

1. Introduction – the challenging nature of research

Slide 1

Working in research can be challenging.

Although we shouldn't just accept that a particular job or environment is challenging, and we should find ways to work together to create cultures and processes that result in a thriving work environment, there are certain things that are inherent nature of research that are likely to trigger emotional responses or that drain our energy and resilience.

If we notice, acknowledge and name these things, we are on the first step to being able to deal with them constructively.

So, why is it that research is inherently challenging?

Slide 2

Let's start by thinking about how we experience challenge in general.

At any one point in time, we experience a certain level of challenge. That challenge might be because of the difficulty or complexity of our activity or from the sheer volume of work. It could be because the starting point of our resilience or skill set is low.

At low levels of challenge we are in our comfort zone. We are not stressed, we feel relaxed, we might even feel bored or disinterested.

As the level of challenge increases, we leave our comfort zone and enter into our stretch zone. Here, the level of pressure causes us to pay more attention, we are engaged, our levels of adrenaline have kicked in to help us to focus.

If the level of challenge increases further, we move out of our stretch zone into our panic zone. Here, our levels of stress or panic are such that we cannot function effectively – we might become distracted or emotional, fearful, even aggressive, or show signs of physical stress. We might try to avoid the source of challenge altogether.

Slide 3

If we look at the effect on our performance as challenge increases: in our comfort zone, we achieve little, and as we increase the level of challenge and become more engaged, our performance and productivity increase, If pushed too far, our productivity falls again.

The stretch zone is where the most learning happens. As researchers we need and accept a certain level of challenge as this is how we develop ourselves and our research. Researchers work in an environment where we are surrounded by experts, which is inherently stretching and challenging in itself. We are often undertaking work that has not been done before, and then holding it up to scrutiny by our peers. All of these aspects make research both exciting and challenging at the same time.

Everyone will have a different set of challenges that shift them from comfort to stretch and then in to panic. Speaking in public might put some people in to the panic zone, while others will be firmly in

their comfort zone. As we become more skilled and knowledgeable from spending time in the stretch zone, we increase our capacity to cope with greater levels of challenge.

Slide 4

When we are in our panic zone, our resilience and energy are being rapidly used up. Our energy and resilience can be thought of as renewable resources – sometimes we have a lot of resource and we can absorb a high degree of challenge, and at other times our reserves are low. Some experiences will top up our reserves, others will use them up.

A useful metaphor is this leaky bucket: the water represents our energy and resilience. Here are some examples of specific challenges we face as researchers. These are the things that punch holes into our leaky bucket. We can enhance our capacity (or get a larger bucket!) by developing skills and experience. We can also top up our reserves by making sure we spend time doing things that build our energy up.

We can also find ways to stem the flow or stop some of these challenges happening or stop them feeling like a challenge.

Many of the ideas and activities suggested in this series of wellbeing materials are designed to help you to do these things:

- To minimise or reframe some challenges
- To be able to expand your capacity for resilience
- And to top your energy and resilience up again when they are inevitably drained

Slide 5

Among the resources you will find a wide range of topics that align with known resilience enhancing techniques. They have been tailored specifically for researchers and designed for you to pick and choose what is most interesting and relevant to you. Although there is some cross referencing, they are designed to be viewed as standalone presentations.

They include:

- Aspects of emotional intelligence including: Optimism, understanding Imposter syndrome and the inner critic, the ingredients of motivation and the emotions of difficult conversations and relationships
- Building competence through your creativity and problem solving, engaging in the learning process and being equipped to plan difficult conversations.
- Coping better by developing skills around making proactive choices, time management and taking stock and reviewing your work.
- Benefiting from supportive and strategic networks and learning different perspectives and opinions.
- And, finally, there are many links to resources for further ideas, as well as links to general physical and mental wellbeing advice and support.