crisis situations. Whether it makes sense to use an external counselling service or to establish one in-house will depend in part on what services are already available locally (e.g. at a partner university). The counselling service must ensure it keeps a distance from the Leibniz institution to preserve the anonymity of doctoral researchers so that they will have no reservations about using the services. The thresholds for using the counselling services should be as low as possible and they should be available in different formats to provide support as required, e.g. as face-to-face counselling sessions or as a telephone hotline (see Measures). Doctoral researchers should be reminded regularly of the existence of the institute's or partner university's counselling services so that they know where to turn in a crisis situation.

**Example:**

The Outpatient Facility for Resilience run by the Leibniz Institute for Resilience Research (LIR) is a counselling service that is also available to external clients, i.e. all employees of Leibniz institutions, not just doctoral researchers. Once a Leibniz institution signs a framework agreement with the LIR, employees can take advantage of services for stress management and resilience promotion, as well as crisis counselling sessions. The LIR provides advice online or face-to-face and invoices the relevant Leibniz institution for the services provided in an anonymous form.

The areas described above emphasise the value of preventive measures. The more aware doctoral researchers and their supervisors or colleagues are of this issue in their dealings with one another, the earlier they are likely to spot signs of mental health risks in individual PhD researchers, and the faster and more successful the search for individual solutions will be. It therefore makes sense to focus specific preventive measures on particular stages of the PhD. However, support for doctoral researchers should start during the recruitment process and continue into the next career stage as well.

## Measures

The following measures provide examples of best practice and are recommended. They are the result of an experience survey conducted among the Leibniz institutions and in the Leibniz PhD Network. The Leibniz Association will regularly update these measures on the basis of new findings.

### PhD induction phase

Aim: To provide realistic advice on the particular challenges associated with a long qualification phase that can sometimes be confusing.

- Present the PhD journey as a long qualification phase with clearly defined tasks and obligations and communicate these clearly; avoid unrealistic expectations
- Offer an interactive orientation seminar
- Provide an opportunity for the working group/young investigator group to get to know each other
- Provide support in drawing up a work schedule with a timetable and milestones
- Provide support in writing the synopsis or developing it further
- Offer an early opportunity to present the project at the institute
- Where relevant, agree early on an alternative research design, if an ambitious doctoral project has a high risk of failure
- Where possible, doctoral candidates should be introduced to scientific work through tasks as student research assistants, interns etc. so that they make their decision to pursue a PhD against a background of a broader range of experience

### Recruitment processes for doctoral researchers (job adverts, interviews)

Aim: To create a binding framework as soon as possible after the commencement of employment, in terms of

- people (colleagues, supervisors),
- subject matter (finding and agreeing on a dissertation topic) and
- organisation and administration (workflow, roles and responsibilities, contact persons, registering the doctoral project).
- In advance: Explain potential stress factors and performance expectations in the job advert and on the website in factual, transparent terms
- In the interview: Create transparency around scientific career paths and around the career ambitions of the applicants
- Sign a supervision agreement
- Set up a supervisory committee, where relevant
- Assign a mentor

- Provide transparent information about the ability to combine work and family (e.g. part-time options for the position, or certificates held by the institute, e.g. “audit berufundfamilie”)

## PhD

Aim: To structure the PhD journey as an open, honest communication process, especially regarding the difficulties inherent in completing a doctorate and the possibility of failure.

- Establish institute-wide supervision guidelines
- View graduate schools and postgraduate programs partly as a social framework for the PhD; establish contact persons
- Issue a certificate of completion for the course phase, where relevant, even if the PhD project itself was not completed
- Establish transparency about the rights and obligations of doctoral researchers
- Draw up a Code of Conduct for respectful collaboration
- Include an understanding of the comprehensive responsibility that goes with supervising a PhD as part of leadership courses (in line with the Leibniz career guidelines)
- Establish flat communication structures at the institute
- Hold regular supervisory meetings and take minutes to document agreements
- Supervisors and doctoral researchers should discuss as soon as possible whether a doctoral project is likely to be successful. If not, the doctorate should be halted as quickly as possible, naturally in a face-saving manner, and candidates should be offered constructive support in looking for alternatives (in line with the Leibniz career guidelines)
- Schedule a ‘half-time’ progress meeting with the director of the institute
- Draw up a career development plan (e.g. following the EU template for a Personal Career Development Plan)
- Coaching options
- Regular contact with the mentor
- Conduct surveys of doctoral researchers
- Strengthen occupational health management, where relevant with an in-house medical officer
- Discuss and clarify employment law and cultural expectations regarding holidays and relaxation
- Establish a positive vacation culture at management level (role model function)
- Create/make available an external counselling service, e.g. in cooperation with the universities or with the Outpatient Facility for Resilience run by the Leibniz Institute for Resilience Research (LIR) in Mainz
- Make doctoral researchers aware of advice and complaints offices for individuals affected by discrimination or abuse of power (e.g. the Leibniz Advice Centre for Conflict Guidance and Prevention)

## **Transition to the next career stage (inside and outside the Leibniz Association)**

Aim: To provide information and broad guidance on future career steps.

- Offer coaching/mentoring; including mobilising networks
- Strengthen contact to postdocs
- Offer to discuss career prospects, including the possibility of staying on at the Leibniz institution
- Offer advice on different career paths
- Offer support with completing research applications
- Career talks with institute alumni inside and outside academia
- Offer training in applying for jobs
- Facilitate job shadowing
- Increase support for networking activities (e.g. taking part in conferences)
- Follow-up interview with alumni to gather experiences of the transition period for the next generation of doctoral researchers

## **Dealing with particular challenges**

Aim: To recognise that particular situations in the lives and research work of doctoral researchers can require special measures in all phases of a PhD.

- Systematically implement measures to enable people to combine work and family, including parent & child rooms; help with finding nursery places; no meetings outside of core working hours; facilitate mobile working
- Flexibility in dealing with family care emergencies
- Special support measures for pregnant doctoral researchers (e.g. restructuring laboratory activities)
- Recognise that international doctoral researchers face particular challenges, many of which occur together at the start of a PhD (e.g. help with dealing with authorities and applying for parental allowance, residence documents, etc.); strengthen the welcoming culture for international doctoral researchers and create special onboarding offers for international doctoral researchers (e.g. a welcome pack, also make use of offers from cities and communities); enable international scholarship holders to take appropriate holidays as well as rest and relaxation time