



Coping with difficulties



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Each work presents difficulties. The PhD is not exempt. Beyond the questions related to the science or the planning of the research project addressed in the sheet «Managing your PhD career», it is useful to be aware of the difficulties PhD students often face and which they mention as being likely to lead to their quitting (1):

- Loneliness at work
- Time spent on teaching, administrative and logistical tasks
- Pressure to get results quickly and the race to publish
- Lack of support or inadequate support from the supervisor (2).

It is therefore crucial to know how to address these difficulties and to seek help if necessary. Meeting with your supervisor, with the administrative staff in charge of support or with other PhD students allows you to share the difficulties and to consider how to solve them. Here we address 5 themes for a serene training PhD.

1/BALANCING PRIVATE AND PROFESSIONAL LIFE

The PhD is often described as a lived, consuming passion. Above all it becomes more and more devouring as the PhD student arriving at the end of his/her thesis only thinks of finishing her work. Although it's not always easy, don't let your professional obligations overwhelm you. Adopt a work schedule that is compatible with the social, cultural and family activities that are important to you. Force yourself to arrange rest periods (holidays, leisure, outings, sports, etc.), even during the most stressful moments of your thesis. Set up rituals to structure your day (meals and breaks at fixed times, sport at a fixed time, etc.).

PhD students must also learn to defend the temporal and spatial territory of the thesis as a period of work that cannot be encroached upon by other activities (3). It is indeed essential to have one's working time respected in one's private life, especially if you work at home. The constraints linked to the PhD and the flexibility allowed are concepts that are sometimes difficult to make your relatives and friends understand. Indeed, it is sometimes difficult to refuse to give a friend a hand, to cut short an unexpected visit on the pretext that it is precisely the day when you are working on your thesis, or to take over family and/or domestic tasks assigned under the pretext that you can organize your working time as you wish. Respecting the working time dedicated to the thesis is just as important in private life as it is at the university. The key is to find the right balance.

Moreover, as already explained in the sheet «Managing your PhD career» it is important to realize that by definition research has no limits, but you do.



To sum up, to succeed in finding a balance between private and professional life:

- Plan your PhD as well as possible in order to cope with periods of intense work and to better manage your research time.
- Plan a work schedule that leaves room for social activities.
- Set aside some time to rest and reboot and respect the rules of the game.
- Learn to say «no» to certain requests and have your working time respected.
- Understand that research has no limits, but you do.

› **Being a parent during the thesis**

Are you planning to expand your family or perhaps you are already a parent? Having children during your thesis is as challenging as at any other time in your professional career. However, for many researchers, parenthood is also a fulfilling, natural and positive experience that forces them to manage and balance their work time.

Maternity and childbirth leave entitlements depend on the law that applies to your contract and your employer. Universities seek to erase differences in status, but the differences remain. For example, in some universities, assistants have the same rights as statutory employees of the university. F.R.S-FNRS fellows may benefit from a suspension of contract due to maternity, paternity or adoption leave, and their contract is extended for a period equal to the duration of this suspension. Some externally-sponsored contracts do not allow this. Check with your university's human resources department for more information. The same applies to parental leave. Notify your employer as soon as you become pregnant in order to control possible risks related to your work.

Universities generally have places in day-care centers, but they are often insufficient and in high demand. You should therefore be aware of this so that you can book them early.

Looking for more good advice on thesis and parenthood? Here are a few cool blogs where you can find what you're looking for:

- « [Pars enThèse : deux mamans au doctorat partagent leur réalité](#) » (Going for your dissertation: Two PhD moms share their reality)
- « [Papa thésard](#) » (Daddy's a PhD student)
- « [Faire une thèse et avoir des enfants : est-ce compatible ?](#) » (Doing a thesis and having children: is it compatible?)
- « [Faire une thèse et un bébé](#) » (Doing a thesis and a baby)
- « [Faire une thèse et un bébé \(II: the dark side\)](#) » (Doing a thesis and a baby (II: the dark side)).



2/WORK ORGANIZATION AND TIME MANAGEMENT

Difficulty with organization or time management is frequently cited by PhD students. Good planning of the project from the outset is essential in order to identify periods of bibliographical research, data acquisition, intense work, publication, mobility, writing, etc. A mistake often made is to focus too much on short-term deadlines. As an assistant, you have to manage the balance of your two tasks: student supervision and research. Lack of planning is one of the reasons why some PhD students find themselves stressed by time and work to the detriment of their private life.



Here are some basic tips on time management and for organizing your work (4):

- **Plan your project over time.** According to Parkinson's law, «the more time you have to complete a task, the longer it will take». Subdivide large long-term tasks into concrete short-term tasks. Regularly review your work plan with your supervisor.
- **Remember your main objective:** to complete a thesis. Concentrate on the tasks related to the thesis to avoid being overwhelmed by satellite activities. Identify and limit time thieves. The biggest time thief is the inability to say «no» (non-essential tasks, visits from colleagues, etc.).
- **Identify priority tasks** and distinguish between what is important and/or urgent and what is not. By planning and managing your time properly, you should have fewer and fewer urgent tasks and more and more important tasks.
- If you are a perfectionist, try to focus on your **priority tasks and meet your goals within achievable deadlines** (see section on stress management).
- If you are a very reactive person, prefer short tasks and keep an eye on your initial enthusiasm.
- **From the outset, sit down and write your thesis.** Write down all your references and summarize your work. You will save time at the end.
- **Regularly assess your skills, use your strengths** and work to improve your weaknesses. Universities organize training courses dedicated to improving personal effectiveness. Take advantage of them.



Plan your day

It is important to take a few minutes each day (at the beginning or end of the day) to plan your day. Here are some tips to consider when planning your day:

- Try to allocate as much of your time as possible to proactive tasks while setting aside brief periods in which you group reactive tasks (e.g., document feedback or responding to emails).
- Whenever possible, plan your breaks and task schedule based on your energy and biological cycle and not that of others. Identify when you have the most concentration and energy and save those times for important, proactive tasks. The beginning of the day is usually a key time for these types of tasks.
- Be realistic in the time allotted to each task.
- Allow time for the unexpected.
- Keep a «to-do list» to note tasks that are not completed, those that do occur and to include them in your schedule for the next few days.
- Be regular and systematic in your planning, but also flexible (in terms of objectives as well as the planning itself).

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Manage relationships to better manage your time

One of the difficulties encountered by PhD students is the delay related to the meeting with the supervisor: delay for meetings, lack of feedback, additional tasks not discussed, new urgent tasks, etc. The importance of relationships with colleagues and collaborators should also not be overlooked.

When you find yourself in this kind of situation:

- Negotiate directly what can be negotiated (organization of a task, a measure).
- Make sure you meet regularly with your supervisor. Propose several appointment dates, emphasizing your urgent need to meet.
- Ask the questions necessary to move your project forward: discussion and negotiation on the opportunity or necessity of what needs to be done, the deadline for handing in a job, the next appointment date. Above all, avoid accepting or starting a task that you do not understand or without a specific deadline.
- If your interviewer asks you to complete the task urgently, assess your possibilities. If necessary, propose a deadline that suits you.

Manage the reception of mails

Another time-consuming activity that reduces research time is poor email management. Here are a few tips on how to best manage the reception and writing of your emails:

- Distinguish between your business and private addresses. Only check business mailboxes during your working hours.
- Plan your email management. Connect regularly, during working hours only. Delete alerts: they affect your concentration on the tasks you are busy with. If necessary, schedule 2 or 3 mail management sessions in your daily schedule.
- Use the “digital reception assistants” to sort your emails automatically. They allow you to automate the classification in folders according to the origin of the subject or the sender of the message, or according to criteria that you can define.
- Manage your emails according to their importance. Process urgent emails directly and sort the others into a “to do” folder. You can also give priority to answering e-mails that you are the only recipient.
- Emails longer than 2 minutes: plan when to answer them and deal with them when your energy and attention rate are at their highest. E-mails under 2 minutes - deal with them when your energy and attention span is lower.
- Sort and deposit each mail in an archive organized into sub-topics. Be concise and to the point when writing an email. This will save you and your recipients time.



De-dramatize procrastination

Don't feel guilty if you haven't been able to get to work one day, if you haven't been productive, or if you haven't met your goals. Occasional procrastination happens to everyone, even your PhD Director.

On the other hand, worry if you develop a tendency to systematically procrastinate. **Procrastination can become chronic**: the more you procrastinate, the more you avoid starting a task, the more difficult it seems, the more anxiety you feel about it, and so on.

To overcome procrastination, try to identify the reasons why you procrastinate and work on your motivation. **Force yourself to work on specific tasks** for an hour or two. Begin tasks at the end of the day that will help you get started more quickly the next day.

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3/STRESS MANAGEMENT

Stress is “the” disease of the century”. It is the negative response to constraint, the pressure from one's professional and private environment. Although it is impossible to avoid all forms of stress, techniques exist to prevent you from being overwhelmed by it.

In the PhD program, the sources of stress come from:

- the PhD itself during which you have to manage a demanding and sometimes insecure project in terms of its development or completion
- the difficulty of managing tasks, time and various obligations: research, supervision, publication, conferences, training, student supervision, ...
- the difficulty of reconciling priorities and letting go, especially in the face of your perfectionism
- your role, sometimes uncertain or ill-defined which leads to not being sure to respond to what is expected of you.
- overwork and the difficulty of saying “no” to your supervisor because of the sometimes ambiguous relationship between the PhD and his/her supervisor
- the high level of international scientific competition and the race for publication
- the lack of skills for the task, especially the training in pedagogy for assistants

Relatives sometimes find it difficult to understand the workload and stress associated with the PhD. At the end of the thesis period or when the workload becomes more intense, warn them that you will be very busy and not necessarily in a very good mood.

This will not make the situation any less difficult to bear, but at least you will have the understanding and support of your loved ones. For their part, understanding the situation will help them to manage it better and reduce possible tensions (Guide du doctorant de l'université de Picardie Jules Verne, p. 63).



When stress becomes recurrent or too intense, it then becomes negative or even dangerous. However, when stress is properly controlled, it can play a driving and positive role. This is why it is wise to learn how to control stress.

Here are a few techniques to do so:

- **Organize and manage your PhD project** as a research project, thinking about defining your role and planning tasks and events (see above). Clarify with your supervisor your mutual commitments and adjust them as you progress. Also make sure that you keep him/her regularly informed about your work in progress and make (intermediate) reviews as often as possible (5).
- **Practice stress management exercises**, for example with communication and exchange activities in the professional context. Present your research project to colleagues, give oral presentations, participate in science cafés or MT180, etc. Some universities also organize stress management training (6).
- **Be aware that you are gradually becoming an expert on your research topic** and that no one knows your subject better than you. You are the best person to talk about your experiences and results. So don't be shy and speak up.
- **Talk about your situation to those around you**, your colleagues and those close to you. They may not necessarily have the solution, but talking about it will help you formulate things and perhaps find the solution yourself.
- **Take care of your private life**: no matter how well you can adapt or concentrate, you cannot devote yourself solely to your work for several years. It is essential to take time off to recuperate, whether it is a break during a weekend at the seaside or an evening with friends.
- **Take care of your health**: get enough sleep, eat a healthy, balanced diet, do something that frees you up, and try relaxation exercises. Even during the critical period of your thesis, continue your sports activities, even if they are reduced, but don't stop them! Also be careful not to consume too many stimulants (coffee, tea, coca cola, etc.). Be extremely careful with expedients such as sleeping pills, anxiolytics or psychostimulants (7).
- Practice relaxation exercises regularly, especially in stressful situations.

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When should you consider your stress dangerous? Here are some of the most frequently cited symptoms (8):

- **Physical**: muscle tension, headaches and/or back pain, fatigue, sleep disturbances, knots in the throat and/or stomach, hyperventilation, sweating, bowel problems, etc.
- **Emotionally**: impatience, irritability, susceptibility, indifference, excessive worry, dark thoughts, feelings of incompetence and/or uselessness, lack of interest, etc.
- **Behavioral and relational**: procrastination, nervous tics, increased consumption of alcohol, tobacco or painkillers, changes in eating habits, strained relations with those around them, reduced interest in others, etc.
- **Intellectual**: confused thoughts, fixed ideas or fleeting thoughts, difficulty concentrating and memorizing, decreased organizational skills, decreased objectivity and critical thinking, etc.

You may feel overwhelmed or unable to overcome your emotions. Do not hesitate to call for help. Speak to your supervisor, colleagues or the university's specialized services (a trusted person at your university).



For more information on psychological stress related to the thesis, consult the study conducted in 2017 by the University of Ghent (« [Work organization and mental health problems in PhD students](#) ». According to this study, 51% of PhD students interviewed (3659 PhD students) were experiencing symptoms of a bad mental health, indicating a psychological stress. The leading cause of this stress comes from the difficulty in managing family obligations because of the professional tasks. Among the other reasons, there is the requirement for hard working and the poor relationship with the thesis director. For more information, please contact concerning the management of the stress, see also the «[You have everything in hand](#)» page so that it goes well.» of the ULiège.

The burn-out

Burn-out is “a state of fatigue and frustration induced by over-investment in an activity, action or relationship that has not produced the expected benefits”. People with burnout are often the most enthusiastic at the start of their project, which is the case for many researchers (9).

PhDs, in particular, are deeply committed to their work, encounter various difficulties, are stressed by time and even the relationship with their supervisor, and may feel a great deal of dissatisfaction. They become physically and psychologically exhausted to the point of having to stop for a long time to “charge their batteries”.

The advice given above for stress management applies. Personalized support is essential, either by specialized university staff or by external coaches. The return to work must also be accompanied.

Facing perfectionism

While the pursuit of high standards may be associated with a range of benefits in terms of academic success, it can also have significant psychological consequences. Céline Douilliez, a researcher at the UCLouvain Institute for Research in Psychological Sciences, has indeed demonstrated that perfectionism favors the development of many psychological difficulties, such as depressive disorders, eating disorders, burn-out or chronic fatigue syndrome (10).

A study conducted at Laval University on «perfectionism and motivation to pursue PhD studies» describes perfectionism as «the setting of too high standards for performance accompanied by the attribution of too much importance to the evaluation by others» (11). Perfectionists set ideal goals that are too often unattainable and judge themselves harshly on their productivity and performance. According to the same study, perfectionism is the great enemy of many PhD students and plays a central role in the quitting the thesis due to the stress and the psychological distress it causes. Professor Geneviève Belleville, a member of this study and author of the book «Sit down and write your thesis», proposes in her book a deconstruction of perfectionism. Indeed, she explains in her book that «The university environment often gives the impression of a temple dedicated to the cult of perfection. It sanctifies those who devote themselves body and soul to their tasks and glorifies work without counting the hours (12). Belleville therefore calls for the deconstruction of this myth, because in reality perfectionism does not lead to success, nor to a more intelligent thesis. On the contrary, a working method organized on the basis of realistic objectives to be reached, a good use of one's strengths and skills and a balance between work and leisure, are in fact the recipe for success (13). Of course, a good dose of perfectionism, i.e. a productive and realistic perfectionism that leads to surpassing oneself and to a feeling of pride is not bad.





According to Belleville, you could face harmful perfectionism when (14) :

- you focus on the details and then lose sight of the overall goal of your work
- you have an inordinate fear of failure (difficulty in keeping realistic goals)
- you find the mistake inconceivable - this will prevent you from taking more risk and thus being creative.
- you fear disapproval.
- you find it difficult to put things into perspective because you have an “all or nothing” mind-set.
- you structure your life based on a list of obligations and therefore forget to consider your desires, hobbies, values and ultimate goal.
- you believe that others succeed more easily.

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This type of harmful perfectionism generates a range of negative emotions. So how can you free yourself from this perfectionist attitude? Professor Belleville advises:

- set realistic and achievable goals based on your values and desires both professionally and privately.
- confront your fears behind perfectionism
- reward you when you have accomplished a task or result.
- recognize that you are still learning and that an imperfect task is not necessarily a failure.
- determine your priority tasks, focus on them and plan your work time accordingly.
- be satisfied with doing most things well; choose only a few that you will do very well.

4/MAINTAINING MOTIVATION

What to do when you feel the motivation to leave you due to lack of results, loneliness or lack of support? Below are some tips to keep or regain motivation:

- **Trust yourself:** Thesis is about creating your own path as a research professional. It's normal not to always know exactly where you are going at the beginning of the journey. The thesis is to move forward (sometimes blindly), to make mistakes, to reorient oneself, to adapt to the results, to find new leads... [HI2]
- **Take a break and don't feel guilty:** Many PhD students say that a thesis is 60% fun and 40% difficulty. Obviously this varies from one period to another but if you feel demotivated to the point that the percentage of “pleasure” decreases drastically, then it's time to take a good break. For this break to be effective, take a vacation. Take the opportunity to spend time with your loved ones who are not in the academic world, indulge in your favourite hobbies, travel, discover the country. **Remember that life is not just about the thesis; it will help you rationalize.**
- **Seek advice from a supervisor, post-doctoral fellow, or a caring colleague.** They've been there before and will have concrete advice for you. Talk to an understanding non-academic relative who can help you “de-dramatize” the thesis and take a step back. If necessary, contact a professional in the field of support for people under stress.



(...)



(...)

- **Integrate yourself into the doctoral community:** Facebook group, Maison des doctorant-e-s, Midi des doctorant-e-s, etc. Or visit <http://phdcomics.com/> where you will find hundreds of cartoons on the life of PhD students. It's better to laugh than cry! The site even offers you the film "PhD the movie": <https://phdmovie.com/>
- **Vary your tasks:** make a thoughtful alternation between supervisory tasks, research, communication with other researchers, training, popularisation of science. Devote time to what pleases and enhances you.
- **Prepare for your post-thesis :**
 - Participate in job fairs for young researchers to meet recruiters from companies and public organizations who are looking for your kind of profile. It is rewarding, and it is an opportunity for you to already plan your post-thesis project, see what skills you need to develop further etc.
 - Take stock of your skills. You will see how you have progressed by analysing the skills you have already acquired through your thesis and the skills you should develop further.

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5/CONFLICT MANAGEMENT



In the event of a conflict with your supervisor or other members of your research team, the chain of command is a solution (see Figure 1). Depending on the seriousness of the conflict and also on the position of the supervisor, who may be the head of the department or the dean, you may contact the head of the department, the dean or the vice-president of research at your institution.



FIGURE 1 : AVENUES OF APPEAL FOR CONFLICT MANAGEMENT.



It is also possible to talk about it with the people who make up your thesis committee, who are resource people for both the research and any communication or harassment problems that may arise. If you have a thesis co-supervisor, contact him or her first to find a solution. This is usually someone you talk to more often in your research and whose access is easier.

Finally, the trusted persons of the SIPPT (Service Interne de Prévention et de Protection au Travail) exist in all institutions. This is a legal obligation. These people are available and are trained to listen, help and advise workers in distress. They can organize conciliation, for example.

By “conflict,” we mean any significant disagreement that may call into question the relationship and cooperation between two individuals within the research unit or institution.

This type of conflict can be caused by many things, including the following:

- Absence of the employment contract or non-compliance by one of the parties, poor working conditions (e.g. regarding access to material or financial resources), personal problems requiring accommodation of the PhD student, discrimination, moral harassment, sexual harassment, etc...
- Non-respect of the rights and duties of the supervisor or the PhD student (missed deadlines, inadequate supervision, scientific isolation, etc.), incompatibility of personality, scientific divergence, refusal of permission to defend, intellectual property conflict, inappropriate tasks, etc (15)

The contacts listed above will help you to:

- identify the real nature of the conflict and assess its seriousness
- determine the means of resolution

In addition to these hierarchical interlocutors, it is strongly recommended that you confide in trusted colleagues, friends, family, etc. Do not isolate yourself! The quality of your research stems, among other things, from the richness of the exchanges within the research team. A lack of team cohesion or unsuitable working conditions can be detrimental to your PhD project.



Therefore, you should not take this type of conflict lightly or think that things will improve on their own over time. If the problem persists and leads to relational, professional or scientific isolation that is detrimental to your PhD project, a project adjustment can be considered in agreement with the doctoral college or doctoral commission that you depend on within your university. Attachment to another team or another research unit, the setting up of new scientific collaborations, or simply an improvement in working conditions are possible solutions (16). So don't be afraid to ask for help.

When this type of conflict arises, it is also advisable to seek information, training, and appropriate communication practices, such as active listening and non-violent communication. In some FWB universities, training on these communication methods, as well as on assertiveness and conflict management, is offered to PhD students. These trainings are also highly recommended in conflict prevention!

Once the conflict has been resolved, if possible, set up a follow-up system: decisions and proposals made during meetings aimed at resolving the conflict are clarified in writing and a date is proposed to take stock of the evolution of the situation. (17). Also ensure that the necessary lessons are learned as a result of the conflict (e.g. upstream in terms of project development, collaboration, authorization for PhD enrolment, etc.).



HUMOUR DOES NOT PRECLUDE RESPECT: HIGHLIGHTING CASES OF HUMILIATION AND BULLYING

We've all been roasted once in our life. Someone makes a joke about you, often in bad taste. You're embarrassed and you don't dare say anything. The others laugh. You imitate them. Humiliation and intimidation are manipulative techniques often encountered in the workplace. To learn what you can do as a witness or victim to deal with them, see Professor Inger Lövkrona's study "Discrimination in academia: challenging organizational cultures".

The harassment

The more serious cases of manipulation, such as mobbing and sexual harassment, also sometimes occur in the academic environment, as in any workplace. When we find ourselves in this situation, it is always difficult to admit that it can happen to us and that we can end up in the "victim" box. "Many times, we think we have the wrong idea, or we don't understand that this is harassment" (18). If you realize that you are being harassed, don't let yourself be trapped by fear of talking about it, of not being believed, of not being taken seriously or of being blamed. Don't convince yourself that by keeping quiet, the situation will improve on its own over time because often it won't. Ask for help and take the necessary steps to protect yourself.



In case of sexual violence, you can contact the Sexual Violence Management Centre (CPVS), which offers medical support (including the collection of material evidence). To contact the CPVS, call 02/535.45.42 or visit their website at www.violencessexuelles.be





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- (15) Ibid.
- (16) Ibid.
- (17) "[Gestion des conflits pendant le doctorat](#)" *Le Doctorat à la Loupe* – n°15 – published on 28/02/2015, modified on 18/11/2018.
- (18) Ibid.

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The PhD@Work project aims to strengthen and enhance the transversal skills of researchers. It is an integrated and inter-university project which has several sub-objectives: to continue the effort already made to strengthen the transversal skills of PhD students and PhDs, in better adequacy with the needs of the socio-economic world; to promote these skills to recruiters in order to improve the employability of PhDs and to support innovation; to develop supports, tools and support for professional integration; and to organize communication and events aimed at PhD students and PhDs as well as academics and companies. The project leader is the ASBL Objectif Recherche and the partner universities are UMONS, UCLouvain, USaint-Louis Brussels, ULB, UNamur and ULiège.

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