

Supporting the mental health of early career researchers (ECRs) during the pandemic: Advice for PIs and supervisors

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1. Make sure ECRs know that it's OK not to be OK

Problem: ECRs are anxious and stressed due to many pandemic-related factors. Even as vaccinations become more widespread, there are still many uncertainties. These issues aren't typically discussed in research groups. As a result, many ECRs feel that they are responsible for handling stress, anxiety and other mental health challenges on their own.

Solutions

Option 1: Use brief "temperature checks" at the beginning of group meetings to get a sense of how everyone is doing and whether people are feeling overwhelmed.

- **Small groups:** You might ask each person to briefly share how they're doing (e.g., "I have experiments all week and I'm looking forward to having data"; "My child is sick so it's been a difficult week"; "My brain is fried from too many meetings"). Start by sharing how you are doing and acknowledge that you also sometimes feel tired and overwhelmed. Offer a "pass" option for people who aren't comfortable sharing.
- **Larger groups:** You might ask people which numbered image in a collage best describes everyone's mood (e.g., emojis, cats, weather forecast, or create your own lab themed mood board). This can be done by raising hands or entering an image number in the chat.

Resource: Here are two example Powerpoint collages.

Option 2: Provide a list of services that team members can easily find if they are in crisis. PIs and supervisors aren't trained mental health professionals and aren't expected to know how to handle mental health crises. Providing a list of services in highly visible place makes it easier for team members to get help and lets them know that their mental health is important to the group.

Resource: Scholar Minds, an initiative organized by early careers researchers, has created a list of resources and steps for seeking help in Berlin, Germany:
<https://www.ecn-berlin.de/mental-health/where-to-find-help.html>

Option 3: Promote and model behaviors related to good mental health: Be a role model by engaging in or sharing practices that improve your mental health, such as time "offline", taking breaks, or going outside. This is an important acknowledgement that mental health should be a priority for everyone.

Option 4: Tackle mental health in a journal club. If you are part of a journal club, consider sharing a paper on mental health. This could be field-specific or a general look at mental health in academia or academic medicine.

Resources: Here are three “conversation starting” papers on mental health in academia:

[Evidence for a mental health crisis in graduate education](#)

[Mental Health in Academia: What about faculty?](#)

[Ten simple rules towards healthier research labs](#)

2. Acknowledge and address uncertainty

Problem: ECRs are anxious about whether degree deadlines and funding will be extended and the impact of the pandemic on the job market. Many feel pressure to maintain pre-pandemic productivity levels, despite numerous challenges and disruptions. Partial vaccine rollout can cause further uncertainties. The absence of clear communication from PIs and supervisors about changes in expectations due to the pandemic exacerbates these problems.

Solutions

Talk directly to ECRs about the things that you have control over. State clearly whether funding and deadlines can be extended, for how long, and under what conditions. Advocate for clear institutional policies when needed. Work with ECRs to develop alternate research plans or timelines for pandemic-related research disruptions and lower productivity. This may include changing research projects to activities that are feasible during the pandemic, or an “exit strategy” for when labs return to more normal operating procedures.

Clearly state how your expectations have changed due to the pandemic, especially for those with childcare and caregiving responsibilities. Offer positive feedback and constructive criticism to encourage ECRs, and clarify these new expectations. ECRs want to know when they’re performing well – positive feedback is motivating. When needed, work with ECRs to plan short-term progress goals (e.g. next week, in two weeks, in one month).

3. Use meeting time wisely. Consider other ways of communicating.

Problem: Many ECRs feel that meetings are the only time when they can connect with other team members. Unfortunately, too many meetings can be overwhelming and limit time available for research. Meetings where ECRs are disengaged or only passively listen can be frustrating and isolating.

Solutions

General considerations: Use meetings for discussions or directed problem solving that requires a group. Specifically solicit topics, questions and comments from ECRs during meetings. Adjust the meeting length according to the task. Avoid scheduling meetings for a full hour – 45- or 50-minute meetings allow attendees to

get coffee, move around and mentally decompress. Decide on someone who can serve as a moderator/timekeeper. Limit meeting attendance to those required for the discussion. Consider scheduling project meetings when milestones are achieved, rather than at fixed time intervals. More importantly, discuss meeting preferences together and be open to trying different options.

Option 1: Written updates: Routine updates, where problem solving and discussion are not required, can be shared without meetings. Ask everyone to post a **brief** written progress update in a shared document or group chat channel the day before the meeting. Leave a bit of time in the meeting agenda for discussion and your feedback on updates.

Tips:

- Use a table with bullet points for updates from each team (e.g. project name in rows, update date in columns).
- Keep it short - these updates are meant to be a time-saving tool and should not involve extra organizational “overhead”.

Option 2: Virtual brainstorming: Consider using virtual brainstorming, an approach for asynchronously gathering ideas online, for complex topics that require creative problem solving. This format leads to an explosion of ideas, levels the playing field so that everyone can contribute and allows more time for the discussions to evolve.

Resource: [This document](#) summarizes the steps in organizing a virtual brainstorming event for your team.

Option 3: Low-threshold coffee meetings: Consider having a virtual space or social channel where lab members can meet one another to have coffee, take a break or just share fun pictures or links. This can help to address feelings of isolation at work, and lead to spontaneous discussions or problem-solving on ongoing projects. If you have time, occasionally drop by.

Resource: The websites [Wonder.me](#) and [Gather.town](#) offer free lightweight platforms for spontaneous interactions and video calls in small groups.

4. Provide clear guidance about which projects will be prioritized and why, and how this affects scheduling and access to resources

Problem: When PIs and supervisors fail to provide clear guidance on project work during the pandemic, these decisions are left to ECRs. ECRs may be forced to choose between the competing incentives of social distancing and completing work required for their degree regulations or career advancement. This places ECRs with health problems, or ECRs who have a high-risk person in their household or bubble, at a disadvantage. This pressure may increase with partial reopening or vaccination campaigns. This creates conflict among ECRs in a research group, especially when resources (time, space, equipment) are limited.

Solutions

Clear communication is essential. What are your current top priorities as a research group? Provide an opportunity to discuss prioritization or issues related to the feasibility or consequences of these decisions. Work with ECRs to mitigate the effects of de-prioritized projects on degree timelines or funding. This may include developing alternative plans, including for return to work after lockdown. Ask ECRs which guidelines or regulations are most important for their degree regulations or career goals. Provide clear procedures (e.g. who to contact and when) for resolving disputes between ECRs.

5. Ask ECRs in your research group or department if they would like to create an ECR peer group and support these efforts.

Problem: Team members no longer see each other regularly in the office or lab, and miss interacting with their peers in the institute. Many ECRs feel isolated, instead of feeling like they belong to a team. Onboarding for new ECRs is particularly difficult, as they have few opportunities to get to know others.

Solutions

Option 1: Encourage your team to form peer networks. ECR peer networks within a research group or institute can encourage socialization and community building, while welcoming new team members. These groups can also identify problems affecting the ECR community and share possible solutions with the research group or department leadership. You can support ECR peer groups by encouraging group representatives to share problems affecting the ECR community with the leadership team and working with ECRs to resolve these issues.

Resource: During our virtual brainstorming event, we prepared a companion fact sheet with resources for ECRs who want to organize peer networks.

Option 2: Update onboarding procedures: When new ECRs or others join your team, make sure that they have been onboarded in the institute or group. Onboarding should include information relevant to the pandemic. Consider pairing new team members with a “buddy” who helps them navigate their first weeks in the new workplace, city, or even country.

Resource: Here is an excellent example of an [onboarding document](#) from the Institute for Public Health, including relevant pandemic-related information.

6. Provide clear information about how ECRs can approach you, and be proactive with challenges or concerns

Problem: Many ECRs no longer see PIs or supervisors outside of virtual research group meetings. Some ECRs aren't sure how to approach their PI or supervisor when they have problems or concerns. This means they may avoid discussing small issues that later develop into larger challenges.

Solutions

Pick a communication strategy that works for you and let your team know your preferences. This might include holding an open virtual office hour or being accessible via an online discussion platform. ECRs should be able to use these discussions for a variety of concerns, however you should clearly state any circumstances in which you expect ECRs to contact you (e.g., family or health emergency, unanticipated project or timeline issues). This may prevent small issues from developing into larger problems.

7. Take care of yourself

Problem: Running a research group during a pandemic is a difficult task, and you may be overwhelmed with many issues, including some not faced by ECRs. Some of these challenges specific for group leaders have been outlined here:

[Mental Health in Academia: What about faculty?](#)

[Mental Health in Academia: "I'm sure that sometimes I miss the signs"](#)

Solutions

It is OK for PIs not to be OK. Several strategies for coping with mental health and research during the pandemic may be found in our document for ECRs. If persistent feelings of stress, anxiety, or being overwhelmed are too much to cope with alone, please also reach out to specialized services or mental health professionals. A more complete directory of services may also be found in our document for ECRs.

Resources:

The social psychiatric service of Berlin (*Sozialpsychiatrische Dienste*) offers support and referral services in all districts of Berlin from Monday to Friday, 08:00 – 16:00. Find the closest center to you:

<https://www.berlin.de/lb/psychiatrie/hilfe-in-krise/sozialpsychiatrische-dienste-der-bezirke/>

Berlin Krisendienst offers phone support 24/7. You can also visit their centers without an appointment on weekdays from 16:00 – 24:00 and during weekends and holidays from 08:00 – 16:00. Find the closest center to you:

<https://www.berliner-krisendienst.de/en/>