



Wellbeing during doctoral studies: an evidence-based review of challenges and associated solutions

Stéphanie Gauttier, PhD

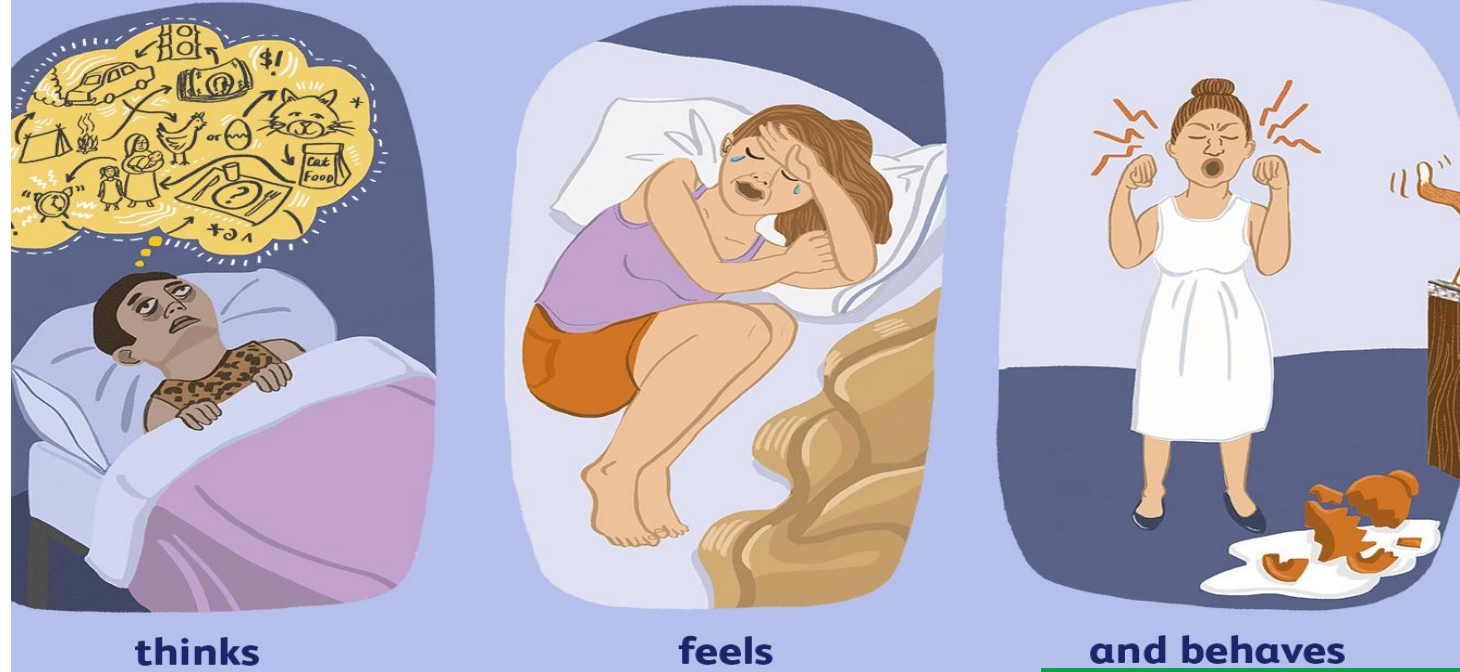
Assistant Professor at Grenoble Ecole de Management

COST Action CA19117 Researcher Mental Health Observatory vice-chair



What is mental health?

A state of well-being in which the individual realizes his or her own abilities, can cope with the normal stresses of life, can work productively and fruitfully, and is able to make a contribution to his or her community – World Health Organization



it's a
DISORDER
not a
DECISION

Mental health issues are more prevalent amongst researchers than in the general population

Common mental health disorders

37% ▶ 19%

Of the researchers population

Of the adult population

50% ▶ 33%

PhD student experiences psychological distress

PhD student is a trisk of a common psychiatric disorder

Deaths resulting from mental & behavioral disorders

4%

Of all deaths in the EU in 2015

General population; Links to work organisation

Levecque et al., 2017; Mattijssen et al., 2021



The root causes for this are numerous

- External: Supervision, personal life, departmental structures, financial opportunities

Caring for a loved one leads to constant strain

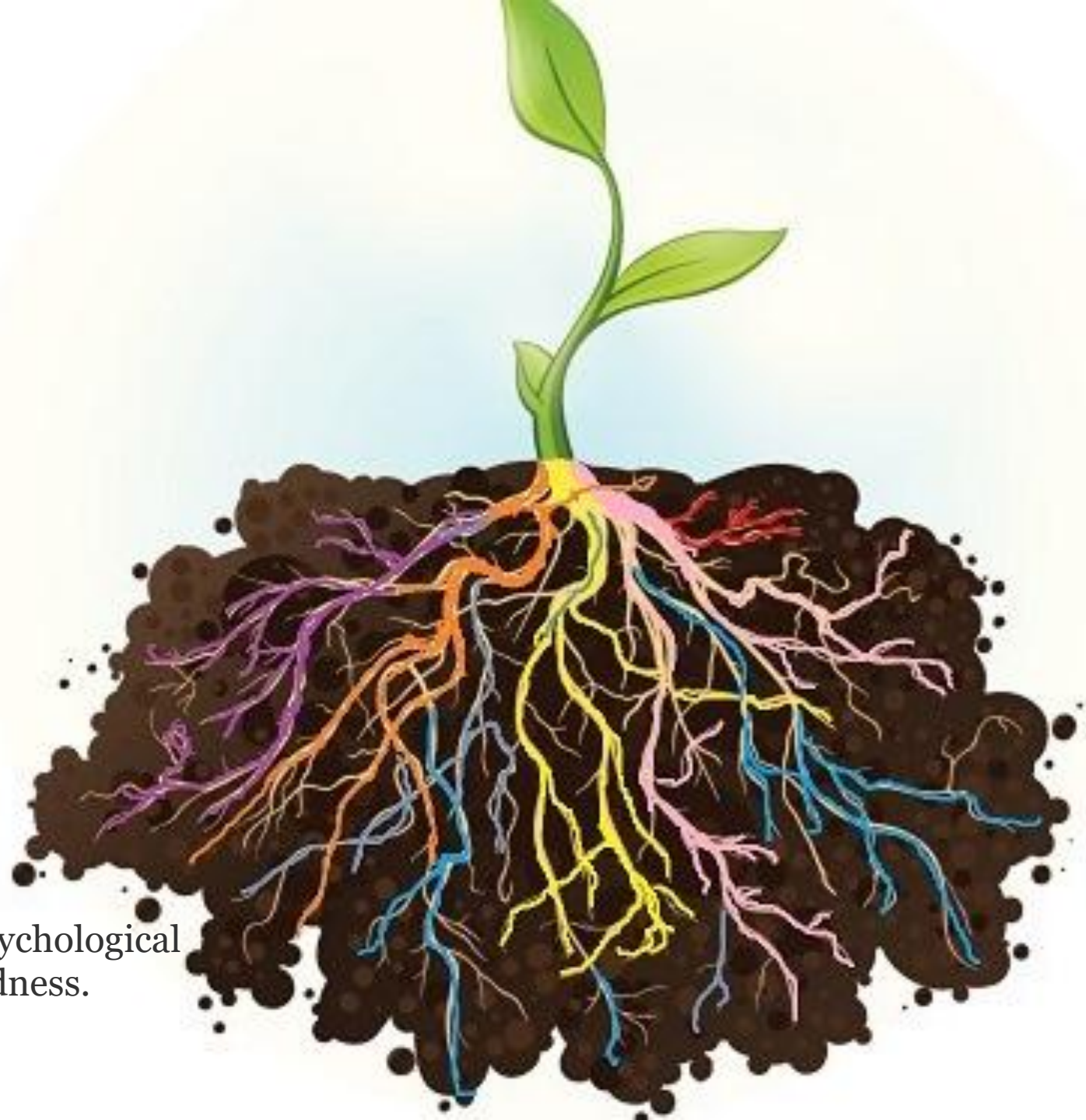
Informal care + PhD + private and family life
55% at risk of developing a psychiatric disorder

Being an international student

COVID

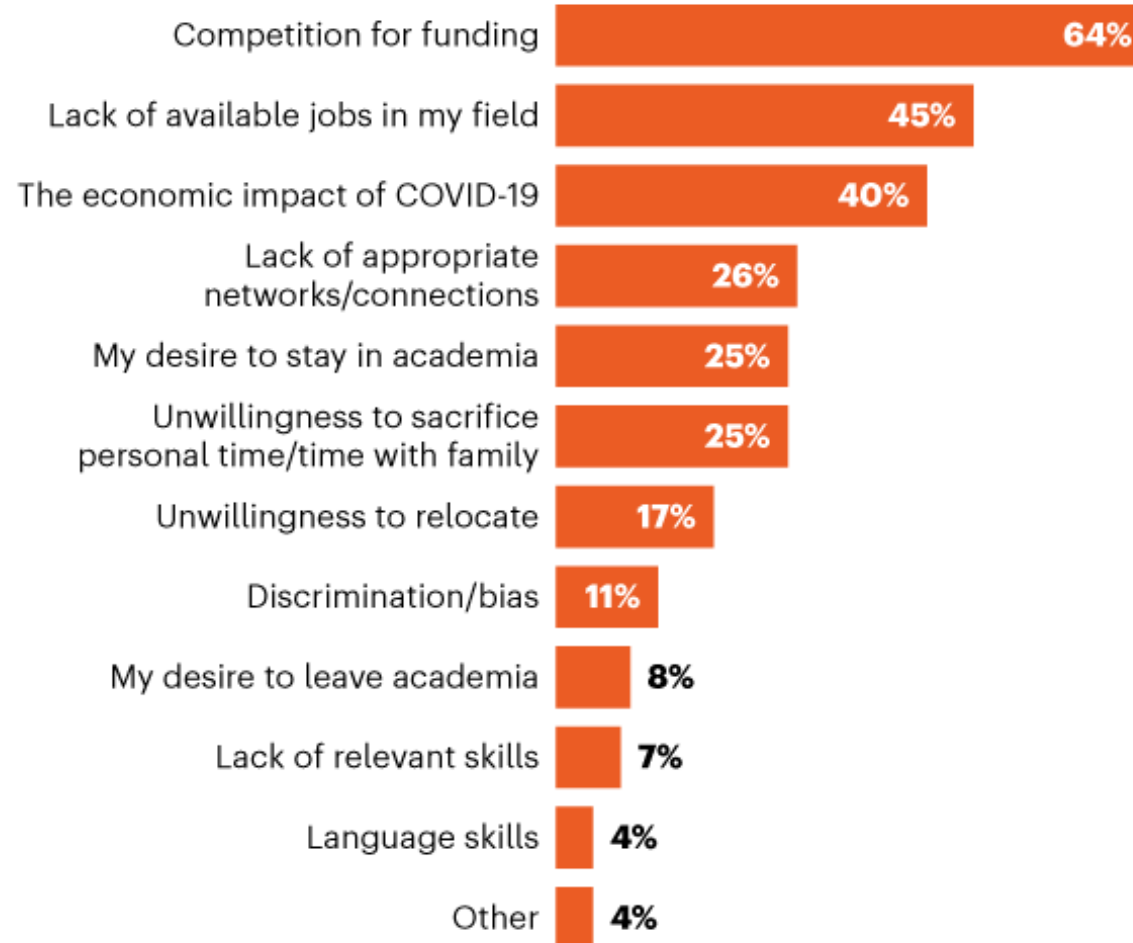
- Internal: Motivation, writing skills, academic identity, self-worth

Lack of sleep and frustration of the basic psychological needs of autonomy, competence and relatedness.



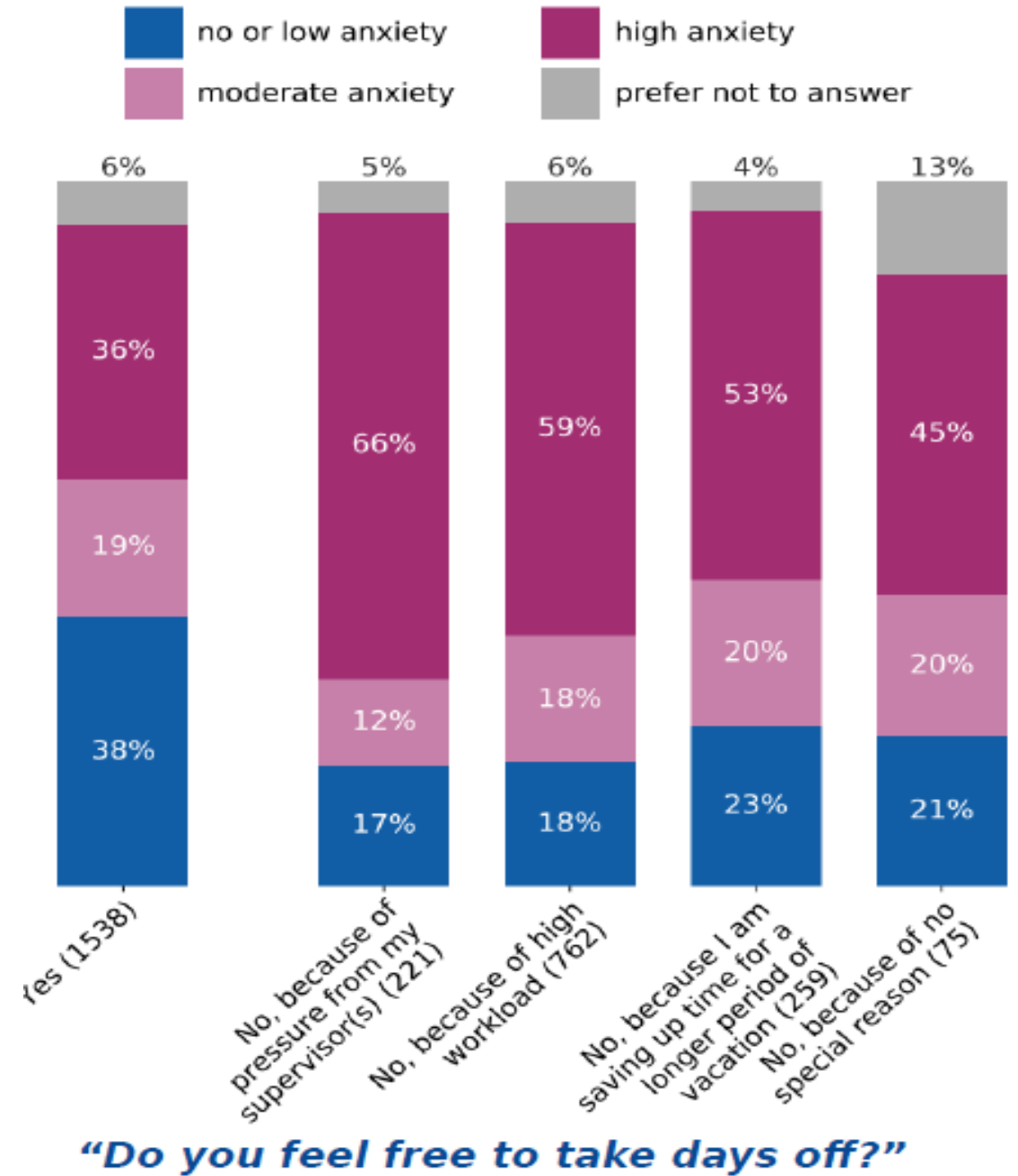
The prevalence of these external vs internal causes is not equal

What do you think is the biggest challenge for your personal career progression?



The working culture imposed on PhD student is also playing a key role

- The frequency at which you take holidays
- The frequency of weekend work
- The amount of working hours



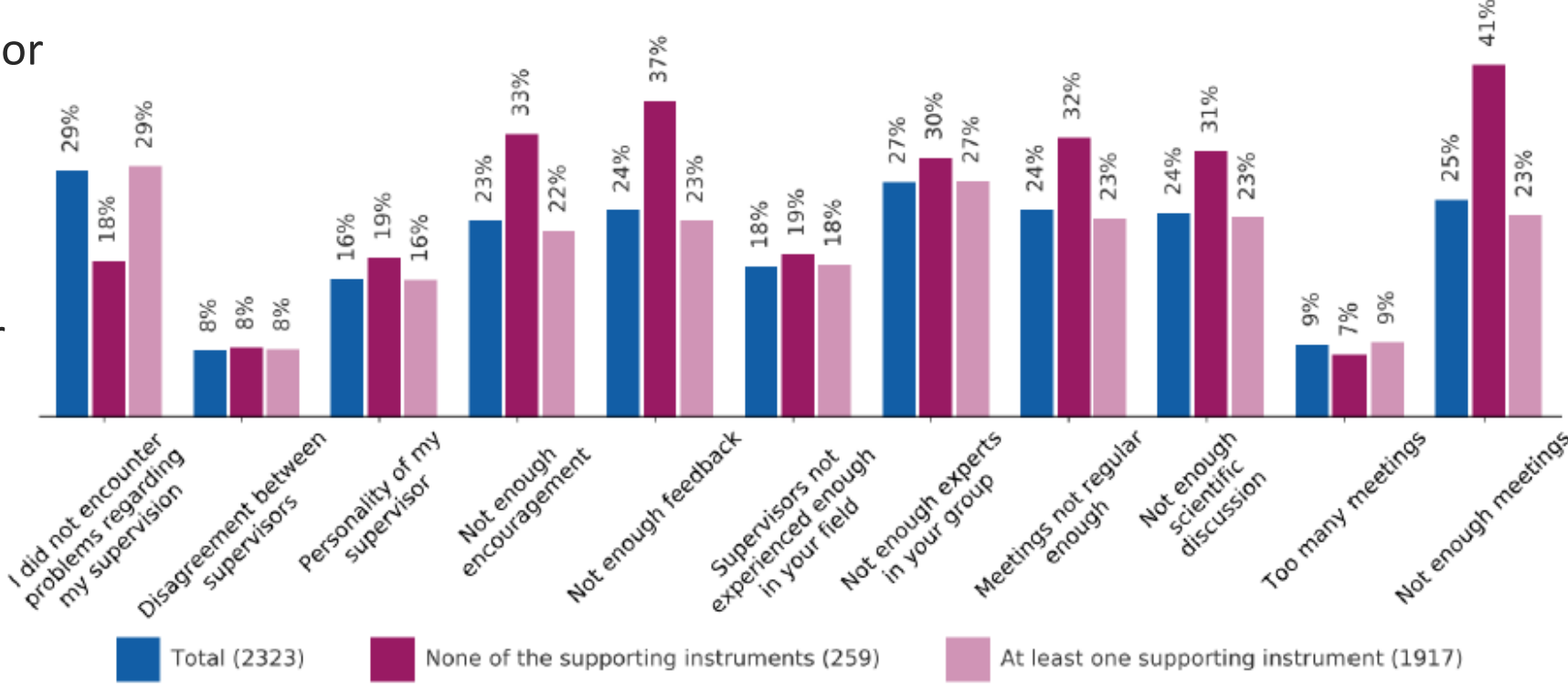
The way work is set up by institutions is also having a strong impact on wellbeing

- The type of contract you have
- The frequency of meeting your supervisor
- The presence of PhD guidelines
- Having a thesis committee (and meeting up with them!)



The person embodying the system is often seen as responsible: the supervisor

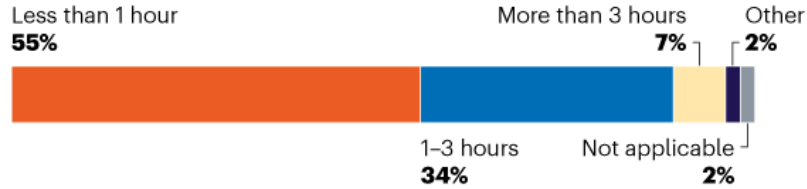
- The personality of the supervisor
- The frequency of meetings
- The expertise of the supervisor
- The availability of one or two supervisors



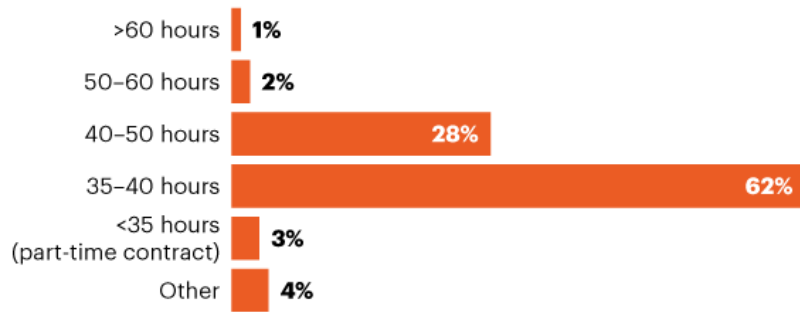
“Did you ever encounter problems regarding your supervision?” Answers are filtered for having at least one and not having one of the above scientific support instruments.

Ignoring mental health would be part of the academic culture

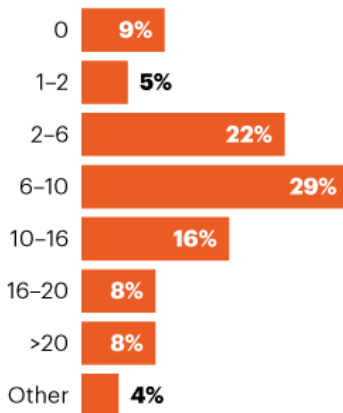
On average, how much one-on-one contact time do you have with your supervisor/PI each week?



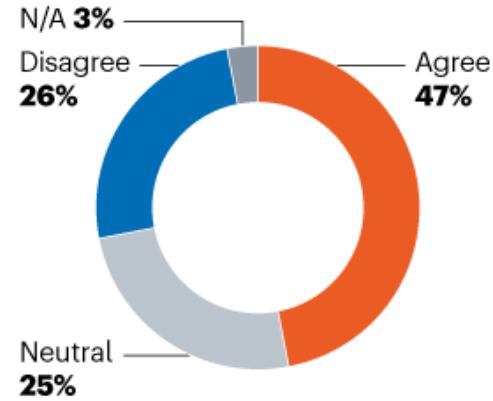
How many hours a week are you contracted to work?



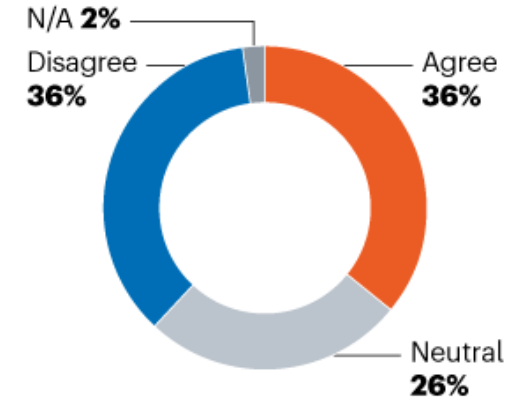
How many hours per week, if any, do you typically work beyond those contracted?*



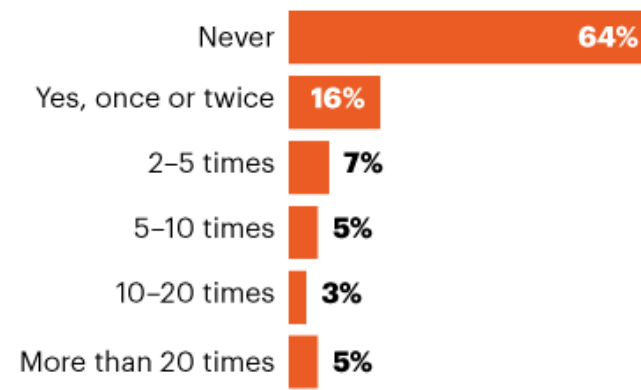
There is a long-hours culture at my university*



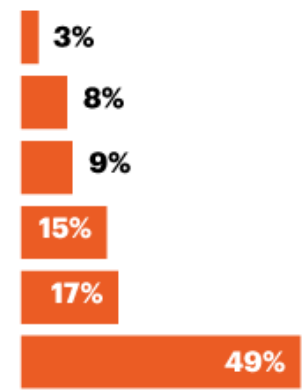
My university supports good work-life balance



In the past year, have you ever worked: ...overnight in the lab?



...on weekends or on days off?*



Would you recommend a career in scientific research to your younger self?

Yes
47%

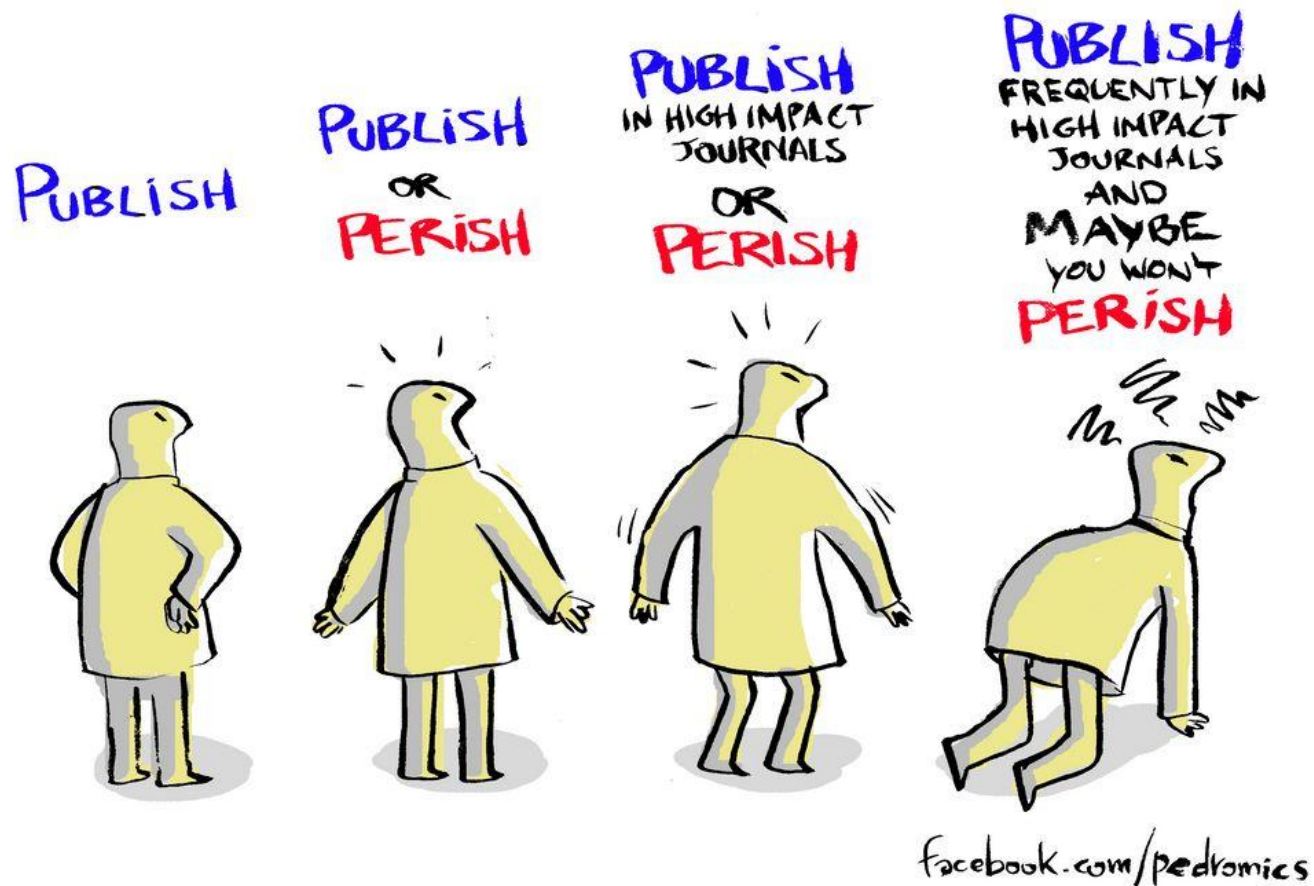
I don't know
29%



No
24%

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THE EVOLUTION OF ACADEMIA

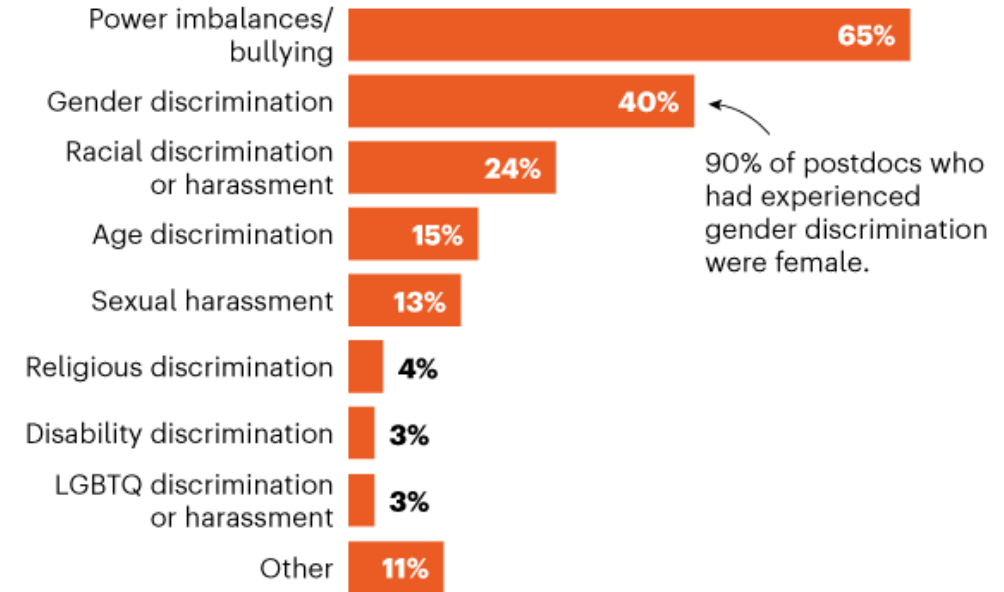


And once tenured, the pressure changes
but does not drop

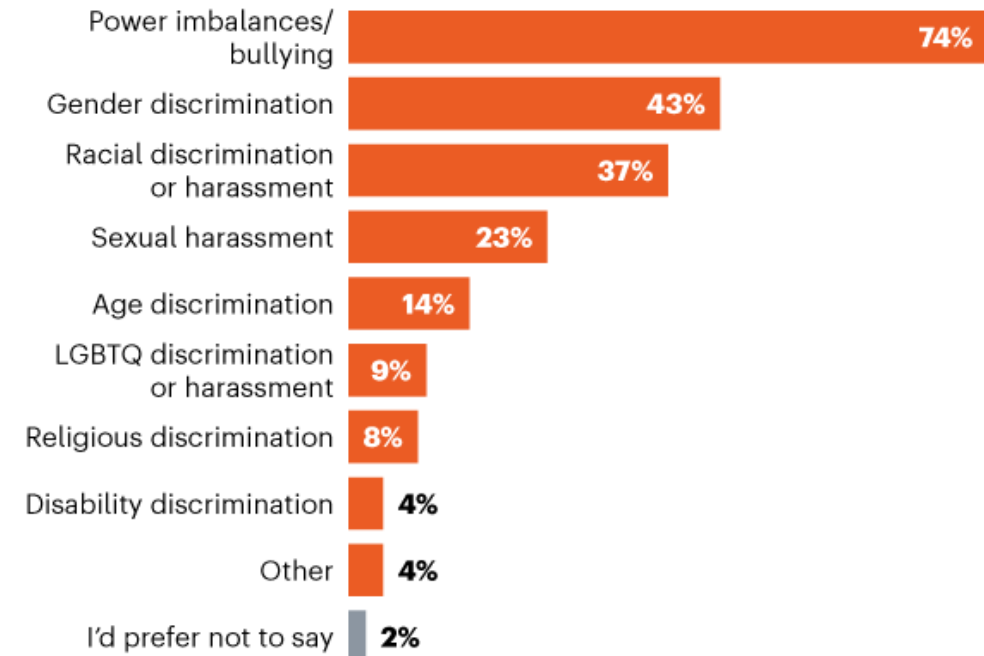
Stop doing the things that are going wrong

- Initiatives against bullying and improper supervision
- What does it mean when it comes to work/life integration?

Which of the following have you experienced directly?



Which of the following have you observed?



Start doing what seems to work

- Affiliation with colleagues
- Focusing on concrete achievements and intrinsic motivation





As individuals, we can set ourselves up for success

- Before moving: health, rights, friends, system
- Recognize work/life integration from the onset of the PhD
- Identify responsibilities between you and the supervisor
- Set up routines: meetings, updates, plan holidays, discuss
- Research the obligations / opportunities in your lab
- Look for mentorship / external advice
- Accept we are 'learning' to do research

The overwhelming advice is to be proactive

- Recognise one's feelings
- Invest in support networks
- Develop perspective
- Stay involved
- Small tasks make large progress
- Ask for help early

[NATUREJOBS](#) | [NATUREJOBS BLOG](#)

Being proactive about mental health during your PhD: a very short guide

Is it too much of a burden on the PhD students' shoulders?

- How to know ahead
- Compassion to the system and people who are meant to take care of them
- Adds to the burden of international / transdisciplinary move
- Mental health issues as the result of personal 'failure' to do all of this



This reflects a narrow view of mental health as a personal / personality problem

- Experienced by the individual, a misfit
- Data from individuals
- Research looking at self-determination frameworks and alike
- Research looking at individual behaviors (sleep patterns, personal context)

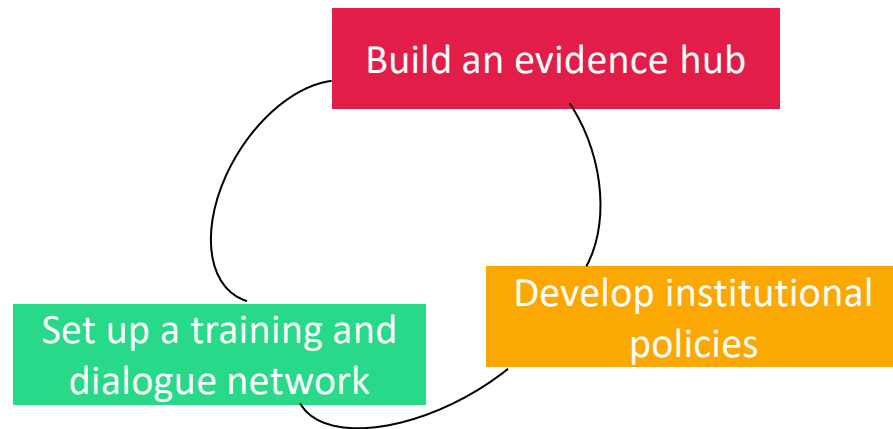


What does that mean in terms of political responsibilities?

- Setting up funding schemes compatible with mental health (duration, conditions, rights)
- Foster the development of the job market (academic and industry)
- Reduce precarity and monitor the use of funding for sustainable careers
- Revise definitions of excellence and assessment, for researchers AND institutions
- Support the development of evidence hubs, with a pluralistic view of the issue



To sum up, there is a lot to do to change what's wrong, but we can all do something!



Some elements need long term work

- System Level
- Institutional Level

They can be influenced by all our fragmented actions

- Individual level

A researcher mental health and well-being manifesto: support in on change.org

October 8, 2021

Other

Open Access

Researcher Mental Health and Well-being Manifesto

 Gábor Kismihók;  Brian Cahill;  Stéphanie Gauttier; Janet Metcalfe;  Stefan T. Mol;  Darragh McCashin;  Jana Lasser;  Murat Güneş; Mathias Schroijen;  Martin Grund;  Katia Levecque;  Susan Guthrie;  Katarzyna Wac;  Jesper Dahlgaard;  Mohamad Nadim Adi; Christina Kling

The ReMO COST Action is a network of stakeholders from all levels of the research community that has drafted a Researcher Mental Health and Well-being Manifesto that calls for the assessment of how the mental health and well-being of researchers can best be nourished and sustained through actions and initiatives at the policy, institutional, community and individual levels.

This manifesto calls for all stakeholders in the research ecosystem to engage in developing policies that monitor, improve, and maintain well-being and mental health in the research environment, delineating more encompassing metrics of success and quality, supporting work-life balance, inclusiveness, and family-friendly sustainable research careers.

This work was performed within the framework of COST Action CA19117 - "Researcher Mental Health".



