

Tuesday late morning session Track B, Tuesday, Sep 23 2025, 11:30-13:00

Location: Seminar 1

Session: Research Culture

Chair: Nina Peršak

OR-02

Mental Health in Academia: surviving or thriving? Results from a nationwide survey on mental health and social safety in the Netherlands

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In the past years, a plethora of evidence has shed light on the problems researchers are facing. Not only is there ample evidence of mental health issues in individual researchers (1), but there is also more emphasis on systemic factors that influence the behavior of researchers, such as research culture, publication pressure (2), and the influence of evaluation practices on researchers' behavior. The latter is often perceived as hampering academic progress, as these numbers determine your success as a researcher.

Let's start with some numbers about mental health in academia: more than 40% of doctoral students showed signs of depression (data from China and Flanders) (3). In the US, a survey conducted by Nature (4) that explored mental health in doctoral students reported that 36% of participants sought mental support because of depressive or anxiety symptoms.

Interestingly, mental health is linked to publication pressure and unhealthy or unsafe research cultures. One of the main burdens in this group is the current assessment criteria. Academic prestige and advancement are mainly assessed by your publication record, including the number of publications, citation record, and acquired funding. Consequently, most researchers primarily focus on these metrics in order to pursue a career in academia. And what gets measured gets managed—resulting in researchers mainly focusing on authorships, citations, and acquiring grants—which is considered to contribute to a publish-or-perish culture and an impact factor mania.

Moreover, a (research) environment, including working conditions and safety, can significantly influence wellbeing and mental health problems. The question is whether academics are resilient and can cope well, or whether these external pressures are affecting their mental health.

To this end, the Young Academy in the Netherlands started a nationwide survey on mental health, working conditions, and psychological safety. With validated questionnaires, we were able to include more than 2,000 responses from academics in the Netherlands.

In the presentation, we present the first results: 25% of academics have moderate to severe depressive symptoms, and more than 20% report high levels of stress. These mental health problems are associated with feeling unsafe and experiencing high workload. Based on these results, we start a discussion with the audience to reflect on the most pressing risk factors in academia—and, most importantly, how we can address those issues on an individual, cultural, and systemic level.

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1. Loissel E. A question of support. *eLife*. 2019;8:e52881.
2. Tijdink JK, Verbeke R, Smulders YM. Publication pressure and scientific misconduct in medical scientists. *J Empir Res Hum Res Ethics*. 2014;9(5):64-71.
3. Levecque K, Anseel F, De Beuckelaer A, Van der Heyden J, Gisle L. Work organization and mental health problems in PhD students. *Research Policy*. 2017;46(4):868-79.
4. The mental health of PhD researchers demands urgent attention. *Nature*. 2019;575(7782):257-8.